

LOVE AND DESPAIR IN TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION

In many a teacher's heart there is an enveloping darkness. It is a darkness that may not be as penetrating and pervasive as the clinical depression depicted by William Styron in *Darkness Visible* but nevertheless amounts to a devastating sense that the education, teaching, and life we have clung to with such hope and promise are losing their grip.¹ The promises of education to transform, ennoble, and enable, to create the conditions for new understandings of our worlds and ourselves, have become tired and devalued promissory notes. It is a darkness of the teaching soul, a soul that struggles to understand the enveloping cover's effects on our teaching and personal lives, and one that despairs at piercing the pervasive world of only shadows. It is a darkness that obscures all that was so apparent and vibrant, becoming the only visible cover in a world that now lacks discernible features. It is a darkness that forgets the landscape and features of teaching.

Teaching occurs on affective and cognitive terrain; it is emotional and intellectual work. In teaching four- and forty-four-year-olds, we work on and through our emotions and ideas to engage students in a process called learning. When it appears successful, we have engaged students in the material at hand through connecting aspects of our lives and theirs with the "grace of great things."² It is a connection that can be filled with or partially dipped in life's significance and meaning. At its best it is an affirmation of what is universally and uniquely human in each of us. At its most mundane it is a recurring nod that significance exists. But for some teachers despair visits and disrupts. The glorious and mundane are cast in shadows that soon dissolve any significance. The energy of teaching is lost and the goals seem to be misplaced. I want to explore this world of despair as presented in literary, autobiographical, and journalistic accounts of teaching and probe the promise of love as a potential way through this darkness. I hope this journey will allow you, the reader, to envision and perhaps even recall this despair, and to look for ways through a rather dark and narrow tunnel.

This should not be unexpected terrain; elements of it have been explored before. In the world of professional development "teacher burnout" is one name given to this

1. William Styron, *Darkness Visible* (New York: Random House, 1990).

2. Parker Palmer draws upon Rainer Maria Rilke's notion of the "grace of great things" to convey the power and wonder entailed in understanding the world, others, and ourselves in educational settings. See Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1998). This book will be cited as *CT* in the text for all subsequent references.

pain and depletion within the teaching ranks.³ In the critical race literature Derrick Bell, Cornel West, and bell hooks portray a "fatalistic" social and political landscape that disfigures children of color and engenders despair in all who care.⁴ Samuel Freedman's and Tracy Kidder's journalistic accounts of teachers depict both doomed and heroic struggles in schools and cities that seemingly counteract teachers' efforts.⁵ And, at times, fictional accounts of teachers' lives illuminate the cracks and crevices of this despair.⁶ In this essay we will walk in others' pain and despair: the writing of the late Andre Dubus offers a fictional glimpse of a former teacher's struggles; journalist Freedman conveys the work of Jessica Siegel, a high school English teacher in lower Manhattan; and Jane Tompkins writes about her pain as a graduate student and university instructor.⁷ All three teachers are at points in their careers where they despair and all three have known the love of learning and teaching. In order to come to grips with their despair we need to understand their love of learning and teaching, and the costs of its loss. Recognizing the depths of this void in people's lives, particular commentators have offered an "enlarged" love, a sustaining attention to others, as a route out of the darkness.⁸ It is a route I would like to explore.

I suggest that there are at least two kinds of love in these scenarios: scorned, romantic love and a transformative, enlarged love. Good teaching entails a kind of romantic love of the learning enterprise; it is motivated by and infuses others with a love of inquiry. Teaching in and with this love is a vulnerable undertaking, one that leaves the teacher open to pain and rejection. When a teacher's love of learning has

3. For example, see Yvonne Gold and Robert Roth, *Teachers Managing Stress and Preventing Burnout: the Professional Health Solution* (Washington D.C.: Falmer Press, 1993).

4. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: the Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992); Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); and bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

5. Samuel Freedman, *Small Victories* (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). This book will be cited as *SV* in the text for all subsequent references. See also Tracy Kidder, *Among Schoolchildren* (New York: Avon Books, 1990).

6. Here I will explore Andre Dubus's insights. See Andre Dubus, *Dancing After Hours* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). This book will be cited as *DH* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Redding, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996). This book will be cited as *LS* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. A number of distinct writers comment on the peculiar power of this particular kind of love. In philosophy Søren Kierkegaard and Iris Murdoch have written extensively about this phenomenon. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Schocken, 1971); and Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Press, 1993). *The Sovereignty of Good* will be cited as *SG* in the text for all subsequent references. In the critical race literature Cornel West in *Race Matters*, and bell hooks in *Outlaw Culture*, have touched on this topic. And in the educational literature Parker Palmer in *The Courage to Teach* and Jim Garrison have explored the role of suffering and love. See James Garrison, *Dewey and Eros* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).

been scorned she may find herself in despair. This despair afflicts the teacher's soul. An enlarged, transformative love is one way to come to terms with this despair; to live with and perhaps transform the night in our days; to inform the quiet heroism that teaching must become. An enlarged love entails a diminished sense of self (or more accurately ego) in the teaching enterprise, an attentive gaze outward toward the other, and an accompanying search for the "good." If guided by an enlarged love teaching can become an ongoing struggle that nourishes our students' and our own souls. Through exploring and understanding these teachers' despair, along with their love of learning in teaching and its loss, we may come to see more clearly the possibilities entailed in a larger love.⁹

My understanding of love's role in teaching's despair is rooted in my personal experience, elaborated in rich narratives of teaching, and offered as a general observation about teaching. As a teacher I have experienced elements of this despair and have come to understand love (romantic and enlarged) as a prominent feature of teaching. My experience and subsequent understanding is not unique. Rich narrative accounts depict teaching's despair and some hint at love's role in this despair. Unfortunately too many academic accounts of teaching have an arid and unrealistically analytical air about them. Affectively suffused and cognitively rich depictions are needed in order to evoke and understand these facets of teaching. Such depictions will, I hope, lead us to a more general understanding of teaching's terrain. And so what I offer is intended as an evocative and phenomenological exploration. It is not yet characterized by, and may never attain, the analytical clarity I have sought in other arenas. However, I believe further understanding and insight can be achieved.

A final elaboration about the term "despair" is in order. Others have asked if the phenomenon I highlight is not better characterized as disillusionment. In teaching and in many of life's other venues we frequently encounter unfulfilled expectations, dashed hopes, and an altered, grimmer sense of reality. Many new to the endeavor of teaching (and other professions) face this sense of disillusionment. Such disillusionment certainly feels disheartening, and can be demoralizing, but as I understand the term (and the phenomenon) it neither strikes to the core of the person and endeavor, nor undercuts an enduring sense of hope in the effort. Disillusionment bespeaks the possibility of a "reasonable" readjustment to a difficult situation. Despair does not. Despair entails a sense of doomed foreclosure, one that requires some sort of radical personal and/or contextual transformation. We need to understand both reactions to teaching. Here I focus on despair.

9. Responding to a draft of this essay Dwayne Huebner wrote that "the despair and lack of love in teaching is, in part, a manifestation of the structure of schooling in our society. By framing your work as you do, you imply that it is the teacher's problem, rather than a large social-cultural problem which deserves thoughtful social analysis" (personal communication, 20 July 1999). In the context of this paper, Huebner is correct; I do "err" in my focus on the individual teacher. But it is an inevitable "error"; at this point a focus on the individual is necessary. In the conclusion of this essay I point to features of a contextual analysis and in *Love and Despair in Teaching* (New York: Routledge, in progress) I rectify this exclusive focus and address the structural-institutional issues.

