

HOW COVID-19 REKINDLED THE SPIRIT OF TEACHING

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The abrupt end to our classes in the middle of March 2020 due to the Covid-19 situation reignited in me the real sense of what it means to be a teacher. It brought me out of the superficial notion, where being a law professor just means being someone who has students who will listen to me talk about the law, and into the deeper sense - that being a teacher involves a very special human relationship. This transition arose in me, I believe, because the Covid-19 situation forced me to slow down and sit still for a while, and that moved me from a place of superficial busy-ness to grounded authenticity in all aspects of my life including teaching.

After some time of being immersed in listening to surreal news from all over the world and coming up with plans to end my courses online, I felt an increasing calm that emerged from not having anywhere to physically rush to. The slowing of the usual hustle brought with it an increased awareness of just how superficial a 'busy' life can be. I felt myself realizing that living through a busy routine can create a tantalizing, but false feeling of ease, security, and purpose. Running here and there, and rushing towards this or that deadline, racing to change the world before someone else does - that hasty existence was in fact allowing me to live at the surface of life, and mask the uneasy questions that occur in my deeper life about my *actual* worth, my *actual* place, my *actual* purpose. Busy-ness is a way to pack our lives so full that we don't have to deal with how frightening and unsettling life can appear - we grow old, we get sick, we are in a fragile, uncertain condition, and we die. The Covid-19 situation made all this stark, and also created space in my life to sit with it. As I did, I felt that the superficial parts of my life were being sifted out and I was experiencing more of the real. And although it may seem that sitting with these things can cause great anxiety and disturbance, yet quite to the contrary, I can report with much gratitude, that embracing life's uncertain fragility managed to give rise to a greater sense of earthy realness to my life. This translated into how I began to feel towards my students and my role as their professor.

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I remember feeling a sense of care, concern, and affection for my students. I do feel this way towards them generally, but however dishonorable, I confess that sometimes these feelings are less at the forefront, and my teaching is animated more by a sense of 'having to get it done.' But, in these moments, I felt less that the students are part of my job and more like they were part of my life, and I part of theirs. I felt responsible for them and for their well-being. These feelings did not arise logically or through my own thinking, they just came, sometimes as a flood, and they brought with them a tangible peace and genuine gratitude for my position as someone's teacher. I would define the experience in the words of my most influential and respected teacher: "It's a grace that comes with just being still and letting life flow around and through." (Professor Ronalda Murphy, in one of her many touching emails to me.)

I remember being overwhelmed at times by the notion of how much trust our students give to us. At times, I experienced the vivid realization that our purpose is to care about our students not just in relation to the content of the courses we teach, but as the whole person who is in our care for a short but crucial time period. To be in this type of relationship of care is an outstanding privilege. It brings our work into the realm of the sacred.

When these thoughts occurred to me over the course of March and April 2020, I wrote emails to my classes, recorded audios, and sent video messages to them. The most substantive was an audio recoding that I created for my civil procedure class, and I ended up sharing it with all my students across my classes. I called these my "Final Comments with Zaheer Beats" because my wonderfully talented cousin heard the comments, felt musically inspired, and allowed me to include a clip of his music at the end. The words are transcribed here because I believe they capture the essence of the shift in my approach to being a teacher that occurred at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Hi everyone,

This would have been the last day that we would have met if this term had been more predictable. So, I thought I'd just share some thoughts.

I know you're probably all feeling busy with upcoming exams – so don't worry, there's absolutely nothing content related in this message, just some rambling, so feel free to unplug.

If we were together, I would have maybe opened up a discussion with you about your experiences of law school or your reflections on what is going on in the world right now, but since we can't do that in person, I thought I'd just talk to you a bit about my own experience with law and careers and stuff.

I think I have already told you that I went to the law school at the U of A in Edmonton, and then I started articling in a mid-sized civil litigation law firm. The part that I didn't tell you, and wouldn't usually, is that I hated it. I was extremely unhappy. And I'll tell you why I'm telling you this in a minute, but I want to just be clear that I am not at all saying that practicing law in a civil litigation law firm is at all inherently problematic – quite to the contrary, I think it can be a great choice. You can do really meaningful work in that context, and I am also very happy that I did have those years at the law firm, for many reasons – including that I think that having done that has enabled me to teach better.

So, don't get me wrong – law firm practice, and civil litigation can be awesome – I know people who find it exhilarating and really meaningful. And my sense is that many, many of the students that I have interacted with at Schulich, including many of you guys, would find traditional law practice to be like that - and that gives me great hope for the profession. Because we need lawyers who are truly passionate about practicing law in that traditional sense.

