

## Behind Every Silver Lining

Wade A. Carpenter

### The Other Side of Dedication

#### I. The Problem of Undefined Duties

A cutesy that's been floating around the Internet awhile, the author of which is, alas, unknown, says it cleverly:

Let me see if I've got this right. You want me to go into that room with all those kids and fill their every waking moment with a love for learning. Not only that, I'm to instill a sense of pride in their ethnicity, behaviorally modify disruptive behavior, and observe them for signs of abuse, drugs, and T-shirt messages. I am to fight the war on drugs and sexually transmitted diseases, check their backpacks for guns, and raise their self-esteem.

I'm to teach them patriotism, good citizenship, sportsmanship and fair play, how and where to register to vote, how to balance a checkbook, and how to apply for a job, but I am never to ask if they are in this country illegally. I am to check their heads occasionally for lice, maintain a safe environment, recognize signs of potential antisocial behavior, offer advice, write letters of recommendation for student employment and scholarships, encourage respect for the cultural diversity of others, and oh yeah, teach, always making sure that I give the girls in my class 50 percent of my attention.

I'm required by my contract to be working, on my own time, summers and evenings and at my own expense toward additional certification, advanced certification, and a master's degree, to sponsor the cheerleaders or the sophomore class,

and after school I am to attend committee and faculty meetings and participate in staff-development training to maintain my current certification and employment status. I am to collect data and maintain all records to support and document our building's progress in the selected state-mandated program to "assess and upgrade educational excellence in the public schools."

I am to be a paragon of virtue larger than life, such that my very presence will awe my students into being obedient and respectful of authority. I am to pledge allegiance to supporting family values, a return to the basics, and my current administration. I am to incorporate technology into the learning, but monitor all Web sites for appropriateness while providing a personal one-on-one relationship with each student. I am to decide who might be potentially dangerous and/or liable to commit crimes in school or who is possibly being abused, and I can be sent to jail for not mentioning these suspicions to those in authority. I am to make sure *all* students pass the state and federally mandated testing and all classes, whether or not they attend school on a regular basis or complete any of the work assigned. I am to communicate frequently with each student's

---

*Wade A. Carpenter, Ph.D., is an associate professor of education at Berry College, Mount Berry, Georgia.*

parent by letter, phone, newsletter, and grade card.

I'm to do all of this with just a piece of chalk, a computer, a few books, a bulletin board, a forty-five-minute-or-less prep period, and a big smile on a starting salary that qualifies my family for food stamps in many states. Is that all? And you want me to do all of this and expect me to do it without praying?

Granted, this piece is a little exaggerated (there's no law against personal prayer by teachers as long as we are not bad influences on children), but otherwise, it's a pretty accurate description of a relatively *easy* teacher workload. It doesn't mention that you wrote a college recommendation for the daughter of the newspaper reporter who just wrote the article trashing teachers. Nothing is mentioned about the proper care and feeding of narcs, busting drug dealers, breaking up race riots, or stopping girl fights. Nothing about being on your principal's you-know-what list for a year, having the three daughters of the worst busybody in the school three years in a row, or chaperoning a decade of discos. I don't see any reference to bouncing drunks at football games, going to get the shovel when a kid defecates in the stairwell (at least, we *hope* it was a kid!), drying the tears of the kid who's just realized what sort of sleaze seduced her, or teaching an eleventh-grader what nobody at home ever bothered to teach him—that it's not polite to break wind in public. How about giving countless reasons to kids why they shouldn't do drugs or have sex or run away or drop out or whatever, teaching interview skills, showing them how to tie their neckties, and, lest we forget, moonlighting so you can send your own child to college? And then there are my own, strictly personal, teacher stories. . . .

## II. The Problem of Misdirected Dedication

The point is, this is way too much. Yes, a dedicated teacher can do all these things. But few can do all of them well, and nobody can do all of them very long. In contrast to yesteryear's callous dumping of difficult kids into special education, nowadays the regular teacher must also fully include gang members, psychopaths, non-English speakers, the brain-damaged, and the incontinent

in the general classroom population—and then take the heat if the standardized test scores go down. The catch-all clause inserted into many contracts—“and will do all such duties”—was originally meant to be a protective shield for educators given the uncountable problems that can arise. It has now become a job requirement that causes uncountably more problems to arise.

And let's be fair: the fault is not entirely the nonteachers'. Education journals are always packed with proposed new duties from well-intentioned professionals who ought to know better. Teachers across the nation are forever riding one bandwagon after another on a spiraling curriculum cloverleaf we call “reform.” Maybe it's time somebody said, “Enough!” Most of the good teachers have been reformed half to death, and most of the bad teachers will never be reformed. So why not do things right for once? Why not get rid of the bad teachers and leave the good ones alone?

