

Good Teachers are Forever

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The De Beers diamond cartel, together with Sean Connery's 007 motion picture, have immortalized the phrase "Diamonds are forever." Lately, I have been thinking about this catchphrase that has been used to boost the sale of overpriced diamonds circulating under tight control in the world market. My mind went from there to some of the teachers who have impacted my life as a student.



One may wonder what is the connection between diamonds and teachers? Apparently none, unless we say that some teachers are "hard," others shine, and still others are priceless like diamonds. But those were not the ideas that came to my mind. The analogy was not with diamonds but with the slogan associated with them. Could we also say that "teachers are forever"?

I still remember him, soft-spoken, frail, sitting in his chair in front of the classroom. His entire life had been devoted to teaching. Although retired now, he is still there teaching, not for a salary but for the love of it. Some of my teachers had been his students, and they all spoke highly of him. His life of research, his profound thoughts, the legacy of his writings, his Christian attitude, his kindness, and above all his humility had touched the lives of his students. The combination of his bright mind and his high values had made him a legendary figure at the college.

Years later, I also became a teacher. On many occasions, my memory brought back his savvy and values. Twenty-five years after I had sat at his feet as a student, I happened to teach the same class that he taught me. For a textbook, I was using a book he authored. Every phrase of that book reminded me of his Christian life. Then came the news of a new and improved edition of his book, created with the help of one of his former students, now a college professor. The new publication was intended to celebrate his 100th birthday.

At such an advanced age, his frailty prevented him from standing in front of a classroom. But to me, and to hundreds of others who had been touched by his life and now lived miles away from him, he was still teaching.

I could still see him, feebly sitting in his chair and dispensing knowledge. I could see him saying to that foreign student (who had just arrived and had a hard time understanding French, let alone writing his exams in that language), "Don't worry, just write your exam in your own language." Although that would

require extra effort on his part, he would not mind. His knowledge of several languages would make up for that. I could see those eyes full of compassion, trying to encourage every student. All those memories not only imparted knowledge to me but also showed me how to be a teacher.

I believe that there are two kinds of teachers. Those who are and those who were. Those who are encompass two categories: the active teachers in today's classroom, whether or not they are successful, and those mentors who impacted the lives of their students in such a positive way that they are still teaching them whether they are active or not.

Alfred Vaucher was not a teacher. He is a teacher. He is my teacher. Even though he rests from his labours, he continues to teach. If I want to be true to him, I can never say that he "was" my teacher. I must say that he "is" my teacher. He still lives in the memory of his students. Every time former students think about him, they learn something. They remember the instructions that were passed on to them, but above all they remember the values. Values, more than knowledge, mark students for life.

There is a puzzling statement of Jesus that has often provoked a theological debate of "conditionalism versus immortal-soulism", to repeat LeRoy E. Froom's terminology. Jesus said about God, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. He is not the God of the dead but of the living." (Matt 22:32). Luke adds, "For to Him all are alive." (Luke 20:38).

Conditionalist theologians have wrestled with this statement in an attempt to find a logical interpretation for it. The best explanation that I have heard is that although they have departed from us, those saintly believers-like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-whose lives brought honour to God are alive in "His memory." From God's standpoint, they are alive. Their lives continues to speak.

If the idea of "being alive in God's memory" is a plausible one for this text, it will also corroborate our tribute to teachers who have so profoundly and positively affected the lives of their students. They are always alive in their memory.

It would be a fallacy to parody the slogan "diamonds are forever" into "teachers are forever," without qualifying the word teacher. Many teachers are not forever. Those who did not leave their mark on their students will soon become statistics among those who "were" teachers. But teachers like Alfred Vaucher will continue to mold their students long after they are retired or dead.

Not all teachers are forever, but the good teachers are!