DESPAIR IN TEACHING

Through literature we sometimes come to understand those lives before and behind us. It is a body of work that offers the opportunity to examine our own lives, while we gaze upon and attempt to understand others. Unfortunately, few literary portraits of teaching are vibrantly real. Many seem to be stuck in a didactic mode — intent upon “teaching” a lesson, intent on getting us to see teaching in a particular way. Fortunately, lucid glimpses do exist; portraits that underscore multiple, rather than singular understandings. Dubus offers such a glimpse in his short story “Dancing After Hours,” when he delves into an ex-teacher’s bartending life at a roadside grill (*DH*, 194-234). In that story, late one night, Emily finds herself serving a paraplegic man, Drew, and his attendant, Alvin. Dubus writes,

Emily rubbed lime on the rims of the glasses and pushed them into the container of thick salt, scooped ice into the blender and poured tequila, and imagined Alvin cutting Drew’s steak, sticking the fork into a piece, maybe feeding it to him; and that is when she knew Alvin wiped Drew’s shit. Probably as Drew lay on his bed, Alvin lifted him and slid a bedpan under him; then he would have to roll him on one side to wipe him clean, and then take the bedpan to the toilet. Her body did not shudder, but she felt as if it shuddered; she knew her face was composed, but it seemed to grimace (*DH*, 209).

Dubus details Emily’s reaction to Drew’s situation and draws parallels to Emily’s pre-bartending, teaching life.

It was not the shit. Shit was nothing. It was the spiritual pain that twisted her soul: Drew’s helplessness, and Alvin reaching into it with his hands. She had stopped teaching because of pain: she had gone with passion to high school students, year after year, and always there was one student, or even five, who wanted to feel a poem or story or novel, and see more clearly because of it. But Emily’s passion dissolved in the other students. They were young and robust, and although she knew their apathy was above all a sign of their being confined by classrooms and adolescence, it still felt like apathy. It made Emily feel isolated and futile, and she thought that if she were a gym teacher or a teacher of dance, she could connect with her students. The women and men who coached athletic teams or taught physical education or dance seemed always to be in harmony with themselves and their students (*DH*, 210).

But Emily was not fortunate to create or find that harmony with herself or her students. In her last three years of teaching

she realized she was becoming scornful and bitter, and she worked to control the tone of her voice, and what she said to students, and what she wrote on their papers. She taught without confidence or hope, and felt like a woman standing at a roadside, reading poems aloud into the wind as cars filled with teenagers went speeding by.... She did not want to teach again, or work with teenagers, or have to talk to anyone, about the books she read. But she knew that pain had defeated her, while other teachers had endured it, or not felt it as sharply (*DH*, 210-11).

Emily lost the passion to teach her subject, the connection to her students, and the ways she could bring her books and students together. While she believed that her students’ indifference said more about the institutional context than her teaching, and that their apathy was a “natural” feature of contemporary adolescence and not a heartfelt dismissal of her beloved books, Emily no longer wanted to talk about her books. She still read but no longer wanted to talk. There is more than a bit of quiet despair about Emily. When conversation about what one loves is off-limits, it is difficult to envision satisfying and enriching conversations. In a sense it appears that her students’ apathy killed Emily’s passion. We know the look of apathy. We understand how it bespeaks an indifference to the world and indicates to those around that meaningful connection is not desired and, if attempted, will fail. In

Emily's view, her students would no longer open themselves up to a story; they could no longer feel that story, and as a result they could not hope to see more clearly. In her students' apathy Emily became lost, she dissolved her passion. Emily could not open herself up to her students; she could not feel her students' passing lives; she could not connect her students to the books she loved.

Dubus writes, "It was the spiritual pain that twisted her soul." I usually think of pain as the result of some sharp object, a disintegrating, aggressive disease, a piercing presence inflicted by some other sharp presence. Emily's pain was not this kind. Spiritual pain and despair seem to arise from an absence and induce a numbness accompanied, at times, by a slightly anxious tinge. Emily's spiritual pain arose from a dissipated passion for teaching stories to her students and from the lack of connection among teacher, students, and the stories. It arose from the absence of desire, a void: she could no longer propel herself beyond those seemingly blank and absent faces to imagine what might lie beneath. It was a pain of emptiness.

Emptiness lies behind other teachers' stories of pain and despair. In *Small Victories*, Freedman's journalistic account of teaching in a lower Manhattan immigrant high school, Jessica Seigel teaches English, composition, and journalism to kids whose families are struggling to survive an urban world's demands. Jessica is a talented teacher and faculty advisor to an award-winning school paper. What she accomplishes she achieves against incredible obstacles. She is a teacher who brings the world of literature into the classroom, focused on themes that will connect with her students' lives; who refuses the Army recruiters' blood money for advertising space in *Seward World*, the school's paper, despite a \$2,000 debt and bureaucratic obstacles to production; and who goes out of her way, each and every day, to motivate students to achieve a level of excellence that will get them accepted to college. Hers is a 14-hour day, seven days a week. Jessica's struggle occurs inside and outside of the classroom.

In the classroom she struggles with both her students and the subject. As Freedman relates,

American literature is not accounting or metal shop or any of the more practical courses Seward Park offers. American literature does not indicate a vocation or promise its master a livelihood. Part of Jessica does not believe she can ask teenagers with very real financial worries to embrace the abstract of scholarship for scholarship's sake. Part of Jessica believes that embrace is an absolute necessity. She seeks to identify the element in a poem or story or novel that may touch a student's life in 1987 on the Lower East Side, and then to exploit that connection, luring the student through character and narrative ultimately into art (SV, 123-24).

Jessica approaches her task from a variety of angles and central to the task is "shaking poor minority teenagers out of that inchoate, enveloping belief in their own insignificance" (SV, 50). In order to connect student to story, students need to see their own significance. One tool she employs is autobiography. Jessica tries to help kids see their own value by focusing on their lives. Sometimes it works. Generally the stories are powerful. In these assignments the outside world comes into the classroom. Jessica reads accounts of rat infestation in New York and near-starvation in China. She reads stories of suicide contemplation, beatings, adultery, and divorce. One girl writes admiringly of her father's physique and Jessica wonders about incest.

Every so often one or two autobiographies are brighter, less dismal. But for the most part Jessica's students' sheer sadness overwhelms her. Jessica "gasps like one nearly drowned, and she rises and paces her apartment, waiting for her breathing to slow. She is the custodian of feeling and memory" (SV, 60). As custodian, Jessica attempts to deflect some of the harm of these injuries and uses the classroom to build on the treasures within each gangly and awkward adolescent. But all that custodial care leaves little room for her own personal life. At age 39 she yearns for something she could call a personal life, time to pursue other interests, and companionship with others. She wants more for herself but she cannot seem to find the time, energy, or emotion to invest.

It all takes its toll on Jessica in the same way it does for many teachers. Freedman captures a good part of it:

How many times can you insist [that a student produce a substantive work] before you bore even yourself? A good teacher doesn't fall out of bed one morning as a burned-out case. A good teacher is ground down to mediocrity over weeks and months and years, and a good teacher who tries to resist learns that the millstone is an implacable adversary. But when the time comes to assign blame, Jessica cannot point the accusing finger.... Jessica judges only herself (SV, 212-13).

For many teachers self-judgment goes to their core. As Jessica relates,

Obviously, you develop a certain amount of thick skin, to let the typical teenage stuff about "It's boring" wash off you. But, ultimately, your ego is on the line. Your identity is on the line. What do I do for a living? I'm a teacher. And so if you get negativism or disinterest or hostility from the class, then that's really a blow. That's a comment on my whole being. I don't know if I'm more vulnerable than other people, but I get my self-worth from this job. And if I'm bombing, then I criticize myself (SV, 213).

