

The Three Rivers of Teaching

**Comments by Carey Elizabeth Smith upon receipt of the
2009 Jerome Perlinski Teacher of the Year Award**

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Today, I stand in immense gratitude for all the teachers and students who shape me, for my family and friends who love and believe in me, for my colleagues who inspire and support me, and for all those I am walking toward in my future. I am deeply honored to receive this award and delighted to have this time with you.

There are three themes that I am choosing to address today: *Lineage, the Present Moment, and the Vision of the Future*. These themes are rivers that run constantly through all our lives and form the basis for living and learning. So, in the spirit of education, it is the questions that hold the potential to call forth the internal investigation where the deepest answers reside. In this framework, curiosity is generative and answers become the foundation for wisdom.

So for many months now, in preparation for this time, I have been living with these three questions:

- **What is my teaching lineage?**
- **Where do I stand at this moment in time in my own evolution?**
- **What are the teaching seeds that I am planting for future generations?**

And, although I will speak my own experience, my greatest hope is that these questions will reverberate within you and that you will leave today enlightened and enlivened by your own discoveries.

The lineage of educators is enormous, encompasses all domains, and includes the entire history of humanity. We come from a vast, deep and long tradition. There is a profound dignity in the teaching profession when it is understood as a living transmission. Teachers literally broadcast their knowledge, experience, passion, commitment and dedication to the next generation of learners so that these students can carry forward their own expression of what is meaningful to them.

In a recent speech to teachers and administrators in the Orlando school system, Vice President Joe Biden quoted the Irish poet William Butler Yeats who said, “Education is not a filling of a pail – but the lighting of a fire.”

What is my teaching lineage?

I have many teachers. They are part of the ground upon which I stand. Some of them are not living and were not living in my lifetime and yet, the potency of their life work extended beyond mortal time and touched me in ways that awakened my own life purpose.

When I was fourteen years old, I went on a religious retreat with a friend of mine who was home from boarding school. I went because I wanted to spend time with her, away from home – an adventure. Somehow, the retreat stirred me in such a way that I couldn’t sleep so I got up in the middle of the night, got dressed and went down to the church library. I took a book off the shelf called *The Absorbent Mind* by Maria Montessori. I opened to a page where she wrote:

The purpose of the teacher is to serve the spirit of the child... to give every human being the help he needs to bring about his fullest spiritual stature so that he can fulfill his true destiny... Every action of the teacher can become a call and an invitation.

I returned the book to the shelf and, many years later, after graduating from college where I did not study education, I opened the phone book in Chapel Hill, NC and called The Montessori Children’s House and inquired about a position. They hired me the next day as a teaching assistant. And so I began. Maria Montessori always lives inside me, informs me, inspires me, teaches me how to live into a world of beauty, harmony, love and abiding faith in others.

I currently have several teachers who stand by me and with me as I wrestle my way into new actions and possibilities. Sue Anderson is my art teacher and guide who is ever constant in her belief in me even when I turn away from myself. Her guidance and inspiration has allowed me to go beyond my limiting voices into realms that are made of my most compelling dreams and longings.

Richard Strozzi-Heckler is my teacher and somatic coach. He is a pioneer in Somatics and founder of the Strozzi Institute in Petaluma, California. I have studied with him for many years and he has taught me how to cultivate practices that build a more expansive and embodied leadership presence so that I can be more effective in bringing forth all that matters to me. In *The Anatomy of Change*, he wrote:

If we cannot find ways to bring the spark of awakening to students, and then teach them how to generate that spark, we are failing to educate them.

And one of my teachers is in this room today. Dr. Michael Shea. He is a healer, teacher and scholar of the highest order. We have had many conversations around the dining table about teaching, students, classroom management, ethical issues and the transformative nature of learning. We have laughed until our sides ached over the unimaginable escapades that occur in the classroom and keep us on the edge of our own development. His capacity to articulate complex concepts into the personal and transpersonal is unparalleled.

All of my students are my teachers. The classroom always provides grist for the mill. They give me endless opportunities to “practice what I preach”, to keep an open mind and heart, to design and maintain clear boundaries, to look again and again at my ever evolving lesson plans. They keep me humble, engaged, curious, just frustrated and challenged enough that I have to expand my own capacity. They delight and inspire me as they demonstrate in so many ways that the world is in good hands.

And lastly, nature is my teacher. I am daily studying the quality of light and shadow, the rhythms of the seasons, the call of birds, the behavioral patterns of deer, squirrel, fox, and how the moonlight reflects off the pond. I am a student of what is endlessly mysterious, beautiful, evocative, life giving, eternal.

If we are going to be teachers, we have to have teachers. If we are going to be teachers, we have to be students. My student self comes forward – awkward, hungry, frightened, tired, resistant, excited, vulnerable, unskilled, hopeful, awake. And this student self reminds me, humbles me, teaches me how to learn, teaches me how to teach. Natalie Goldberg, an author and teacher of writing as a practice, once said:

I think a student actually creates the teacher. When a student is alive and eager, it wakes up the teaching seeds in the teacher.

Where do I stand at this moment in time in my own evolution?

I am committed to teaching massage therapy students so that they learn how to touch others with skill and compassion. So that they learn how to create an environment of trust where clients can relax and allow their own generative wisdom to emerge. So that they know they stand in a long lineage of healers, pioneers, scholars and visionaries.

I am committed to the BTI Center for Teacher Education, where massage, movement and spa educators gather to study and learn the skills necessary to become effective and inspiring agents of change in the classroom. I sit with teachers from all over the country who are in despair in their classrooms. Many of them have received little or no training.

They may be superb massage therapists, but teaching requires a very different skill set. As a result, they are under-prepared, under-resourced and over-scheduled with little or no ongoing supervision. Some of the stories they tell more closely resemble junior high school detention hall than adult education in the healing arts. In some instances, the classroom is a battleground to survive rather than a place of learning, of manifesting dreams, of becoming vehicles for health and healing. This is a both a great sorrow and opportunity for change.

What are the teaching seeds that I am planting for future generations?

In some ways, this is the hardest question of all. It can be difficult to articulate what lives in our very bones and blood, nearly impossible to find words that express the magnitude of love and longing that resides deep within our DNA. It is a conversation between the biological imperative and the limitless capacity of the imagination.

I am in my mid-fifties – in the second half of my life. Vibrant, strong, skilled, happy, at the top of my game and making choices about the best use of my life force. What aspects of my work would I like a next generation of teachers to carry forward? How do I want to be remembered? And, once I am forgotten, how will the ways I chose to live, learn, teach, love echo through time?

- I plant the seed that curiosity, wonder and delight coupled with hard work, determination and discipline will lead to the manifestation of dreams
- I plant the seed that every person has the capacity to be self-generating, self-educating and self-healing if given the appropriate tools and training
- I plant the seed that beauty and kindness uplift the human spirit
- I plant the seed that love and compassion will prevail

I wish you much success, joy and satisfaction in your ongoing work. I thank you for the contributions that each of you make on a daily basis.

Thank you very much for this time together.