SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE TEACHING BEGINS WITH AWAY THROWING YOUR LECTURE NOTES
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ALSO BY CALVIN LUTHER MARTIN, PhD

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In the Spirit of the Earth
Keepers of the Game
The Great Forgetting
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My little brother just got his PhD and his first college teaching job. He’s an expert in political science and knows almost nothing about teaching—and that, I tell you cheerfully, is typical of professors beginning their teaching careers.

If you’re not a college professor this probably sounds crazy.

It is crazy, of course. But it’s one of those charming traditions of our profession, along with tenure, academic freedom, and bizarre costumes at graduation ceremonies. What can one do about it? Some graduate programs now insist that their PhD students take a course in something they call “effective teaching,” but this requirement seems
to be rare and not taken seriously. Plus, I have my doubts about some of the faculty teaching these courses. How well do they themselves teach? Faculty tend to be monumentally deluded about their classroom skills. Their students are the ones to ask, and many will tell you flat out that the professor is abysmal. Professors gripe about this, but the students are generally right.

I learned this when I became a student once again in one department while I was a tenured professor in another. Sitting in that multitude of anxious note-takers, and taking the course (biochemistry) for a grade, I was floored by the lousy teaching. I swore I would do something about it.

I overhauled my own teaching, and this book is the result. The impetus to write it actually came from my brother, who in a matter of weeks is going to march into his first classroom as Professor Martin — the Charge of the Light Brigade in slow motion. I’m afraid for him. Not that he’s any less prepared than any other beginning assistant professor. I’m fearful for all of them. What these bright-eyed new PhDs know of their discipline (and they know plenty) is only half the story. Maybe only a quarter or even a tenth or less. The remainder, the huge part, is: How are they going to teach it to eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds? By “teach it” I don’t mean so much what one writes on the syllabus, or the books one chooses, or even the course content. I mean the conversation we casually call “teaching.”

Indeed, how does one teach at all? There are endless ways of teaching, of course, and just as many contexts. In this book, I’m addressing just one context, a common yet desperately neglected one: the realities of today’s college classroom. Not some long-dead image of my grandfather’s era at Princeton or Oxford or the state university, nor some equally irrelevant Hollywood fantasy about what it’s like to stand before a classroom, but the genuine thing from someone who lived by doing it and learned to love it. Although I started out hating it.

I write this book for my brother. As a primer. Something he might read in an evening or two. Something to save him, I hope, from the anguish I suffered and blunders I committed along the way.

I think of Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style* which many writers keep handy by their desk. I would like to see this slim book take its place by Strunk and White. When you sign your first college teaching contract you will discover that you are expected to publish as well as grade

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student papers. Strunk and White comes in mighty handy. You will also discover, or maybe I should say you will be vividly reminded, that you are actually going to have to teach these students. Think carefully about this last bit of news.

The contract you are holding is calling you a teacher. But do you honestly know how to teach college students? Read this book before you walk through that door and discover you don’t.

S H A L L T E L L you how to teach. I intend to be blunt, irreverent, and opinionated. Which is not to say I am cynical about teaching. On the contrary, I consider teaching to be a privilege and a sacrament.

I have lectured at Ivy League universities, state universities, small private colleges, even tiny private colleges, a microscopic Eskimo seminary (three faculty, twelve students), several state prisons, and a graveyard filled with hundreds of Indian children. The cemetery was at the old Carlisle (Pennsylvania) Indian Boarding School, the children were long dead, and this was their final class. But the prisoners were the best. New York City’s finest. Many there for life, usually for murder. They were men—how shall I put it? —
with colorful personalities. They knew garbage when they heard it, and they would have cheerfully told me if my teaching was exactly that. Undergraduates won’t do this as a rule; lifers in the state penitentiary will.

What I am cynical about is the common rhetoric about teaching. Lord knows I have heard plenty of it from colleagues in department meetings, generally from people who couldn’t teach their way out of a paper bag. The media, too, every so often flogs us over the state of the nation’s schools, whereupon teaching suffers through another round of pious debate, usually by people who either don’t teach or fail to persuade me they know the first thing about it.