But for me, it simply wasn't a good fit. And I spent four years in that, but I think I knew within the first maybe three months that I was really uneasy in that environment. And I'm not sure that I can tell you precisely what the problem was for me, and that doesn't really even matter much. There were little things that I could point to, like I think law practice requires a bit of detail orientation, and I may have a bit of a more of a big picture tendency, and that can be dangerous in a law firm.

But that doesn't matter too much, because my point in telling you this is contingent only on the fact that it wasn't a good fit for me, and it doesn't matter why. But what I wanted to express is that I ended up with a lot of internal conflict because from an external perspective, I was doing everything right and apparently living a dream. But the reality of it was that it may be a dream for someone, but it wasn't really my dream, but I was continually trying to convince myself that it was my dream, because there are so many external forces (parents, society, the law school itself) telling you that that's the dream, or that that's success. So there was internal dissonance because internally you know that you don't belong somewhere, and you try to tell yourself that that's exactly where you belong. But thankfully, my internal reality never succumbed to my attempts to lie to it. And I don't think it ever does. So I remained uneasy, and that causes some suffering.

Now I know that people suffer in life in far more serious ways, but nonetheless, the suffering that results from the dissonance that I'm talking about is I think quite a widespread form of suffering (and we know that for one reason or another, studies seem to indicate that law just isn't the happiest profession. There could be lots of reasons for that – the hours, the billable hour, things like that. But to me it's also an indication that people in our profession are experiencing that dissonance that I'm talking about.

And I think that's because nowhere in the education system from grade school to professional school do we ever really encourage people to be in tune with themselves first. And then do things from that sense of being in tune. Instead we encourage people to be externally driven – like your teachers will tell you what you're supposed to do, and what success means, and we never really say clearly to people – you've got to look inwards and find your intrinsic or internal drive.

I certainly was basically exclusively externally driven until very recently, when I met someone who sort of slowly pointed all this out. (I happened to marry that person!)

I'm sharing this with you because I just want to encourage you to be very aware if something like the dissonance and internal conflict that I'm describing happens to you at some point. And the fact is that I

think it happens to a lot of people, but there is so much external demand to be ambitious towards only certain ideals of success, that it's hard to come out of it when you're caught in it. So, you have to put effort into continually asking yourself if what you are doing is in line with who you actually are.

Now even if you do that, of course there will be parts of your job that you don't like, no matter what. Like, I love this job, I have loved being with you in the classroom, but there are parts of it that are like arg!, this again! Like pouring yourself into an article for a year only to have it dismissed as "too obvious" to publish. That has happened, guys!

And the path to getting this job felt very rough at times, so I'm not saying be afraid of hard work, or expect to walk on rainbows all the time, and I recognize that there are practicalities in your lives like bills and responsibilities, that will make some of this seem irrelevant or more like a luxury, and in a sense you're right about that, but I don't think that there is anything more relevant than putting every effort into ensuring that you live a life that makes you feel....alive.

Some people may immediately go into careers that they love, and that's great, but that didn't happen for me, and it may not happen for some of you right away. So you'll have periods of uncertainty and uneasiness in your life – for sure – but I think what's key is that you know that you don't need to be afraid of that uneasiness – you have to be aware of it, and don't shut it up, because that's what is going to create a path forward for you.

In the end, while I care about how you do in Civ Pro, I care far more that you live very much in tune with yourself, so that you live very fully, and that your career is an expression of who you are, and not who you think you are supposed to be.

That is what I think is best for you and for the profession and for society, because when you're in-tune, then you'll find yourself working hard, being passionate, your creativity will flow on it's own, and you will walk the difficult paths, but you won't lose any strength in the process.

I know it may feel strange for me to be talking about this stuff given this quite remarkable period of history that we're in right now. But I

think that the message of being in tune with yourself is maybe even more relevant this year than any other year, and at least it's no less relevant this year.

But I know that many of you will have concerns for families right now who you can't be with, and maybe people are feeling isolation anxiety, some people's jobs and things aren't certain anymore. I know that's very tough, and there isn't much to say in response to that, except maybe the thought that we should always approach defining things as adversities or blessings with humility because the fact is that we don't know tomorrow's reality, and we are all very much together in that state of incomplete knowledge.

But that doesn't make tough moments necessarily easier to bear. So, let's just be easy with ourselves and each other.

For me, this pandemic awakened and re-kindled the spirit of what it means to be someone's teacher, and the special bond that emerges from that relationship. It reminded me that I cannot take teaching for granted. It grounded me into an ethic of care to guide my relationship with my students. It showed me how easy it is for me to get caught into the whirlwind of productivity, personal advancement, and 'busy-ness,' and opened my eyes to what I sacrifice when I do so, and I wanted to share that with my students. I hope that I will always look back at this period with much gratitude, because the Covid-19 slow down graciously humbled me and brought me back to life.