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ACADEMY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

## Called to Teach: Brief Essays on the Meaning of Teaching

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### Called to Teach: To Give to My Students What Was Given to Me

Dr. Michael D. Thomas,  
Professor of Spanish

*Rima VII* (my translation), by Spanish Romantic poet, Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer (1836-1870)

In a dark corner of the room,  
perhaps forgotten by its owner,  
the harp lies silent,  
covered with dust.

How many notes sleep in its strings,  
like a bird that sleeps in a tree;  
the harp is waiting for the snow-white hand  
that knows how to awaken it and make it sing!

Ah, I thought: how often does the genius of the mind  
sleep like this in the depths of the soul,  
waiting, like Lazarus, for a voice  
to say to it: "Rise and walk!"

I fell in love with Spanish under somewhat unusual circumstances. I grew up in a small city in Missouri where there were no Spanish-speakers. I began studying the language in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade with a Latin teacher who knew little, if any Spanish. I was so captivated by it that I finished the textbook in six weeks, after which, at age 13, I became the *de facto* teacher of the class, or at least, the one who could correct the instructor when she brought Latin verb conjugations into our Spanish lesson.

She would write something on the board and then look over at me:

“Is that right, Thomas?”

“No, Miss McFann, I think that’s Latin.”

By November, I had translated the “Little Drummer Boy” into Spanish. Miss McFann was so impressed with my work that she made me sing it in front of the whole class. It became clear at that moment that my vocation was Spanish, not singing. Lest you be impressed by this *wunderkind* performance, I will add that I failed even to crack most other textbooks all the way through high school and graduated in the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of my class. Yet, though I was not yet a Christian, that unusual 9<sup>th</sup> grade experience in many ways foreshadowed my entire adult professional life and my later involvement in Christian missions.

When I was a freshman in college, I realized that I had to get serious about all my classes. I had decided to become a Spanish professor, to do something I loved and to do it for the rest of my life. Since this was my goal, I immediately began studying hard and at the same time looking for professional role models. After cramming for over ten hours for a psychology exam, I made a “D.” My psychology professor called me into his office and tutored me in how to study; I used his approach all the way through my Ph.D. comprehensive exams and have passed it on to my students over many decades. My math professor impressed me with his commitment to be sure everyone understood difficult concepts, which for me was pretty much all of them. I wanted to be that kind of teacher. I also vividly remember the passion conveyed by other instructors in the sciences, economics, philosophy, and even Chinese history. To this day, I still read literature in these fields with great interest. Those instructors’ impact on me never wore off.

In Spanish, French, and Portuguese courses, I met teachers who were committed mentors and spent quality time with me, teaching me to express my ideas effectively in a clear and well-organized way. One professor required three essays per semester. After grading each paper, he scheduled individual conferences during which he politely and professionally raked us over the coals, line by line:

“Mr. Thomas, this paragraph has no topic sentence.”

“Mr. Thomas, there is no transition here.”

“Mr. Thomas, you need more convincing examples.”

“Mr. Thomas, your introduction and conclusion are weak.”

And the list went on. After two or three of those sessions, I finally grasped how to write analytically, to present and argue a thesis effectively with topic sentences, strong examples, and smooth

transitions. I had done scores of term papers as a student, but they usually came back with only a grade and very occasionally, a few written comments. I didn't know what I had done right or wrong. Because of the influence of that one committed professor, I have held the same type of individual conferences with my students in several languages for over forty-seven years, including fourteen in Baylor's Great Texts Program. I wanted to do for them what had been done for me.

In 1977, I became a Christian while on the faculty of a state university, and this completed my self-portrait: I was a Christian teacher-scholar. My new faith reinforced my concept of teaching as mentoring (discipleship). But I was still looking for a way to express my newly-discovered identity in a friendlier environment. Within a few years, I became involved in training short-term missionaries in various languages to prepare them for mission trips.

My involvement in missions has borne fruit in unexpected and satisfying ways. In 1979, I was hired to spend six weeks teaching Portuguese to twenty-six young people who were to spend a year in Brazil as mission volunteers. I hired an assistant, a Baylor Biology senior who grew up in Manaus, Brazil, a Mr. Robert Doyle. In the class was a young lady named Eva Cheatam. Many years later, in 2001, they would join me as new Baylor faculty members: Dr. Robert Doyle, who chaired the Biology department for twelve years, and Dr. Eva Doyle, current chair of Baylor's Public Health Department; together, they oversee Baylor in Brazil.

My faith also influenced my research. I wanted to ensure that a Christian voice was still on the academic table in a post-modern intellectual climate. I published a book about Spanish fascism and the contrary ethos proposed by five major novelists of the Franco period. One early reviewer rejected my book's thesis, stating that "values and virtues," Christian or otherwise, "do not exist." The Spanish dictator saw the war as a victory for God and imposed his own set of values, but these authors wrote novels that exposed the regime's hypocrisy, cruelty, and especially its betrayal of the younger generation, explicitly likening it in one novel to Peter's denial of Christ. The novelists advocated universal human values like compassion, reaching out to the marginalized "other," authentic identity, integrity, and courage under ideological fire.

Learning to teach by watching great professors, bringing my language skills into Christian service, and pursuing research through the lens of faith, I have come to my view of Christian education. Bécquer's poem expresses my perspective vividly:

- To awaken the dormant genius of every intellect of every student so they can create, learn, grow, think deeply, articulate unique insights, and find solutions to the problems our world faces.
- To respond to Christ, who called Lazarus from the dead, but according to Bécquer, also calls us to "rise and walk," to awaken and sing (figuratively), to contribute beauty and harmony, and in the spirit of *Illuminate*, to be a "light to the world."

During my seventeen years at Baylor, I have had more opportunities to give back, to mentor, to share my passion for Spanish literature and for classic works in the Great Texts program, all from the perspective of my Christian faith. Olympic Runner Eric Liddell once said, “God made me fast. And when I run, I feel His pleasure.” God called me to teach. And when I teach, I feel His pleasure.

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