Anyhow, I shall declare right here that I regard much of the formal and popular wisdom on teaching worthless.

Do you want to learn how to teach, really and truly, as a professor? Don’t take an education course on the subject. Even if you could find one it would be largely a waste of time. Get hold of a sermon or speech by Dr. Martin Luther King or Reverend Jesse Jackson and savor it. Don’t read it; listen to a recording. Let it fill you. Hear its compassion, inhale its fire and urgency. Feel the rhythm and cadence, rolling like the sea, biblical in its majesty. Listen especially carefully to the silences. Hear the passion and eloquence of silence. And respect that man for knowing his subject, knowing it in his very bones.

This is teaching.

I was a tenured professor of history at Rutgers University for twenty years. Rutgers is a worthy university — your typical huge old state university with an uneven faculty. Some truly outstanding scholars, some dreadful, and a lot in between. The pattern is repeated among the students. Some stellar, some who don’t belong there (either in preparation or interest), and thousands in between. Nevertheless, I grew to like all my students, whether terrific scholars or not. It was at Rutgers that I became the teacher described in these pages.

Teaching, I have already confessed, isn’t something I liked initially. I didn’t go to graduate school to become a teacher. I went to escape the Vietnam War, of course, and I went because, at twenty-one, I didn’t have the imagination to go to Alaska and do something truly exciting and life changing. I was still a kid, a married one, and besides, my wife was a brand-new schoolteacher in town. So I went to the University of California campus across town. Because I imagined myself a scholar? I doubt it. This was the late sixties in Santa Barbara. The University of California campus was an exciting place to be. Student demonstrations,
the National Guard in battle gear, tear gas blowing around, marijuana blowing around, undergraduates taking over classrooms, dogs coupling on stage during a lecture. Interesting stuff going on.

As I think back on it, I didn’t give the teaching part of an academic career much thought. I was spectacularly naive about what I was getting into. I just wanted to learn history (because I thought it would explain why civilization was in such a mess) and anthropology (which introduced me to the alternative world of aboriginal societies). Besides, I liked the thought of writing. But teaching? Not so much. I can still remember sitting through numerous graduate courses and being amazed that professors had the courage and calmness and knowledge to conduct an entire class with ease.

Like many graduate students, I was a teaching assistant. Being a TA was easy and mildly interesting, I thought. The two scraps of advice I got from my professor were (1) don’t wear shorts to class and (2) always begin a written critique of a student’s essay with the encouraging phrase “You can improve by ...,” — and then drop the bomb. (I ignored both.)

On the other hand, when it came time to run my own class as a new assistant professor, I was terrified. I had grown up a shy kid in rural French Canada, son of a minister. My public school teachers were grim souls, especially in my high school years, and my college professors (minuscule Baptist college with Christus Primatus Tenens stitched into the school crest) were overworked and lackluster as well. I can think of no role models from either experience. Added to this, I was a terrible public speaker. I mumbled, generally with my hand over my mouth. This did not go unnoticed; in college I was obliged to take a speech class, easily one of the most painful courses I ever took. Each of us had to give tiny speeches to the class. Eight people, maybe? My little speeches were inaudible and incoherent. The professor was close to speechless. God bless him, he gave me a C. I deserved a D.

But, then, I had no love or passion for what I was assigned to talk about. I’m Irish; I’m capable of passion. That class never aroused it.

My point is that I was a bum candidate for the job when I walked into my first classroom as a professor. “But we’re going to hire you despite your seminar presentation,” I vividly recall the department chairman confiding to me after the job interview. Luckily I had done a little publishing as a graduate student, and my new colleagues hoped there was more to come. They figured I would learn to teach soon enough — by being forced to do it. Not a bad motivator, force — although there’s no guarantee of the results.

I write this little book as a life vest for poor saps like
Above all you have got to remember that teaching is a spiritual exercise. And your first exercise is with the classroom itself. Commune with that room before you present yourself to those students. I mean literally that empty classroom. It’s going to be a home, a haven, a magical space for you and your class for the rest of the semester. A room is not a mere piece of hollowed-out architecture. A room has a spirit, even a personality, and you would do well to equilibrate your spirit with its spirit before you walk in there and begin talking.