After a while it all becomes a bit too exhausting and, as Freedman observed, Jessica's exhaustion "exceeds the physical; it is a condition of the spirit. She gives so much; she gives too much...until her soul is windblown topsoil, a spent strip mine" (SV, 214). At the end of *Small Victories* Jessica leaves teaching to pursue her journalistic interests.

Whereas Emily's pain and emptiness seemed to arise, in part, from a growing inability or disinclination to make the connections between stories and students, Jessica's emptiness arose from the exhausting effort required to make those connections. Freedman illustrates again and again how Jessica was able to connect subject to student. By plumbing the depths of her students and seeing in them potential they did not see themselves, and by understanding her subject matter and the ways in which it could be drawn into her students' lives, Jessica made those connections. Jessica frequently succeeded as a teacher and, it seems as a result, was consumed in the process. Her teaching created a hole in her own life, an absence where connections with others and with other features of herself could not be knit. While some would maintain that in giving we receive, Jessica's experience did not reflect that. The labor of teaching took all of her time, leaving her spent and without time to attend to herself or special others. The obstacles she encountered in making those connections simply wore her down.

Jane Tompkins reflects less on a sense of emptiness and more on a feeling of pain: "If only I'd known, if only someone I respected had talked to me honestly about

teaching, I might have been saved from a lot of pain" (LS, 90). A salvific desire for dispensation from pain seems to be a recurring theme in Tompkins's memoir, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned*. A prominent literary scholar, formerly at Duke and now at the University of Illinois-Chicago, Tompkins looks back at her education and teaching, looking at what they embodied and lacked. She finds that her own schooling and teaching embroiled her in pain and fear. As a teacher she feared her inability to deliver the intellectual goods and as a student she feared letting her love of literature show. Schools, she argues, offer students and teachers partial selves: walking minds at best, disembodied and disfigured souls at worst. For Tompkins, graduate school was the culminating experience in creating this partial self:

When I talk about graduate school, try as I may, I can't keep the bitterness from creeping into my voice. Though my idealism about literature was partly based on ignorance and snobbery and self-protectiveness, it was real nevertheless. It was an expression of love and the best thing I had to offer. At Yale I spent five years learning how to strangle my love, and I never quite got over it.... At Yale the fear of not wanting to appear stupid or ill-informed was dominant and set the tone. People were afraid to show who they really were, and most of all they were afraid to show what had drawn them to study literature in the first place. It was love that brought us there, students and professors alike, but to listen to us talk you would never have known it. The love didn't have a conjugation or a declension; it couldn't be articulated as a theory or contained in a body of information. It wasn't intellectual — that was a shameful thing — though it had an intellectual dimension. Being amorphous, tremulous, pulsing, it was completely vulnerable. So we all hid it as best we could, and quite successfully most of the time (LS, 76, 78-79).

Disavowing her love, hiding it as best she could, disfigured Tompkins; a disfigurement she says she shares with most other students.

Schooling, Tompkins maintains, teaches us not to feel. It causes our hearts and souls to atrophy and our minds and wills to grow out of proportion. It creates partitioned and apportioned, not holistic and integrated, selves. One is taught to keep one's own experience out of the learning process, to look neither for significance nor personal integration, but to expect brilliance. And it was with and through this expectation that Tompkins grew to be a teacher, albeit a partial, partitioned, and malformed one — one, she says, like so many others:

Whereas for my entire teaching life I had always thought that what I was doing was helping my students to understand the material we were studying — Melville or poststructuralism or whatever it happened to be... I realized that what I had actually been concerned with was showing the students how smart I was, how knowledgeable I was, and how well-prepared I was for class. I had been putting on a performance whose true goal was not to help students learn, as I had thought, but to perform before them in such a way that they would have a good opinion of me (LS, 119).

Teaching occurred in a showplace and the purpose was to show off one's mental excellence.

Jane Tompkins had brilliant ideas about her subject matter but after some time she saw them as brittle: brilliant, shiny, and thin. Her ideas arose, in part she believed, from a fear of being judged harshly. Fearful that her students would not like her and that her colleagues would not respect her, she pushed to produce works of brilliance. Rooted in this fear her explications no longer connected knower to known, lover to beloved. Connections between teacher and student can arise from a shared love of literature, from the excitement that attends the curriculum being uncovered, and our coming to know the world and others in distinctly new and different ways.

But it appears that Tompkins's education taught her to forgo her affection for literature, an affection she attempted to suppress and replace with brilliance. Of her undergraduate days she writes,

Those were desperate times, understanding T.S. Eliot in college — you had to be able to do that if you were an English major. So I wrote down the dry bits of information that the teacher gave us; it was like eating dog kibble. "These fragments I have shored against my ruins," Eliot writes.... That was me.

But it's possible to understand the poetry at another level without knowing what the references mean. It's possible to interrogate your soul and learn from its cries and whispers what the poet might be saying. Oh, I read Eliot, all right. I read him with my heart, and what I understood was appalling. But I couldn't admit to myself or articulate what I had seen. Turning back now to "The Hollow Men," looking at those dead lines, I see what they say and I can hardly take it. Irony of ironies, it was Eliot who was able to bare his heart in verse, in death's dream kingdom. But the reality was too much for my teachers, for me, so we lost ourselves in explication. We said: these lines are from Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*; these are from Gerard de Nerval. "Those are pearls that were his eyes," a reference to Shakespeare (*LS*, 129).

It did not have to be that way. Throughout *A Life in School* Tompkins portrays other avenues, recalls her kindling love, how it was ignited, snuffed, and re-ignited. Looking back on her high school and undergraduate years she remembers the teachers who loved their subjects and did not hide it; they were the ones who made the most difference (*LS*, 61). She recalls Mr. Bowler, her high school geometry teacher, who in approaching both the students and plane geometry respectfully and seriously created a classroom whose deliberations were deemed, by all, important (*LS*, 56). She remembers Dr. Sprague, who reenacted scenes from Shakespeare taking one part and then another, modulating his tone and inflection, inhabiting each character with substance and exquisite timing. Listening to Sprague she would shiver and want to hear it again. He showed Tompkins that "you could love something with your body and your heart as well as your mind" and "reconfirmed my sense that literature really was about life, and it gave me permission to express my unbounded enthusiasm" (*LS*, 61).

Unfortunately even under the best of conditions good teaching is difficult to develop and deliver. And it seems that Jane Tompkins's love of learning and teaching was pretty nearly dismantled before she began her life as a professor. But she did go on to teach. She taught literature in New London, Connecticut; Baltimore; Philadelphia; and Durham; and then left teaching for two years. When she returned she looked for a connection that would work. She focused on enabling students to understand themselves while also learning about the literary craft. These seemed to become two separate and distinct guiding educational goals. She was able to replace her fears with a sense of faith, a sense that things will turn out if she paid attention "to the moment, without too much pressure to make it come out in a certain way" (*LS*, 227).

Not all are as fortunate as Tompkins. Her good fortune allows us to glimpse both her pain and her resolutions. Tompkins, not unlike Dubus and Freedman, portrays a pain arising from connections severed and love scorned. Teaching, that process whereby teacher conjoins student and curricula, was all-too-often aborted. Her fears and her education encouraged flashy shows of expertise rather than attempts at

bringing the student and the curriculum together. In repressing her love for literature she did not share her excitement and passion for her subject with her students. In refusing to express her love she did not allow her students the opportunity or space for their love. She knew better. She had been graced with the warmth and glow of good teaching. She could recollect what she had been given and her own past excitement and thrill. She struggled to create the conditions where strands could be knit among teacher, stories, and students.

