When I think back to the teachers of my youth, one of the things that strikes me is how vivid they remain to me. I turned fifty this year, and I still remember the teachers I had 35, 40, even 45 years ago, along with specific events I experienced in relation to them. This illustrates, I think, how deep the impressions are that teachers leave on us. They are iconic figures of our childhood, larger than life. For better and worse, they play a large role in shaping the kinds of adults we wish to be, and the kinds of adults we become.

I am a developmental psychologist, which means that I do research on how people develop and change with age. Developmental psychologists describe how each stage of life has distinctive characteristics that set it apart from other stages. In this chapter, I will recall the most memorable teachers I had from first grade through college, and how my experiences with them fit—or, in one case, jarringly didn’t fit—the developmental stage I was in at the time.
FIRST GRADE: A SUBSTITUTE MOM

The earliest teacher I remember was my first grade teacher, Mrs. Sterlitz. Memory that far back is indistinct, but I remember that she was young and lively and had bright red hair. I was very fond of her and deeply wanted to impress her, so I was a good kid in her class and worked diligently.

Developmental psychologists talk about the importance of the attachment relationship in childhood, meaning that children need to have one special person, usually the mom, who loves them, protects them, and provides for their needs. If children are secure in their love from this "primary attachment figure" it gives them the confidence to explore the world around them and gradually become more independent, because they realize that if a crisis arises—they become hungry, or hurt, or frightened—they can always retreat to the "secure base" provided by this attachment figure. Gradually children form additional attachments to persons within and outside the family.

I was well-loved by my mom, and I think I found that same kind of love in Mrs. Sterlitz. In those days most American kids had full-time moms and didn’t have much experience with day care or preschool before they entered kindergarten, so the transition to starting school was a much sharper break from life at home with mom than it is today. I’m sure I missed my mom when I started school, but Mrs. Sterlitz became an important secondary attachment figure for me. My mom always made me feel like she thought I was just wonderful, and so did Mrs. Sterlitz.

At the end of the school year, she gave me a little school picture of herself and wrote on the back (I still have it):

You are
2 good
+ 2 be
4 gotten

So was she, and I have not forgotten her.

THIRD GRADE: HUMILIATION AS A TEACHING TECHNIQUE

Most of my experiences with teachers were good, so the one especially bad one really stands out. It provides a textbook example of how not to teach children.

Middle childhood is a time of beginning to gain the skills necessary for performing the work required in your culture. In many cultures, including the American middle-class I grew up in, that means learning reading, writ-
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ing, and arithmetic. It's also a time when, according to the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, the primary challenge is *industry vs. inferiority*. If a child is encouraged and supported in learning cultural skills, a sense of industry develops that includes enthusiasm for learning and confidence in mastering the skills required. However, a child who is neglected or humiliated in the learning process is likely to experience a sense of inferiority.

My third grade teacher—I can't remember her name, and in any case it would probably be best not to name her—came up with an idea that seems like it was designed to promote inferiority rather than industry. We were told to bring a favorite story from home, which we would then read to the class. I chose *The Curious Cow*, about a cow whose curiosity led to all sorts of mayhem and disorder. I really loved that story, and I looked forward to reading it to my classmates.

However, a strange thing happened when I stood up before the class and began to read. No sooner had I started reading when the whole class started laughing. I stopped and looked at them, puzzled and hurt. Why were they laughing? I had not reached any of the funny parts yet. I had just begun the story. I tried again, and the same thing happened. They all laughed, and worse yet, I realized that they were not laughing at anything in the story, they were laughing at me! I tried yet again, and they again interrupted me with hoots of laughter after I had spoken only a few words. Humiliated, bewildered, and tearful, I slunk off and retreated to my seat.

As I sat burning with shame and pain the teacher stood up and explained that she had told the class to laugh when I began reading, as a way of showing—what? I can't remember what educational goal this exercise was supposed to achieve. I only remember my humiliation, and my horrified astonishment when she announced that she had instigated it.

More than 40 years later, it makes no more sense to me than it did then. What on earth was she thinking? Did she really think that I would benefit from being humiliated, or that the other students would be edified from humiliating me? How, exactly, would that be instructive for anyone involved? I remain horrified and astonished.