This means, of course, that you are going to have to pay careful attention to the scheduling of your classes, that is, what rooms you are assigned. This matter is generally handled by a minor secretary in your department. Seek her out (generally it’s a woman) and cultivate her. Take her to lunch, for God’s sake. You will discover that on any college or university campus there are a half-dozen people who are critical to your life. No, the president and dean are not among them; they’re too remote, and anyhow by the time your dossier reaches their desks the decision about you (hire/fire, tenure/non-tenure, salary raise) has already been made. The woman who does your scheduling: she is number one on your list of critical people. Virtually all the rest are secretaries, as well, and don’t forget the custodian.
Anyhow, back to the scheduler. You want to tell her it’s important to you what room you teach in. One with windows (windows that actually open), with plenty of blackboard space perhaps, and realistic ventilation (here’s where open windows come in handy). Not one next to a busy street (the campus bus stop, for instance) or the new construction that’s going on. I have taught next to the campus bus stop, I have taught next to a freeway, and I have taught next to a jackhammer. Believe me, a jackhammer can turn the most brilliant scholar delivering the most brilliant lecture into butter.

These are all things I consider and discuss with the secretary. I flatly refuse to teach in small, windowless rooms. Try and imagine closing yourself in such a room (you must close the door because of the hurly burly going on in the hallway) with a group of people you don’t know, when the air conditioning isn’t working in the fall (“deferred maintenance” on most college campuses generally means it isn’t) or Physical Plant has set the thermostat too high (it’s of course sealed and inaccessible). Go ahead, give it a few moments’ thought. As you do, consider the soaring speeches you have heard by college presidents and deans on “our commitment to teaching” and juxtapose those with this cramped, airless, windowless room. (Deans and presidents never, ever, work in small windowless rooms, by the way.)

Tell your secretary you want a room with windows as well as space to move around in (very important). Here you run into a problem with the campus-wide Scheduling Office (this is different from your department scheduler; this is run out of the registrar’s office): you discover that each room has a maximum capacity. Thirty, forty, fifty students—whatever. If your enrollment exceeds this you are told by Scheduling that you will have to get a different room because you have exceeded what the fire marshal considers to be the safe maximum occupancy for the room. (In twenty-five years I never met the fire marshal and never found this rule enforced. The fire marshal, like the Easter Bunny, may well be a fiction.)

You’re in a jam, however, if your pre-enrollment is within room capacity and, at the first class meeting, you are besieged by a host of hopeful students imploring you to let them in. This is a tough decision. I was never concerned about the extra exams I would now have to grade, and I was always able to order, quickly, enough books at the bookstore to cover the surplus. My chief concern was straining the seams of the classroom. Personally, I accommodated virtually everyone who wanted to sign up. But
that’s because I was evangelical about what I taught and always flattered that anyone wanted to listen to me. So the more souls the better; I signed them in. I have had them sitting in the aisles and up front, backs to the blackboard, surrounding me. Since I was careful to get spacious rooms with windows, this never really bothered me. And, as I say, I believe the fire marshal is a hoax.

So pick your room carefully, realizing you may get more people than you expect. You can always go back to Scheduling and plead a larger enrollment and ask for another room, but by that point in the semester the pickin’s are slim and unappealing. (Scheduling would always prefer to have you put a cap on your enrollment rather than hunt for a larger room at this stage in the term.)

By the end of my teaching career the enrollment in my lecture course was so huge I was using an auditorium rather than a regular classroom. There spelled the end of my beloved windows. At first I was able to open the side doors up front, letting in blessed air and light. But then some brilliant associate dean (or perhaps it was the mysterious fire marshal?) decided this was unsafe and these exit doors up front were fitted with an alarm and a sign, advising that this alarm would scream murder if this door were opened. I had a TA who was a brilliant electronics expert; he had done highly classified things with trip wires and the like in the Vietnam War that he still wouldn’t talk about. I hoped he could deactivate one of these alarms. He couldn’t.