LOVE OF LEARNING (AND TEACHING)

At different times in their lives Emily, Jessica, and Jane expressed both love for their subjects and a desire to share that passion with their students. Emily and Jane's love of literature was an ardent, almost ecstatic, engagement with stories. Literature engaged their hearts and souls and they saw more clearly because of the tales they read. Jessica loved the challenge of a well-written story and its potential to change the lives of young writers and readers. All three were immersed in stories and were endeared to the process of learning. In order to understand their despair we need to grasp the nature of their love, how it was lost, and the cost. We need to know better what was at stake, the vulnerability entailed in this engagement, and how such a loss can take the wind out of a teacher. My hope is that this understanding and an enlarged love will lead us to a way through this despair, or at least to a way to live with a less intense despair.

A love of learning, a love of inquiry, comes in many forms. In its various manifestations we seem to reach beyond ourselves, to discover, create, and uncover. We invest ourselves in and engage ourselves with the world around us. Lured by an attempt to understand the Irish nationalists' struggles through Michael Collins's life, intrigued by scientific efforts to explain the bacterial growth causing the Rocky Mountain trout twirling disease, caught up in the attempt to discover the value of x in a complex algebraic equation, and wanting to know the ways in which light, color, movement, and character can convey subtle shades of emotion in a dance, are all expressions of this love of learning. In order to recapture this love, it would help to understand, at least to glimpse, distinct features of it. To appreciate elements of this love I explore the practice of writing cursive letters (penmanship), the lively possibilities of conversation, and the desire entailed in metaphorically "reaching for" spinning tops.

My son Matthew is learning cursive these days. He takes great pains to follow the outlines of each letter, to know its particular swoops, curves, loops, and connections. He practices his name, trying different slants, enlarging and reducing the spaces in the upper case "M," perfecting the connection from one letter to the next. After a while Matthew's left hand becomes smudged with graphite and, at times, smears the word he just wrote. But he does not allow this to discourage him. He persists. He is creating his mark and he knows that. He is practicing a great art. He is becoming more and more like the older kids and adults. It is an old, venerable, even ancient enterprise. In her autobiography Eudora Welty writes of how this art, as scrolled in her story books, affected her:

My love for the alphabet, which endures, grew out of reciting it but, before that, out of seeing the letters on the page. In my own story books, before I could read them for myself, I fell in love with various winding, enchanted-looking initials drawn by Walter Crane at the heads of fairy tales. In "Once upon a time" an "O" had a rabbit running it as a treadmill, his feet upon flowers. When the day came, years later, for me to see the Book of Kells, all the wizardry of letter, initial, and word swept over me a thousand times over, and the illumination, the gold, seemed a part of the word's beauty and holiness that had been there from the start.¹⁰

Commenting on this love of letters Anne Carson, poet and classics essayist, asks us to

Think how much energy, time, and emotion goes into that effort of learning: it absorbs years of your life and dominates your self-esteem; it informs much of your subsequent endeavor to grasp and communicate with the world. Think of the beauty of letters, and of how it feels to come to know them....To anyone trained in this way the edges of letters are memorable, emotional places, and remain so.¹¹

When we first learn to write we copy the particular scroll of traditional or D'Nealian cursive. Over time we make the letters our own. In learning to write our letters we learn to reach out and write ourselves into the world. We write ourselves into a world, a world that we experience, which can be "holy" and about which much is written. In exploring this world we come to know better its loops, and its curves. We come to observe and (re)create the connections that tie it together and the tears that rend it apart. We write the world and we have a need to explore and talk about it with others. We want to converse.

And it is conversation that is at the center of Michael Oakeshott's view of learning and our engagement with this world.¹² In his view we are born heirs to an inheritance, one that we can acquire only through learning. For Michael Oakeshott every person is born an heir to

an inheritance of feelings, emotions, images, visions, thoughts, beliefs, ideas, understandings, intellectual and practical enterprises, languages, relationships, organizations, canons and maxims of conduct, procedures, rituals, skills, works of art, books, musical compositions, tools.¹³

To take part in this inheritance is to engage in learning and one of the means of learning is conversation. It is through conversation, where we engage with others in understanding ourselves and this world, that this inheritance can be bequeathed. Educational conversations occur when we forget our everyday preoccupations, our ulterior goals, and become immersed in an understanding of and entranced by the power of this inheritance or what Palmer (following Rilke) calls "the grace of great things" (*CT*, 107). Educational settings allow us to explore this inheritance of great things and this exploration can be both delightful and delightfully trying. Oakeshott captures conversation's fleeting, reaching, and effervescent character when he writes that in conversation

10. Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 9.

11. Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 55, 57. This book will be cited as *EB* in the text for all subsequent references.

12. See Timothy Fuller, ed., *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Learning* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press).

13. *Ibid.*, 45.

"facts" appear only to be resolved once more into the possibilities from which they were made; "certainties" are shown to be combustible, not by being brought into contact with other "certainties" or with doubts, but by being kindled by the presence of ideas of another order; approximations are revealed between notions normally remote from one another. Thoughts of different species take wing and play around one another, responding to each other's movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions. Nobody asks where they have come from or on what authority they are present; nobody cares what will become of them when they have played their part. There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials. Every entrant is taken at its face-value and everything is permitted which can get itself accepted into the flow of speculation. And voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy. Conversation is not an enterprise designed to yield an extrinsic profit, a contest where a winner gets a prize, nor is it an activity of exegesis. It is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure. It is with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering.¹⁴

Conversations, these unrehearsed intellectual adventures, take on a life of their own; a life that is marked by flight and transformation.

Our love of letters and conversations, of reaching out to understand our worlds individually and with others, has a desirous and fleeting character. In learning we desire to reach out into other worlds and we know that our reach may miss, or our desired objects might move. Carson illuminates further this desirous and fleeting nature. She writes that in Franz Kafka's story, "The Top," a particular philosopher used to love to hang around children; chasing their spinning tops, hoping to catch them. This energetic scholar believed that an "understanding of any detail, that of a spinning top for instance, was sufficient for the understanding of all things" (*EB*, xi). When he succeeded at snaring a top he realized his "error." However this realization did not halt his chase. Once he caught sight of a spinning top, he would again run breathlessly after it. Carson understands the story to be about the delight we take in metaphor and the reason why we love to fall in love. Combining these two interpretations the story also seems to be about the reason why we love to fall in love with understanding, with learning about ourselves and the world around us. Carson writes

The story is about the delight we take in metaphor. A meaning spins, remaining upright on an axis of normalcy aligned with the conventions of connotation and denotation, and yet: to spin is not normal, and to dissemble normal uprightness by means of this fantastic motion is impertinent. What is the relation of impertinence to the hope of understanding? To delight? (*EB*, xi).

She adds that the story also concerns

the reason why we love to fall in love. Beauty spins and the mind moves. To catch beauty would be to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible. But no, delight need not reach so far. To be running breathlessly, but not yet arrived, is itself delightful, a suspended moment of living hope (*EB*, xi).

In concluding, she maintains that the philosopher is not really running after understanding but rather has become a philosopher so as to have a pretext for running after tops. Understanding is not the lure but rather the delight in the reach; the delight in living in that suspended moment of living hope is what draws a lover of knowledge (*EB*, xi-xii).

14. *Ibid.*, 13.

