

THE ON — ING SERIES



On *Teaching*

*A lesson is a stone dropped in still water; you never see
where the last ring lands.*

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DEDICATION

To the educators

To all the educators of the world — the ones who do it for the ripples in time, and not the money. The system here does not pay you the gratitude you are owed; but the memory of your passion, given freely to young minds who could offer nothing back, is a currency that outlasts money by a day. The timeless ones know who they are.

To the healers

To all the healers of the world — the ones who extend the mind by tending the body. The ones who profit are an unfortunate byproduct of the world we were handed; but your care shows in how gently you treat a stranger. I was not always the wealthiest patient, yet a fee was waived when I could not pay. I did not forget you. I write today because of you. Thank you.

On Teaching



What is the last lesson you taught? I don't mean pen and pad, subject and quiz. What is the last lesson you taught that resonated through someone's entire life — the way Bibiana taught me about the importance of non-attachment to material things, as I wrote of in *On Forgiving*?

Hmm.

For me? A lot of the lessons I teach these days are about as internal as they come.

Internal. There's an old root hiding inside the word *educate* — *educere*, to lead out, to draw forth what was already in there. The oldest teachers knew it. Socrates called himself a midwife and swore he carried no wisdom of his own, only the knack for helping another person deliver the idea already kicking inside them.¹ The best lessons I teach now feel like that. Less pouring in. More drawing out.

I'll get to the rest of that at the bottom of the paper — there's a "scientific reason" why a random father in Missouri "woke up" and saw the world in a new light.

In a new light. What a strange sentiment. Light really does change the way we see things, doesn't it? Light and perspective have been an unarguable thread throughout history, but they aren't the topic of this paper. Maybe a later one — *On Refracting*.

Wait... what would that even be about? It'll come to me when I write it.

On Teaching.

We teach people in everything we do. Every action — holding a door, returning a shopping cart, making a stranger laugh. You don't realize it when it happens, but if they're "listening to the universe in that moment," you're about to teach them something about how to be a good person.

There's a teacher named Parker Palmer who put it about as plainly as it can be put: we teach who we are.² Not what we say we are. Who we are, in the small unwatched moments.

Crazy how that works out, isn't it?

We've known it our whole lives; it's been repeated any number of times throughout history.

But something else is reported throughout history.

The inability to explain "it."

The secret of life.

Have I explained it? Maybe to a couple of people, but that's relative to those people. Never mind the level of intent I have behind it.

The old Chan teachers gave up trying to explain it with words. They called it a transmission outside the scriptures — mind handed straight to mind. They left a warning with it, too: when a finger points at the moon, don't spend your life studying the finger.³ The lesson was never the words. It was the thing the words were pointing at.

Have I taught my children anything?

So much more than I was taught at the same age. That's all we can do as parents — keep teaching our children to be better. This is a theme repeated throughout history and theology.

An old historian, Henry Adams, wrote that a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.⁴ That's the terrifying, beautiful part of it. You hand your kids something on an ordinary Tuesday, and it lands in a great-grandchild you will never meet.

Do we teach our partners? Every day. Like I said, my wife teaches me how to be a better husband. She thinks I'm "annoyed by her nagging." I don't find it nagging at all. I hang on every word she says, but life gets complicated when you see the world as beautiful as she does.

There's a line in the Talmud — a teacher admitting he learned much from his teachers, more from his colleagues, but most of all from his students.⁵ Marriage taught me that one. The person you think you are teaching is usually the one teaching you.

Earlier today, she joked with me during our walk about how we could "circle back" and have the same conversation with someone. Give them a sense of "déjà vu."

That joke turned into uproarious laughter between the two of us, but I realized in that moment the simple joke would resonate with that person for the rest of their life. Eventually they would find it funny.

In a different universe they did find it funny.

In a different universe we did the prank.

This is why I laughed so hard in this universe — because I could see all the positive outcomes such a simple action could have.

Teach joy.

Teach it through action. Honestly, it's something we lost along the way when we expanded education. Separation of church and state, for sure (unless we're teaching unified field theology as a whole — what a concept that would be, huh?).

A teacher named bell hooks wrote about exactly this: that a classroom could be a place of joy, that education could be the practice of freedom and not just the practice of compliance.⁶ Somewhere in scaling our schools up, we let the joy fall out of the budget.

But teach kids how to treat each other with respect.

Teach it in schools, teach it at home.