What he could do, however—and this is not trivial—was make certain the sound system worked in that auditorium. If ever you find yourself teaching in one of these cavernous chambers, believe me, you will want to make sure one of your TAs can bring a stubborn sound system to life. (Don’t rely on the Audiovisual Department to send somebody over there. Think about it; Murphy’s Law, which is not a fiction, was enunciated by a professor at a state university, I swear.) This guy was a genius.

When you contemplate teaching in an auditorium, think about your voice. You might imagine yourself blessed with lungs powerful enough to bellow to that sea of students for an entire period. You would be making a big mistake, however. It’s utterly exhausting to shout (let’s face it, this is what you are doing) for a whole period. Moreover, it comes across as precisely that: shouting. To shout is neither intimate nor compelling; you cripple your effectiveness when you must shout at people. Besides, you lose one of your strongest voices in public speaking: you lose silence. For silences (and they are essential to good teaching) are so exaggerated as to be startling in a shouting format.
Use a microphone.

As I say, I always visited my classrooms alone before I began teaching in them. Sit, walk around, meditate. Check to see if the student desks are comfortable. (Go ahead, try them.) Make sure there is a realistic table up front for you to put your stuff on and, yes, sit on. (Some tables are so beat up they’re wobbly. Check it out.) Like an Aborigine, begin dreaming the class into existence, right here in this room where it will transpire. So when you walk in that first day, you are walking into a room that you know already and that knows you. Trust me, this familiarity will give you confidence.

I admit I do the same thing whenever I am asked to give a public speech. I tell my host I would like time alone in that room before the lecture. Or, if that’s not possible, I ask to be taken to the auditorium plenty early, before the audience arrives. Try it. I call it equilibrating with the room.

Let’s say you have adjusted to your room, equilibrated with it well before this first class meeting. And let’s say you have been the first one to arrive in the classroom that first day — this too is important. You should arrive early, straighten the desks and chairs, pick up the soda bottles and candy wrappers, make sure the blinds are up, erase the board, wipe off the table up front (it’s sticky with spilled soda or coffee), and open windows. Make it a pleasant place for them when they arrive. This shows them you care about them.

You are now ready to meet your students.

The next point: get to know them. And they must get to know you. It is far more important to get to know each other on the first day or two than to lecture right away. In fact, I would say you are making a huge mistake if you lecture at this first meeting. Give them an overview of the course, yes, that’s vital at this first meeting, but don’t give a formal lecture. Remember: your students are actually shopping for courses this first week of the semester. Many are not solidly committed to sticking with your class. They are sizing up the course and the professor.

The classroom filled with young men and women sitting in front of you is nervous. Remember that. You, too, are nervous. It’s important, right now, to think in small steps. Don’t look out at them and think, “They are out there and I am here, at the front, and it’s my obligation to teach them American colonial history or Economics 101 for the next sixteen weeks! Oh my God!” Forget about the course content for now. Right now it’s time to meet one another. It’s ancient human etiquette; it must not be ignored. And yet it is very frequently if not generally ignored by faculty,
even seasoned professors. To do so is almost to guarantee that teaching will be a drag for you, an onerous task rather than a delight.

But who are they, after all? This is a matter you will have to ponder long before the first class meeting. It is one of the most overlooked parts of teaching: *Who are these people?* The answer depends on your answer to a prior question, which is: *Who are you?* You are not teaching as a scholar or a professor. This is self-illusion. You are teaching as a human being. For this is how they will see you and this is how you will and must come across. Occupy the skin of a real human being and you will teach well; occupy the armor of a professor or scholar and you will teach poorly.

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**Chapter 2**

Idealism. Passion, compassion, inspiration. It’s wired into them. This is a gift to you.

Your students are wonderful people. They are fascinating and often funny and always complicated, and some are cool, and they are all afraid. They are in a difficult transition. They are beginning to carry the burden of their future (many are putting themselves through college) and are apprehensive about the life before them. They realize the majors they choose now will have to funnel them into a job or further professional training. Plus they are getting considerable advice from parents to choose a practical (read: marketable) major. You will be astounded at how many want to go to law school for this reason alone—not because they are thrilled by what lawyers do (they barely know) but because they believe it is lucrative and prestigious. Lots are headed into