In Carson's portrayal love, *Eros*, sits within and reaches amidst the play of paradoxical tensions — it tries "to understand how that impertinent stability in vertigo is possible" (*EB*, xi).¹⁵ *Eros* takes delight in reaching within these tensions, attempting to reconcile the elements in paradox. Although Carson seems to repudiate understanding as an aim, supplanting it with the "aim" of running reach's delight, I think delight in both understanding and "the reach" are present in many philosophers' and learners' inquiry. Certainly the delight in reaching and the delight in arrival contain distinctions. However to deny delight in understanding seems to repudiate an experience most all of us have had.

In writing our cursive letters and in writing ourselves into the world, we experience those suspended moments of living hope; we occupy the space between the known and the unknown, the actual and the possible. It is an exciting, wonderful, and wondrous time. In reaching for that next loop we try to perfect our scroll. When we stop to look and see that the loop droops, we reach again. When we pause and notice that the loop is formed just right, we tend to note it and move on to the next loop or swoop. Certainly there are times when we delight in (and times when we are frustrated by) our practice. In those invigorating classroom discussions — we reach out with others to understand the texts we read and the lives we lead. We attempt to come to understand the many meanings before us, we reach for those meanings and, in reaching, we show features of ourselves. In reaching for those meanings we are attempting to bridge what we know with what we do not know, what is present with what is lacking. We reach amidst the tensions and when we reach we hope that we will be carried to the other side, to a new understanding. Our hope is intense and the possibilities of new understandings loom large. In conversations and in writing we also uncover aspects of ourselves and expose ourselves to others. We allow others to see glimpses of our hopes, our desires, and our dreams. We experience frustrations when we reach after our desires, frustrations that others observe. When we finish the cursive uppercase "M" or offer a comment in the conversation, we can feel as if we are giving of ourselves. We are and we are vulnerable in that giving.

As teachers we share this love of learning with our students. To teach is to share publicly this love; it is to ask others to be drawn in by the same powers that lure and attract us; it is to try to get our students to see the grace and attraction that these "great things" have for us. In teaching we reach out toward our students in an attempt to create connections among them and our subjects. We want them to love what we find so alluring. To love teaching is to be enamored of the attempt to share the attraction and hold the world has on us. To love teaching is to give of yourself in a way that can be so tenderly vulnerable. At one time Emily, Jessica, and Jane loved learning and teaching. But schooling drained Emily and Jessica of their love of teaching and, to some degree, learning. Graduate school prepared Jane for her subsequent despair; it robbed her of her love of learning and gave her little inspiration for teaching.

15. The role of love in paradox and suffering is explored poetically and evocatively by Carson in *Eros*, and discursively by Garrison in *Dewey and Eros*, and Palmer in *The Courage to Teach*.

ON SUFFERING AND ENLARGED LOVE

Emily, Jessica, and Jane loved their stories, knew the excitement, felt this vulnerability, experienced scorn and humiliation, and despaired. They no longer desired to teach. They no longer cared to take up that exposed place where the love of and desire for knowledge are sought, where the student and the curriculum are brought together through teaching. Emily's desire was run over by carloads of adolescents rushing by, paying her no mind. Jessica's desire became starved by an overwhelming hunger for a personal life. And Jane's desire was pounded down to a thin, brittle, and insubstantial brilliance. After having been run over, starved, and pounded down, Emily, Jessica, and Jane (along with thousands of teachers) no longer desired to teach. They occupied a place where there is no desire; their imagination wandered no longer. They no longer wanted to reach out for that elusive figment of their inquiry; they no longer wanted to experience the vulnerability and pain which accompanies that quest. They no longer engaged their imagination to envision their desires. Neither desire nor imagination moved them. Carson writes,

Whenever any creature is moved to reach out for what it desires,...the movement begins in an act of imagination [phantasia]....Without such acts neither animals nor men would bestir themselves to reach out of the present condition or beyond what they already know. Phantasia stirs minds to movement by its power of representation; in other words, imagination prepares desire by representing the desired object as desirable to the mind of the desirer. Phantasia tells the mind a story (*EB*, 169-70).

Emily, Jessica, and Jane cannot hear phantasia's tales about their subjects, their students, and the ways of teaching the two together. Their minds are closed to phantasia. They despair; their love is lost. Their imaginations cannot bestir them; they desire to teach no longer. As Carson underscores, to love and to learn is to reach for the difference between known and unknown and, as such, both efforts are high risk propositions. For too many teachers it becomes a risk not worth taking.

Emotionally and intellectually the risks are great. Despairing teachers are caught in the snares of a dilemma and in that dilemma they know and feel their vulnerability. Many, if encouraged, could probably articulate the tensions, the dilemmas they face. Collectively, Their tensions and dilemmas go something like this: How do I teach in a way that expresses my love of inquiry, for my subject matter, and for my students? How do I express and act on these loves in settings that disparage and scorn these loves? How do I, why should I, love when that love has been and could very well be destroyed again? How do I embrace love in the face of love scorned? Expressed as a paradox lurking behind the despair is this: In order to resuscitate scorned love one needs to embrace love.

My first inclination, when faced with a paradox, is to hive it into at least two distinct "parts" and to analyze each piece separately. This analytical approach works well in some situations and even with some paradoxes, but it is ill-suited to dealing with the tensions of despair and love.¹⁶ It is an approach in which many of us are well-trained but one that lacks the necessary stuff to travel the terrain. Jim Garrison

16. R.M. Sainsbury offers an analytical approach to particular "families" of paradox. See R.M. Sainsbury, *Paradoxes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

underscores the limitations of an analytical approach in these situations.¹⁷ Palmer offers the following admonition and suggestion:

We split paradoxes so reflexively that we do not understand the price we pay for our habit. The poles of a paradox are like the poles of a battery: hold them together and they generate the energy of life; pull them apart, and the current stops flowing. When we separate any of the profound paired truths of our lives, both poles become lifeless specters of themselves — and we become lifeless as well. Dissecting a living paradox has the same impact on our intellectual, emotional, and spiritual well-being as the decision to breathe in without ever breathing out would have on our physical health [CT, 65].

How we live with, rather than dissect, teaching's paradoxes is no simple matter. How we go about living with the pain, the suffering and confusion — the despair that Emily, Jessica and Jane experienced — cannot be a singularly cognitive affair. It is at the intersection of our thinking, feeling, intuiting, and acting selves that we begin to come to terms with these dilemmas. Despair, suffering, and affliction call forth an enlarged love;¹⁸ a love that is distinct from (while similar to) the desirous romantic "reach" Carson illuminates. If we are to sort out the conundrums faced by our love of teaching and learning, by those times when teaching can hurt like hell and empty us of the imagination and desire that animate our teaching and learning, then an attentiveness to the situation is required. Again, Palmer is helpful:

If we are to hold paradoxes together our own love is absolutely necessary — and yet our own love is never enough. In a time of tension we must endure whatever love we can muster until that very tension draws a larger love into the scene.... There is a name for the endurance we must practice until a larger love arrives: it is called suffering. We will not be able to teach in the power of paradox until we are willing to suffer the tension of opposites, until we understand that such suffering is neither to be avoided nor merely survived but must be actively embraced for the way it expands our own hearts (CT, 85).

In paradox we reach for an enlarged love, one that, we hope, can embrace and endure the tensions entailed in our teaching dilemmas. But how do we tell Emily, Jessica, and Jane that their suffering is not simply to be endured, it must be actively accepted? How do we, why should we, utter to someone in pain, "Embrace your suffering?" We need to return to these questions.

Palmer's prescription derives from experiential and spiritual sources, from a conceptual framework that is holistic in its embrace. His years as a teacher, his Quaker orientation, and his belief that teaching is a cognitive, emotional, and spiritual practice inform his understanding of the dilemmas of teaching. His perspective dovetails with many other commentators who have wandered through similar territory. In the educational literature Jim Garrison's Deweyan framework leads to a very similar place and Lisa Goldstein's feminist approach emphasizes comparable aspects.¹⁹ In the larger philosophic enterprise Søren Kierkegaard's focus

17. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 115-25.

