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ACADEMY FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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

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### Where They Sit: Thinking about the Lives of Our Students

Dr. Greg Garrett, Professor of English

The other day I crowdsourced some thoughts on what the most impactful teaching looks like, and in sifting through about 40 responses, I heard all the usual suspects: enthusiasm for the subject, the ability to spark imagination and curiosity, the ability to make learning relevant for students. I suspect that we don't have much disagreement about successful teaching from our end of things, but I have been thinking a great deal about the students' side of the podium, about where they are, and about how we might most fully engage them.

In seminary, my homiletics professor, Roger Paynter, used to tell us about something he did before he preached. He would go out into the sanctuary, sit in a series of seats, and try to imagine how the persons sitting there might receive the sermon he had written. What was going on in their lives? What distractions might prevent their hearing the Good News? What good news did they most need to hear? It was groundbreaking for those of us learning to preach, and I think it could be a similarly useful practice for us as faculty.

Many of us do something similar already. Periodically someone will forward us information, or we'll read something in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* about our incoming classes. We'll learn that our freshmen have never seen a cassette tape, say, or that most of them have no direct memory of 9/11, or read speculation about how they have been shaped by their immersion in smartphones and social media. Surely these are important pieces of information.

But in my work on narrative and culture in recent years, I've discovered something else that might help us think about who our students are and what they might need from us to succeed. I've been writing and speaking about archetypal stories, the universal human narratives that unite us all in shared experience, and it occurs to me that knowing how our students are living out these narratives could be, in a sense, a way of sitting in their desks and imagining how they might respond to the learning experiences we've planned.

Home, Community, Heroism, and Brokenness are important archetypal stories. Home is the story of reaching or building a place where we belong. Community is about finding your people, about being supported and challenged and nurtured. Heroism is a narrative in which we recognize that we are all called to give ourselves to something larger than ourselves. Each of these stories is central to Baylor's mission, and many of the things we teach and the classroom practices we cultivate may speak to them.

But at this moment, perhaps the most important narrative archetype is Brokenness, the story in which a main character suffers, lives in uncertainty, and may not yet have found Home, Community, or a higher calling. I saw this in the crowdsourced comments I received. Martha Lou Scott, Associate Vice President for Student Life, talked with me about emotional, physical, and mental brokenness in the lives of our students that cannot help but impact their learning. She told me, for example, that suicide threats and attempts by Baylor students have doubled in the past year. James Marsh, who heads Baylor's counseling center, says that student requests for counseling are up across the country; here at Baylor, visits have gone from 1,350 in 2015-16 to well over 2,600 in this academic year. Perhaps your own anecdotal census of mental illness and emotional difficulty among our students bears out what these statistics seem to indicate: in our classrooms, labs, and practicums sit Baylor students who are anxious, who are in despair, who are hopeless, who do not know how to cope with the pressures and stresses of their lives, and whose learning will be affected by that brokenness.

I'm not advocating that we become pastors or counselors to students caught up in this story. (Martha Lou Scott reminded me to remind you that dealing with the lives of our students is what Student Life does; it's why we have a counseling center that takes walk-ins, why we have a recovery center for addiction, and why she asked me to tell you, "Send students our way anytime, for any reason.") Nor am I arguing that we ought to make our curricula easier or somehow insulate our students against failure because we know they are wrestling with hard things. Life beyond Baylor will not do that for them, and neither should we. But I know there are ways that we can help create safe and nurturing environments, can offer encouragement in whatever stories our students currently inhabit, and can let all of them know that they are loved and valued members of the Baylor community, and I know it because many Baylor faculty already seek to do this.

Tom Hanks, professor emeritus of English, told me that at some point after mid-semester, he always asked his classes about the stresses they were feeling. He then invited them to recognize that

virtually everyone seated around them shared similar feelings. For many years, I have mentioned the fact that I suffered from—and survived—life-threatening chronic serious depression, offering myself as an example to, I hope, reduce the loneliness of students suffering from mental illness. And most of us probably offer prayers and consolation for our students when they are suffering and welcome them back to class so that they know they have been missed. Small things can make a big difference, as James Marsh told me. Baylor faculty should “never underestimate the impact they are having on students through interactions every day. Showing concern for a student and taking time to have a conversation go a long way in helping students be successful. I have found that many students simply want to speak with an adult and seek their guidance, which is something all of us can do.”

Anne-Marie Schultz, professor of Philosophy, told me that the most important thing she has learned about teaching is “that every student has something valuable to say, and our job as teachers is to create a context where they feel comfortable saying it.” When we consider where our students are sitting as we plan and as we teach, we can use that awareness in creating a context so that the hard, good, and necessary conversations can take place here at Baylor.

When we know where our students are, we better know where to meet them.