## III. L'état, C'est Roi

Here in Georgia, Gov. Roy Barnes has decided to fix our achievement problems. Among the provisions of his recently passed “A+ Education Reform Act” are a number that tell teachers clearly the curriculum now is, quite simply, the tests.

Predictably, educators are screaming, and some of the elements of this thing really do give the impression that Governor Barnes may be to Georgia education what General Sherman was to Georgia architecture. But maybe we should shut up and listen. Our governor has done something we've needed for a long time: he has defined our job for us. We may not like *how* he's defined it, but he has defined it clearly.

We could bounce his own bombast back at him with statewide television ads saying, “The governor has spoken, your representatives have agreed, and we will obey. We will raise the test scores. That's our job. *You* raise the children. That's yours.”

As amusing as the thought may be (imagine last spring's Elian Gonzales raid in reverse, with the relatives launching a military-style assault to force the government to take their kids!), we're not going to do that. Far too many parents fail in their child-rearing obligations for teachers to abdicate our moral responsibilities, especially in favor of “academic” ones as dubious as high-stakes testing. But a counterattack might inspire a few better and easier ways to help our political masters define our jobs, and maybe a few more

teacher stories will have happy endings. Self-immolating dedication has had only limited results so far.

#### **IV. Three Easy R's: Rest, Respect, and Realism**

First, maybe God was right after all: the Sabbath really *is* a good idea. Maybe it's time for teachers to reclaim the Sabbath. We moderns have come to think of blue laws as restrictive when, in fact, they were protective. Every child, including a teacher's child, has a right to parental time. Educators holler about negligent parents and their wretched kids, but are we giving our own children the time they deserve? And every human soul has a right to time for prayer. If a teacher doesn't have a full day for self, family, and whatever he or she believes to be sacred, that teacher is being abused. Let's take back the Sabbath, and see if the rest of the week isn't more productive as a result.

Second, we can just say no to making fools of ourselves. When attending our oldest child's first elementary-school Fall Festival several years back, my Anglo-Indian wife pointed out a symptom I had never noticed. The fundraiser was nothing special, just the usual face-painters, fortune-tellers, cookie-sellers, and clown-faced or pie-in-the-faced teachers. But Sara was appalled and embarrassed. Where she had grown up, teachers were godlike figures respected by all, ladies and gentlemen of scholarship, elegance, and wit. Some of them may have been a bit stuffy, but adults paid attention to them, and children obeyed them. Sara had never imagined that teachers would debase themselves so, and it started answering a lot of her questions about the behavior of American children.

Please don't misunderstand: I'm not suggesting that teachers shouldn't be humble (humility is the positive alternative to humiliation), but I am suggesting that if we don't respect ourselves, why should we be surprised if others don't respect us? I wonder what would happen if some teacher somewhere just said, "No, sir, I don't believe I want to kiss a pig this year"?

Third, teachers need to combine self-respect with realism. To assume that we can solve all the world's problems is at best thoughtless and at worst arrogant. For instance, we did not start the teenage pregnancy problem; we're sure not going

---

*Maybe God was right after all: the Sabbath really is a good idea.*

to solve it. Another example: for armed authority to say "We need better education to win the drug war" is a copout. They are substituting miseducation for bad government. We cannot win the drug war for the obvious reasons that there is big money in the drug trade, the bad guys have lots of firearms, and teachers have neither. Yet another: most teachers are not fully trained family therapists, alcohol-rehabilitation counselors, or clinical psychiatrists. To take responsibility for serious mental health problems one is not qualified or competent to handle is to virtually assure the loss of the kid. We should be referring the poor child to someone qualified. But what if teachers are told that the district doesn't want to foot the bill for professional services because a teacher wants to make a referral, so they'd better keep their mouths shut? (And if you believe this doesn't happen, please contact me at [wcarpenter@berry.edu](mailto:wcarpenter@berry.edu); I've got some stock I'd like to sell you.)

As in Vietnam, so in the schools: a lot of good people have crashed and burned in a desperate struggle with no battle lines and no clear objective. If we teachers are willing to burn ourselves out in low-percentage attempts to help kids, why should we wimp out because of legally unsustainable threats when competent, qualified, high-percentage help is available? This can only destroy kids, and such a system has already failed and its good guys have already lost. The most terrible irony of teaching is that when educators volunteer to do too much for our few, we allow the miseducators to get by with doing too little for our millions. And when good and great teachers are *required* to do too much, we deny reality by miscalling it "dedication."

Yes, good and great teachers will always rise to meet real crises, and give without thought of getting. That is who we are and what we do. St. Paul calls it *agapé*, the highest form of selfless love. But to allow crisis conditions to become chronic conditions and then dump the workload, heartbreak, and blame on teachers is not love at all. It is child neglect, employee abuse, and a fraud against the public, and it is time we started reporting it.