18. It would be a mistake to claim that despair necessarily calls forth an enlarged love. For some the connection may occur but for others despair may prevail. Marcia Westcott (personal communication, 2 June 1999) holds that a Buddhist meditative stance enables some to move from despair to an enlarged love and Dwayne Huebner believes the relationship between suffering and love to be central in Christian thought and practice (personal communication, 20 July 1999). I pursue this connection in *Love and Despair in Teaching*.

19. Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, 48-49 and Lisa Goldstein, *Teaching with Love* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

on despair and love, Simone Weil's writings on love and affliction, and Iris Murdoch's attention to love, a sense of the void, and "the good" all share Palmer's concern for a larger love in suffering.²⁰ And it is in Murdoch's earlier work that we find an elaboration of this enlarged love. In this enlarged love at least three facets seem necessary: a diminished sense of self, an attentive gaze toward the situation and the other, and a presumption that "good" exists and is the object of love.

Before I fill in the outline of this enlarged love, a reminder is probably in order. I do not offer a larger love as a means of overcoming individual "failures." It is not an effort to remediate broken teachers but rather an endeavor to resuscitate lives and loves. Despair, at least the kind experienced by Emily, Jessica, and Jane, is a condition of their souls, and once visited, a condition of their worlds. An enlarged love will not wipe the slate clean, it will not necessarily make one a "better" teacher, and it will not magically transform the real world obstacles. It cannot alleviate teachers' suffering, cure our institutional or instructional ills, or knit together forever student and subject. What it does offer is a way to see through the depths of the despair and live with the remains. It can enable us to see our despair for what it is, it can add to our suffering a measure of joy and beauty, and it can allow us once again to find those connections among students and subject. Working toward an enlarged love is a rather large effort. But for those in despair, the effort seems commensurate with the task. To recapture that love of teaching and inquiry, to venture into that space where hope and possibility exist, where vulnerability is a reality and returning despair a possibility, requires what may seem to some a monumental effort. For those in despair it can appear as if it is the only route, the only route if one wants to continue teaching.

In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch attempts, in a neo-Platonic fashion, to place an understanding of the "good" and an orientation to love at the center of our moral and spiritual life. It is an enlarged sense of love in that it takes the individual beyond his or her particular concerns to a clearer, less noise-filled focus on beauty and the good, and on the world around and beyond us. Murdoch asks us to look lovingly beyond ourselves; to construe freedom as the absence of self-preoccupied fantasies and the ability to see the world more clearly. Her understanding lies in

the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists. The freedom which is a proper human goal is the freedom from fantasy, that is the realism of compassion. What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called "will" or "willing" belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.... Freedom is not strictly the exercise of the will, but rather the experience of accurate vision, which, when this becomes appropriate, occasions action. It is what lies behind and in between actions and prompts them that is important, and it is this area which should be purified (SG, 66-67).

She adds that the "love which brings the right answer is an exercise of justice and realism and really looking. The difficulty is to keep the attention fixed upon the real situation and to prevent it from returning surreptitiously to the self with consolations of self-pity, resentment, fantasy, and despair" (SG, 91). Murdoch's call to love,

20. Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*; Simone Weil, ed. Eric Springsted, *Simone Weil* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998); Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*; and Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*.

what I am calling an enlarged (or larger) love, requires that we see through and beyond ourselves, so that we can comprehend and come to terms with our situations. Her perspective is neither a pedestrian nor sophisticated realism, and it does not entail the putative ascetic elimination of self. It is an individual's loving attempt to see the world carefully and justly, to be guided by the Good. She elaborates,

When true good is loved, even impurely or by accident, the quality of the love is automatically refined, and when the soul is turned towards Good the highest part of the soul is enlivened. Love is the tension between the imperfect soul and the magnetic perfection which is conceived of as lying beyond it.... And when we try perfectly to love what is imperfect our love goes to its object via the Good to be thus purified and made unselfish and just. The mother loving the retarded child or loving the tiresome elderly relation. Love is the general name of the quality of attachment and it is capable of infinite degradation and is the source of our greatest errors; but when it is even partially refined it is the energy and passion of the soul in its search for Good, the force that joins us to Good and joins us to the world through Good. Its existence is the unmistakable sign that we are spiritual creatures, attracted by excellence and made for the Good. It is a reflection of the warmth and light of the sun (SG, 102-3).

To offer Murdoch's vision of love and the good as one route out of teachers' despair raises as many questions and dilemmas as it purports to address. Murdoch's nontheistic spirituality, her Platonic emphasis on the good and the beautiful, and her understanding of a diminished self could (and should) be explored further.²¹ Here I simply want to raise Murdoch's orientation, and implicitly the more theistic views of Simone Weil, as a complicated beacon to follow, as a beacon that lifts one out of the depths of despair and enables one to see, partially, what that despair entails.²² Before I refocus on Emily, Jessica, and Jane's despair I want to show how Murdoch links her emphasis on the good to the virtue of humility, for an understanding of humility is central to this enlarged love, and crucial to putting despair in its proper place.

Murdoch ends *The Sovereignty of Good* by underscoring the sovereignty of good over other concepts. Yet she wants to link the abstract features of goodness with particular human virtues. She links goodness with humility:

Goodness is connected with the acceptance of real death and real chance and real transience and only against this background of this acceptance, which is psychologically so difficult, can we understand the full extent of what virtue is like. The acceptance of death is an acceptance of our own nothingness which is an automatic spur to our concern with what is not ourselves. The good man is humble.... Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one and one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self.... The humble man, because he sees himself as nothing, can see other things as they are. He sees the pointlessness of virtue and its unique value and the endless extent of its demand (SG, 102-3).

Earlier I claimed that one of the sources of despair in teaching was love scorned. Teachers immersed in their love of learning and in their passion to share that love with students put themselves in vulnerable positions. They expose precious features

21. Charles Taylor and Martha Nussbaum explore further some of these and other features of Murdoch's formulations. See Charles Taylor, "Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy," in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3-28 and Martha Nussbaum, "Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual" in Antonaccio and Schweiker, *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, 29-53.

22. Simone Weil, *Simone Weil*; Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963); and Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1951).

of themselves: their passions, their loves and aversions, their idiosyncrasies, and their blemishes. Their naked humanness is offered to others. Despair seems to have a source in the scorn and derision felt by teachers when they have offered themselves, their love of learning, and their particular subject to students. It was not a scorn that was experienced once, intermittently, and then forgotten, but a continual, persistent, and for some seemingly ever-present diminishment of their love.²³ And so how is an enlarged love supposed to resuscitate and reengage these teachers? How is Emily to face carloads of adolescents speeding by, paying her no mind? How is she to protect her love of literature and her desire to talk with others about the stories she reads?

