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Ayers, William. (2010) *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* (3rd edition). NY: Teachers College Press

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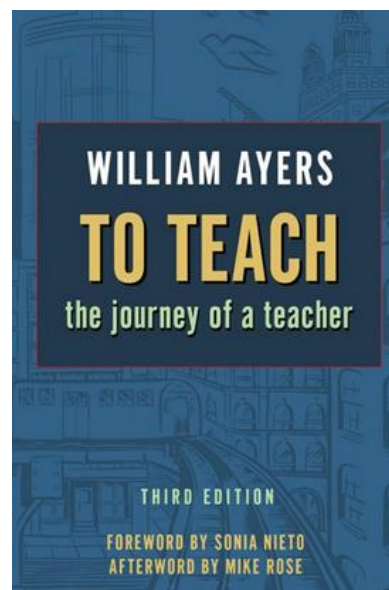
Reviewed by Kenneth J. Bernstein

*The reward of teaching is knowing
your life can still make a difference.*

The question before most of us who teach is how we can best accomplish that, remembering that the point of what we do is not ourselves, as exciting as our own experience might be, but rather the lives of our students and the world they will help create in the future.

This new edition, with a Foreword by Sonia Nieto and an Afterword by Mike Rose, is invaluable in helping the reader explore exactly how to approach the sacred role of being a teacher.

Ayers, who is now retired from his position as Distinguished Professor and Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago, brings to this volume his experiences as a teacher whose



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students ranged from small children to graduate students. He applies wide reading of literature beyond that specifically thought of as educational. And he applies the lessons he learned from being a parent.

I asked to review this volume because of the high regard in which Ayers and his work as an educator and school reform activist is held by people whose judgment I greatly respect. I am primarily a classroom teacher, but I also function as a bit of an activist by writing online, including reviewing for others books about education. As I read through the book I found myself regularly nodding my head in agreement with much of what I encountered, but also found my thinking challenged in ways I perhaps had not expected in this my sixteenth year as a classroom teacher.

But do not be misled. This is more than a book about teaching, nor is it aimed only at those of us whose primary occupation is that of teacher. Teaching is a key part of our entire educational endeavor, and it should be incumbent upon all concerned with that endeavor—policy makers, administrators, parents, teachers, students, taxpayers—to more fully understand what teaching is, or rather, what it should be, particularly in a nation that still claims to be a liberal democracy.

It should surprise no one that key parts of Ayers's treatment are the issues of democracy and social justice. These themes constantly reappear throughout the different chapters of the book which, after a long introduction setting the stage, are entitled in order *Beginning: The Challenge of Teaching*; *Seeing the Student*; *Creating an Environment for Learning*; *Building Bridges*; *Liberating the Curriculum*; *Keeping Track*; *Working in the Gaps*; *The Mystery of Teaching*; and *Beginning Again: If I Only Had a Home*. One encounters the words of others upon whom Ayers relies to emphasize his point that the ultimate focus and purpose of teaching is the lives of the students before us. He starts with George Orwell, and we also encounter the words of Walt Whitman, Ayers's teacher Maxine Greene, her teacher Hannah Arendt, Nel Noddings, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. Drawing from Martin Luther King Jr., Ayers reminds us of the concept of a vision of a moral arc bending towards justice. Given the authors whose words he cites, one should not be



William Ayers, Distinguished Professor of Education and Senior University Scholar at the University of Illinois at Chicago (retired), and founder of both the Small Schools Workshop and the Center for Youth and Society, taught courses in interpretive and qualitative research, urban school change, and teaching and the modern predicament. A graduate of the University of Michigan, the Bank Street College of Education, Bennington College, and Teachers College, Columbia University, Ayers has written extensively about social justice, democracy and education, the cultural contexts of schooling, and teaching as an essentially intellectual, ethical, and political enterprise. He is currently the vice-president of Division B of the American Educational Research Association.

