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ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Alverna Champion

Many years ago I asked my mother a question to which she replied, "I don't know." This response echoed through the chambers of my mind. With brows furrowed, I thought, "How can this be?" Surely my mother knew the answer to my question. I recollect my frustration quite vividly. You can probably imagine the quizzical look on my face. In silence, I questioned her motives for not spoonfeeding me, as was her custom. I was certain that my mother, now the teacher, held the answer I so desperately needed. But my mother, now the disciplinarian and chieftain, sensed a rebellion looming on the horizon. Swiftly and decisively, she moved to quell the tiny warrior by engaging me in conversation. My mother, now the communicator, used dialogue to learn the genesis of my problem as well as the roots of my question. This dialogue presented my mother, now the problem solver, the challenge of balancing respect for the level of my intellectual curiosity with respect for the integrity of the subject at hand. What had started out as my problem was now transformed into *our* problem.

Next came the fun! We jumped into our old, dependable Buick, so familiar to me, for it had been with our family as long as I could remember. Off we went to a place that my mother, now the guide, told me was the parish library. I had heard some of the kids at kindergarten speak, in hushed tones, of a strange place called a library. Now I was bravely going to this new world. So my mother, now the learner, and I solved one problem but revealed new ones in the process.

Over the years I have learned many lessons, but few have left a greater imprint on me than that one from my early years. In order for effective teaching or effective learning to occur, the demarcation between the two must become blurred. Both teaching and learning must begin with an honest and often innocent search for truth. Teaching and learning embody breaking down barriers of suspicion, mistrust, and frustration. Teaching and learning help chieftain and warrior to join forces to end power struggles, thereby facilitating cooperative endeavors. Teaching and learning involve finding a vehicle, similar to that old Buick, which can move both teacher and learner from the world of the familiar boldly into new worlds where even greater mysteries abound, into adventures that provide pleasure and fun. Ultimately, teaching and learning entail *replacing* that comfortable, old Buick with a newer, untested model, yet one in which the student will confidently take the driver's seat and travel to places where the teacher could never have imagined.

Hear a student ask a question to which the professor replies, "I don't know." Observe the furrowed brows, the quizzical look, the tilted head, and tense body. Listen for the unspoken words, "How can that be?" as they echo through the chambers of academe.