It seems that Murdoch's enlarged love countenances the following: An enlarged love in teaching is, in part, an effort to diminish the unnecessary noise of the teacher's self. It would understand the "romantic" love of inquiry and subject as a gift of the ages to be given to others and not simply as the teacher's own love. As a result Emily, Jane, and Jessica could construe teaching not only as *their* loving gift but also as a gift of the human inheritance of which they are a part. In giving such a gift our preoccupation with self-worth, our vulnerability, is lessened. A larger teaching love also attends to the situation, to the students in the classes, in an attempt to see the class more clearly, to find ways to connect students with the grace of great things. Less encumbered by the vicissitudes and noise of the teaching self, the teacher searches for ways to knit student and subject. Finally, an enlarged love looks for the good in students and these teaching settings, it attempts to see students in ways that assume and build up the good.²⁴ A larger love may not entice Emily or Jessica back into teaching. There is no guarantee attached to this attentive stance. However it does offer a route for renewed faith and engagement in an activity that is dear to us and essential for the human race. It is a valuable route if it can help us address some of our central dilemmas: How do I pursue my love of teaching and learning in the face of love scorned? How do I embrace the suffering and pain that love scorned brings? It is a valuable route for those teachers who wish to pursue teaching with the love and intensity they have known. Teaching from despair is an awful, some would say horror-filled, effort. Dispelling despair, in order to continue teaching with love, requires a greater love.

Will it sustain Jessica to tell her that she is part of a great human inheritance? Would that decrease Jessica's vulnerability? Will it help Jessica to know that teaching from the heart, finding ways to bring students to the subject matter they "need," is an effort of generational proportions? No one will know if any such effort would have retrieved Jessica for teaching. And no one knows (ahead of time or abstractly) what paths a larger love of teaching will create. But in order to support our claim that a larger love is part of this recovery effort, this "story" has to seem plausible; it needs to ring true. To me, it does.

23. Emily and Jessica's despair seemed to follow this pattern. The "basis" for Jane's despair seemed to lie in her graduate school experiences. There she experienced a significant diminishment of her love of learning and teaching.

24. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 209-79.

Recall that Jessica stated, in teaching, "Your identity is on the line....And so if you get negativism or disinterest or hostility from the class, then that's really a blow. That's a comment on my whole being" (SV, 213). It seems that Jessica opened her entire self to her students, emptied herself in her classroom, allowed others to judge her efforts and accepted their negative judgments. To give of yourself to the point where there is little left, and then ask for judgment is to put too much of your self on the line. In Jessica's situation the noise emanating from her self-abnegation was deafening. When that occurs, the teaching self is not diminished but decimated. In teaching with a larger love our sense of self-importance, our concerns about our brilliance, and our preoccupation with classroom presentations are diminished. But to diminish these noisy features of the self is not to extinguish the teaching self. We need the self in order to see clearly, to attend to the class, and to perform the magic that is teaching. Perhaps Jessica simply gave (up) too much.

Many of us have had to learn the difficult lessons of discerning care. Caring for students requires that we engage in the difficult deliberation of how much to give, when to offer a comment, and when to keep quiet. There are those among us who believe that we need to give all of ourselves most of the time. To do so means giving (up) too much. To say that Jessica may have given too much of herself is to offer neither an indictment nor a harsh judgment. By all accounts she worked miracles at Seward Park High. But if she wanted to continue teaching, to find a way to continue pursuing her love of journalism and her engagement with her students, she needed to change, to occupy another kind of love. Perhaps if she had read Leonard Covello's *The Heart is the Teacher*, a Manhattan teacher's story of immigrant education in the earlier part of this century, she would have seen the enormity of the effort and her part in that legacy.²⁵ Her story could have been inserted into a larger story. Perhaps if she had "forced" herself to take time out for herself her resources would have been greater. Perhaps, perhaps. But then, it could be that the social conditions of Seward Park High School were too brutal for even an enlarged love to salvage. Teaching from an enlarged love cannot ensure transformed social conditions. However before we give up on teaching due to pain and despair, it makes sense to see if a salvaging effort might work.

In Emily's thoughts about teaching she recalled that only a few students a year came to class to feel the stories and poetry and to see more clearly because of them. It seems that the rest of the students spent their class time in their cars, on the road, passing Emily by. Throughout our tale of two loves and despair I have claimed that teaching is an effort that brings student and subject together. Emily felt little connection with her students, no longer wanted to share her love of literature in the classroom, and was unable to conjoin student and subject. She was fearful of teaching her love of literature to students because of the vulnerability it entailed. She grew scornful and bitter. To live in this scorn and bitterness is to suffer; and in suffering, I have claimed, we may find a way to a larger love. This larger love allows the teacher to see past his or her self-enmeshed concerns to the situation at hand. A larger love allows greater clarity of vision about the students and about the ways to knit student

25. Leonard Covello, *The Heart is the Teacher* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954).

and subject together. So what would this enhanced vision, this quality of attentiveness, mean for Emily's teaching? It might permit her to understand why so many of her students enjoyed the car's racing thrill and the exuberance of their friends' company. It might help her explore the harmony she observed between the physical education teachers and her students, their attraction to the sensual reach of bodies in motion. It might enable her to understand her students' desires and the fuel of their imaginations and to offer her sustenance for her own imagination and desire. With these understandings she might create speed bumps and detours so her students could consider her stories once again, this time driving back around a bit more slowly. With this attentiveness she might alter the stories she asked them to read and to see in these new stories a grace and power similar to her own well-worn tales. It might provide insights about and avenues for connecting students and subjects. In Dubus's account Emily had the ability to see the scenes before her. An enlarged love does not require Herculean efforts. She saw clearly Alvin's care for Drew. She understood the pain of her teaching and why she left. She noticed others staying. To continue teaching would have required the kind of clarity she employed at the bar. Sometimes pain and suffering blinds us to what is around. Taking leave can be the wisest thing to do.

A larger love takes us beyond our immediate concerns to attend to, and to see more clearly, the concerns of others. Seeing the situations and others more clearly requires that we get beyond the noise of ourselves so that we can attend to and dwell in their situation. Most all of us have had those experiences where our attention is crystallized on a particular scene. Walking along a path by a stream I have come upon a kingfisher flitting along the waters, coming to rest on a nearby tree branch. For a few minutes it allowed me to gaze at its royal crest, long beak, and beautiful plumage. Nothing else much existed except for another person who happened to come along, and to whom I passed on the sight of the kingfisher. Many of us have observed a student giving a gift to another, or one who is lost in a story of enchantment and wonder, or another playing a theatrical role that made her normally quiet voice roll like thunder. These are the moments that nourish teachers' souls for they allow us glimpses into worlds that stand as if on their own. And then there are the times we see the anguish of a student, walking into class, knowing that some injury has recently passed and will not be easily forgotten. Or a parent comes to visit, full of the same piss and vinegar that brought his son so much ill will during the semester. Although painful, these moments are also part of the rhythms of classroom life, rhythms that beat the march of our lives along.²⁶ Seeing these moments and students for what they are, without enmeshing ourselves into the drama at hand, is part of a larger love in teaching. This quality of attentiveness helps us to see the situations in front of us and act not out of anguish, fear, or self-aggrandizement but for the good of the student and the situation at hand.

And finally an enlarged love attends to the good, the beautiful, that lies before us. When we despair, much of what we see is the fallout of our own despair. Attending

26. For a helpful discussion of these rhythms see Garrison, *Dewey and Eros*, chap. 2.

to the good in others, allowing the "thou" in others to address the "I" in ourselves, can be an immense effort when the days are dark. Even in normal "despair-less" times it is not unusual for most of the classroom ills to be blamed on the students. At the university, in high schools, and in middle and elementary schools, teachers can be disposed to assume that when learning fails, the problem lies in the students. Assuming and searching for the good within students who appear to dismiss us, who seem to cast aside our educational efforts, can be trying and feel impossible. Two examples of this attentive search for good might help. In *The Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch describes how a mother (*M*) alters her original and negative opinions about her daughter-in-law (*D*). As Murdoch relates, *M* initially construed her daughter-in-law as rude, brusque, and tirelessly juvenile. *M* then reflects on the situation and gives "careful and just attention" to both her relationship with *D* and her own attitudes. Upon reflection *M* realizes that she may be old fashioned, conventional, snobbish, and narrow-minded in her approach. She knows she is jealous. Subsequently, *M* comes to a different appraisal. She sees *D* as no longer vulgar but "refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on" (SG, 17-18). Murdoch writes that such an attainment is neither simple nor uncomplicated, and it is the result of being moved by love, justice, and the search for the good.