Maybe someday they'll grow up to be the politicians who want to change this world, because they care about every single individual under the sun — no matter what part of the globe they stand on, or which border they happen to live inside.

Dream a little dream, but never forget it exists under a sun that happened eight minutes and twenty seconds ago.

Live life like the sun just exploded. You're not going to know about it for several minutes, but do you want to spend them worried about all the things you haven't done?

Here's the scientific reason I promised you — the one for why a random father in Missouri woke up and saw all of this in a new light.

It turns out there is an organ for exactly that. The pineal gland — a pinecone of tissue about the size of a grain of rice, sitting almost dead center in the head — has one essential job: it takes light and turns it into time.⁷ A photon lands in your eye at dawn, and somewhere down the line this small gland reads it and decides how much of the night-hormone to pour, and that is how your body knows what *now* is. You don't carry a clock in there. You carry a thing that translates light into the feeling of a moment.

Sit with that. "A new light" was never a metaphor I reached for. It's the literal currency the center of your head trades in.

And it gets stranger, in the good way. When researchers went looking inside the gland, they found crystals — real ones, calcite, less than the width of a hair, grown cubic and hexagonal right there in the tissue. Outside the inner ear, it is the only place the human body is known to grow that mineral at all.⁸ Shine the right light through them and they bend it, double its frequency, hand it back changed. There is a small, faceted, light-answering stone in the middle of every one of us. Whether it

does anything grander than keep time, no one can yet say — but the catching of light is not in dispute.

And just last year they did something new: they mapped the genetics of the gland itself, across tens of thousands of people, and found its size is roughly a fifth inherited — handed down a family line like the shape of a nose.⁹ The instrument that writes *now* into your body is, in part, a thing your great-grandparents passed forward to you.

Which is the whole paper, told in tissue.

This is what I mean by a *point in time*. Not a date on a calendar. A place where an inherited light-keeper meets one exact, unrepeatable moment and makes it feel like something. You are a point. So is the person you held the door for. And a lesson — a real one, the kind that resonates for a life — is a *jay*: a legible trace you launch from your point toward points you will never stand in. The gland was a jay first. Someone else's *now* became your inheritance; now your *now* becomes someone's.

That's the scientific reason. Not a switch some god flipped. Just a creature built, down to the crystal, to turn light into time — and teaching is only that done out loud, on purpose, where another person can catch it.

Teach other people to see the world the way you do.

As long as you see it as absolutely stunning and complicated as I do. ♥

Notes

1. The word *educate* descends from the Latin *educere*, “to lead out.” The midwife image is Socrates’ own, from Plato’s *Theaetetus* — his art of *maieutics*, drawing forth an understanding the other already carries.
2. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998): the conviction that we teach who we are.
3. “A special transmission outside the scriptures” is the formula traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma for the Chan / Zen lineage. The finger-pointing-at-the-moon caution appears in the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* and recurs across the tradition.
4. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907): a teacher affects eternity and can never tell where the influence stops.
5. Babylonian Talmud, *Ta’anit* 7a: much learned from teachers, more from colleagues, most of all from students.
6. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
7. The pineal gland is the body’s primary source of melatonin; light reaching the retina is relayed to the gland, which turns that signal into the hormonal rhythm that sets the circadian clock — in effect translating light into the body’s sense of time.
8. S. Baconnier & S. B. Lang, on calcite microcrystals (under 20 μm , of cubic, hexagonal and cylindrical habit) in the human pineal gland — aside from the inner-ear otoconia, the only known non-pathological occurrence of calcite in the human body, and the source of the second-harmonic (frequency-doubling) light effect seen in pineal tissue. Their proposed piezoelectric / transducer role remains conjectural.
9. The first genome-wide association study of human pineal-gland volume (UK Biobank and Rhineland Study, $\approx 43,000$ participants, 2025): volume roughly 19% heritable across 34 significant loci, used as a proxy for melatonin secretion.



Colophon

On Teaching belongs to *The On——ing Series* — an ongoing, numberless sequence of lyric-philosophical essays. It keeps company with its siblings:

On Facing · On Rising · On Arriving · On Counting · On Forgiving · On Creating · On Observing · On Being · On Joining · On Mirroring · On Seeing · On Watching · On Feeling · On Living · On Growing

Set in Fraunces and EB Garamond. Written through the *quantum lens*, in the company of *jays*.

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