surprised to find a focus on social justice. As he writes in his introduction:

The teacher's ambition might become to link democratic possibilities in education with fresh possibilities in our larger shared community life. . . . Education and democracy are linked: A strong democracy requires a thoughtful, engaged, and active citizenry, and an education that encourages critical thought, reception and resistance, participation and empowerment pushes towards a more vital an inclusive democracy. (pp. 6-7)

This is very far from a "how-to" book. Instead, Ayers reflects back on the lessons he has learned in his long career as a teacher, and infuses the tales he tells with the results of his extensive reading and even more extensive reflection on the nature of learning and the sacred task of teaching. For Ayers, teaching starts with a basic point:

The desire to share a part of the world with the young draws many of us to the classroom again and again. (p. xiii)

He writes of his conception of the human beings before him who are his students:

Teaching is powered by a common faith: When I look out at my students, I assume the full humanity of each. I see hopes and dreams, aspirations and needs, experiences and intentions that must somehow be accounted for and valued. I encounter citizens not consumers, unruly sparks of meaning-making energy and not a mess of deficits. This is evidence of things not seen, the starting point for teachers in a democracy. (p. 140)

Ayers understands that the teacher does not work in isolation. A parent himself, he emphasizes the importance of the role of parents. He recounts how he decided to begin each parent conference by acknowledging that the parents know more about their children than the teacher will ever know, thus the teacher needs to work together with the parents on behalf of the children. He shares what he and his wife have learned from raising three children, two of

their own and one of a close friend who could no longer care for her child. Part of the teaching role as Ayers sees it is being attentive to the students before us, in a sense empowering them to teach us how to teach them. It also means listening, and as an adult modeling the willingness to take risks to achieve a better result. He writes:

Teachers must understand even as they teach, they will also be taught; even as they help others develop, they will themselves change and grow. If a teacher is to be hopeful and optimistic in her teaching, she must take action—waiting cannot bring hope. This, of course, involves a certain amount of plunging into the unknown, listening and hearing; a certain willingness to take risks at the adult level, too. (p. 90)

For Ayers, there are few final answers on teaching, but rather a series of questions that he has found helpful to ponder repeatedly as he grew in his own teaching. These appear in the chapter titled “Liberating the Curriculum.” Each is accompanied by a discussion which explores the dimensions of the question. One might not agree with all of the points Ayers makes, but one will undoubtedly benefit from considering his perspective in answering the questions as one prepares one’s own responses. The questions:

Are there opportunities for discovery and surprise?

Are students actively engaged with primary sources and hands-on materials?

Is productive work going on?

Is the work linked to student questions or interests?

Are problems within the classroom, the school, and the larger community part of student consciousness?

Is the work in my classroom pursued to its furthest limits?

(pp. 104-5)

Obviously these questions demonstrate an understanding of education and teaching as something very different from a set of tasks that can easily be measured by today's ubiquitous standardized. It will thus not surprise readers to find Ayers does not hold such tests in high regards. He remarks twice on standardized tests.

Sorting children into winners and losers is the main business of the standardized tests. And the tragedy is that we pretty much know before the tests are even administered who is going to land where. (p. 127)

ALTERNATIVES TO STANDARDIZED TESTS [emphasis in the original] can be thought of as the three p's: projects, portfolios and performance. (p. 129)

Ayers provides us with a clear example of how this different kind of teaching can work in exploring the work of Stokely Carmichael in Freedom School in Mississippi, organized by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. For those who are unfamiliar with this bit of history, this was, along with voter registration, a major part of the Freedom Summer activities in 1964, a landmark year in the transformation of the South and the expansion of Civil Rights in this nation. Ayers devotes several pages to how Carmichael functioned. At the end of the class being described, Carmichael asked the students to consider what constituted society, who got to make the rules. Such an understanding is of course an essential part of educating for participation in a democracy. Ayers describes the students' initial responses to these questions, then offers the following description of the teacher's impact on the students:

They left wrestling with important questions about language, culture, control, politics and power. In this brief time in this class, these students were exposed to education at its best: Their teacher treated them with respect and valued their knowledge, insight, and know-how as a starting place for a dialogue of learning; the students' knowledge was extended,

connected, and compared as a framework for further discovering and knowing; and the students went away more thoughtful and more powerful than when they arrived. (p. 121)

This edition of *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher* has a companion volume which Ayers urges people to consult, but to which I did not have access when reading the main volume and writing this review. It is a comic:

Ayers, William, and Alexander-Tanner, Ryan (2010). *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics*. (New York, New York: Teachers College Press.) Pp 144. ISBN 080775062X.

In the preface to the volume under review, Ayers suggests that the comic would provide a unique way of presenting the world of teaching in a non-traditional way that might “speak to a new generation of potential teachers” offering his understanding of both the joys and pains of teaching. Ayers apparently feels strongly that those who want to understand fully the main volume should also peruse the comic to ensure they can

better get close to the aesthetic and the feel, the challenge and the joy, the pain and the promise of life in classrooms as we know it and feel it. (p. xi)

This book is far more than Ayers reexamining his own life as a teacher. He is trying to use that life as a lens through which he can offer an alternate vision of teaching, one which focuses more on the students as individuals, as participants in our great democratic experience. Ayers surely desires to encourage a different approach to teaching, learning, education, schooling. His book is an effort to encourage those willing to consider teaching as a calling, not merely a place of employment, with a willingness to challenge the status quo. At one point he discusses the importance of what he describes as “creative insubordination” as something that “might be necessary to serve student learning.” (p. 143)

Throughout the book, he presents series of questions we can and should consider. He also provides characteristics of what he considers good schools, for example, that they are gathering places of good teachers who are allowed to

teach, whose building leaders are prepared to run interference with the bureaucracy outside the building to ensure the school remains such a place. Such schools are “unique,” usually have “a set of *core values*,” are places where “teachers are respected,” and are “geared to continuous improvement.” (p. 147) He suggests that

Teaching requires thoughtful, caring people to carry it forward successfully, and we need, then, to commit to becoming more thoughtful and caring as we grow into our work. (p. 155)

For Ayers, teaching is a moral task, with an ethical commitment. It requires an attitude like that which he sees in the poetry of May Oliver, of paying attention, being astonished, and talking about it. For Ayers, it also requires a commitment to social justice, for without such a commitment how can one truly be committed to the well-being of one’s students?

As Mike Rose rightly notes in his Afterword to this new edition, Ayers places great weight:

on the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching. His new introduction beautifully reinforces this dimension of *To Teach*. Teaching is a moral craft. (p. 168)

At least, teaching *should* be a moral craft. The tragedy of teaching today is how little attention is given to this, either in how we prepare our teachers, or in how we expect them to function.

I can think of no better way to close my review of this superb volume than to quote again Mike Rose from the final words he offers:

To Teach provides a wealth of tips, lesson, approaches, and ways to think about thinking, but it also provides a sense of the calling to teach. Today, we need books like this one to remind us of why teaching matters. (p. 169)

To which I can only add a hearty AMEN!

About the Reviewer

Kenneth J. Bernstein is a National Board Certified Social Studies teacher. He holds degrees in music from Haverford, Religions from St. Charles Seminary, and teaching from Johns Hopkins University. He did extensive doctoral studies in educational administration and policy studies at The Catholic University of America, and additional studies in reading education at the University of Virginia. He has served as a peer reviewer for a number of professional publications, including *Current Issues in Education* and *Teachers College Record*. He is coauthor of Rotberg, I; Bernstein, K. J. & Ritter, S. B. (2001). *No Child Left Behind: Views about the potential impact of the Bush administration's education proposals*. Washington, DC: Institute for Education Policy Studies.



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