In a similar vein, Goldstein writes, "if I am committed to loving each of my students, how do I handle the children whom I find unappealing?"²⁷ She writes of Andy, whose persistent whining, negative attitude, and meanness toward other students affected not only her own attitudes but the feelings of other students, "He started every task, regardless of what it was, by sitting down and saying 'I hate this....do I have to do this?' I tried giving him the benefit of the doubt, cutting him slack, giving him space. Then I ran out of ideas."²⁸ Temporarily running out of ideas, Goldstein placed Andy in a category that could not be loved. Goldstein writes,

His negativism was contagious: once he started complaining, the other children working near him would start doing it too. I tried to diffuse the situation with humor whenever it arose — since once Andy was laughing he forgot to be miserable. And then it dawned on me. Andy didn't really hate everything, and he didn't really mind doing the work he was assigned. Being grouchy was his "schtick"; it was the only way he knew how to enter a situation. I saw Andy in a new light, and was able to ignore his complaints and help him get settled into each new project. I don't know if my interpretation of Andy's bad attitude is correct or not, but it enabled me to find a way to interact with him that would be positive and allowed me to establish a relationship with him.²⁹

Will searching for the good, diminishing the noise from the self, and seeing the world more clearly enable the despairing teacher to take up that vulnerable place of love in teaching? Will despair dissolve partially or at least sufficiently to enable the love of learning to be re-ignited? I do not know. But I do not know of another way.

CONCLUSION

Actually there are at least two other, more traditional, ways to conceive of and deal with teachers' despair: the psychological approach articulated in the teacher

27. Goldstein, *Teaching with Love*, 86.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid., 86-87.

burnout literature, and the contextualization of teachers' work that informs the current educational reform literature. Given that these two orientations provide the putative and scholarly frameworks for understanding what I have called teacher despair, it would be helpful, in conclusion, to compare briefly my thesis with these two approaches. In the psychological literature a common construal of burnout is as follows: a "syndrome which emanates from an individual's perceptions of unmet needs and unfulfilled expectations. It is characterized by progressive disillusionment, with related psychological and physical symptoms which diminish one's self-esteem. It develops gradually over time."³⁰ In this framework the onus of change is placed squarely on the individual: the afflicted teacher needs to become aware of his or her own needs and expectations and how he or she is perceiving them.³¹ In the contextual literature, the organizational structure of schooling is said to create unnecessary obstacles to teachers' effective and meaningful instruction, frustrating their efforts to educate students. School organizational reform and restructuring are required to facilitate rewarding teachers' work. Obviously there are many truths and insights contained in both approaches. My love and despair thesis does not necessarily contradict these stances and, I think, adds further to the understandings offered by both.

Briefly it appears that the love and despair approach adds to the burnout literature the notion that teaching practice is *by its very nature* prone to despair. Teachers' despair is not solely a matter of individuals' unmet needs and expectations; it is part of the structure of teaching. If part of teaching is the public sharing of our personal love of learning, then we will always be vulnerable. And while teachers, according to the burnout literature, may need to attend to their unmet needs and unfulfilled expectations, they also (according to my love and despair thesis) need to be attentive to others unencumbered by significant ego noise. It is not clear, without further development, how these two features might interact. However an approach like that outlined in David Brazier's book, *Zen Therapy: Transcending the Sorrows of the Human Mind*, might provide a beginning.³²

The contextual approach, a view I generally have held for some twenty years, acts as a helpful corrective to our cultural tendency toward psychological reductions. All too often our culturally sanctioned, individualist approach forgets the contextual landscape and focuses predominantly on the individual actors. While some persist in seeing complex cultural and structural phenomena through individualist lenses, it is difficult to discount the ways in which institutional arrangements and structural elements confound teachers' efforts. A view of teaching as a practice prone to despair and entailing at least two distinct kinds of love might provide the contextual approach with additional moral and rhetorical bases for educational reforms, especially those reforms related to teachers' work and student learning. A recognition of

30. Gold and Roth, *Teachers Managing Stress and Preventing Burnout*, 41.

31. *Ibid.*, 46.

32. See David Brazier, *Zen Therapy: Transcending the Sorrows of the Human Mind* (New York: John Wiley and Sons), 1995.

love and despair in teaching would necessitate addressing the following question: How can we structure teachers' work to allow for both a love of learning and enlarged love in teaching? Teachers' work would, I believe, look radically different if this question were addressed and teachers' work restructured. The love and despair thesis also provides a potential ethic and basis for teacher protest toward school reform. If good teaching entails an expression of one's love of learning and requires an enlarged love toward our students, and if school structures and community misunderstandings obstruct an adequate teaching practice, we may have additional ethical and rhetorical bases for reform. It may be a basis that connects emotionally and more integrally to teachers' daily efforts. Who knows? We can hope.

While recounting his four-year struggle with depression and hospitalization, William Styron searched for a hopeful message to pass along. It was not an easy task, as his account conveys a claustrophobic sense of life closing in, darkly, quietly, with a thick and languid air. In his despair he expressed little hope, little wonder, and little love. But for the reader he had this to offer: "It is of great importance that those who are suffering a siege, perhaps for the first time, be told — be convinced, rather — that the illness will run its course and that they will pull through."³³ While teachers' despair may not be an illness, it does seem to be an occupational hazard. It is a hazard that can and should be forewarned. And it would be helpful for teachers in despair to know that one need not leave teaching in order for the despair to cease (although for some that might be necessary). Tompkins came to a somewhat similar conclusion. Toward the end of her biography she notes that

fear is still a major feature of my psychic life, [but] it is not as attached as it used to be to what happens in a class. I feel a greater kinship with students, more on a level with them as human beings than I used to, and I know that if I play it straight and listen to what they have to say, nothing much can go wrong.... You might say that my fear has been replaced in a general way by faith, faith that things will work out and that if I pay attention to the moment, without too much pressure to make it come out a certain way, I'll be all right (*LS*, 226-27).

Love and despair may be inextricably interwoven in teaching. If love of learning, reaching for the spinning top, lures us into the classroom, then the snares of despair may lock us into a bare and empty room. This alluring love is bound to disenchant; it cannot withstand the inevitable onslaughts of institutional classroom life. But it need not remain mired in and soured by despair. If our alluring love brought us here, our enlarged love can console and repair. An enlarged love is built from the suffering and pain of love scorned. Faith in ourselves and faith in those around us are, perhaps, our saving and amazing grace.

33. Styron, *Darkness Visible*, 76.

I WISH TO THANK Michael Dale (Appalachian State University, North Carolina) who greatly facilitated this essay. Through sharing pertinent works and rich conversation he lent his spirit, intelligence, and gave sustenance to this work. I wrote the piece but I could not have developed or polished it without his passion for and understanding of the issues. I want to thank Nick Burbules, Mark Conrad, Isabel Duffy, Jim Garrison, Ken Howe, Dwayne Huebner, Jody and Pat McQuillan, Liz Meador, Ofelia Miramontes, Jo Anne Pagano, A.G. Rud, Michele Seipp, Mary Ann Shea, Lynn and Bill Stanley, Wally Ullrich, and Marcia Westkott for their helpful comments on previous drafts. I am also grateful to three anonymous reviewers from the *Educational Theory* editorial review board.