Teachers are iconic figures, and that can be good when they are loving, encouraging, and inspiring. But their iconic status also gives them vast power to hurt. We remember our whole lives the ones who especially loved, encouraged, and inspired us, but we remember, too, the ones who used their power over us to cause us pain.

**SIXTH GRADE: LOVE PRACTICE**

Physically, socially, mentally, and in pretty much every other way, adolescence is an earthquake that changes everything. In the course of a few
years, our bodies change in ways that amaze us, sometimes delight us, and sometimes appall us. Perhaps most importantly, we reach sexual maturity, and sexuality, to which we had been merrily oblivious in middle childhood, now bestirs us and presents us with daunting puzzles and mysteries. For most boys, the girls we had as friends through childhood now become—well, something else, but it takes us a long time to figure out exactly what.

I remember early adolescence as the most difficult time of my life, and I’m not alone. For most people—boys and girls alike—self-esteem takes a sharp drop in early adolescence, not fully recovering until late high school. Moods fluctuate more, and dark moods are more frequent. In a study by Reed Larson and Maryse Richards, in which 5th to 8th graders wore wristwatch “beepers” and reported their moods and activities when beeped randomly in the course of a day, the authors described the changes of early adolescence as an emotional “fall from grace.” Times beeped when feeling “very happy” declined by 50% from 5th to 8th grade, and similar declines took place in reports of feeling “great,” “proud,” and “in control.” According to Larson and Richards, a key source of early adolescents’ negative moods is their fumbled attempts to figure out how to interact with the other sex.

This definitely fits how I remember my early adolescence. I had always played happily with girls as well as boys, but suddenly girls terrified me. One little girl in particular, with long blonde hair and a sunny smile, inspired my deepest adoration and fear, in equal parts. I heard through the peer grapevine that she “liked” me, too, but that only deepened my terror. I never actually spoke a single word to her. Suffice it to say that, anywhere near her, I never felt “great,” “proud,” or “in control.”

However, that same year, sixth grade, we had a student teacher, Miss Davis. She, too, had long blonde hair and a sunny smile, but I felt no fear in her presence, only adoration. She was young enough to be a target of my youthful infatuation, but old enough to be safe. In retrospect, I see my relationship with her as a way of practicing normal flirting without the remotest prospect of actual sex intruding.

I was smitten enough with her that, after she left her student teaching internship to return to college, I sent her two dollars from my allowance, along with a letter encouraging her to buy something nice for herself. Thinking of this now, I can imagine the laughs this gesture provided to her and her friends, but she handled it with kindness and grace. She sent the money back to me along with a letter thanking me for thinking her, and a little pennant from her college. I still have that pennant, and I still have my warm memory of her as the first girl/woman outside my family that felt safe for me to love.
FIFTH TO SEVENTH GRADE: HOW TO BE A MAN

One of the most influential teachers of my childhood was someone outside of school, my Boy Scout leader Ken Bourgon. I loved Boy Scouts. I was involved in it from about age 10 to 13, from fifth to seventh grade. I loved camping out and hiking, and I loved learning about the natural world. But perhaps even more importantly, at an age when relationships with girls were new and daunting it was wonderful to have an all-male social haven.

I think the Boy Scouts is a great organization, but having Ken Bourgon—"Mr. B" as we all called him—as Scoutmaster was the key to my enjoyment of it. I know this because I briefly had two other Scoutmasters before Mr. B, and although I enjoyed Scouts with them it was not nearly as important in my life as it became once I met Mr. B.

Part of early adolescent development is figuring out how to be a woman in your culture, if you are a girl, or a man in your culture, if you are a boy. All cultures have gender distinctions, that is, different roles and ideals for men and for women, and all children are urged to conform to the roles and ideals specific to their gender. Some cultures teach gender roles and ideals explicitly, as part of puberty rituals. Others, like ours, teach them implicitly, through the models that parents, teachers, and others provide, and through the ideals presented in the media.

My father was a remote, cantankerous figure who taught me little about being a man, either explicitly or implicitly. He had five children, and he regarded it as his fatherly duty to keep them all fed, clothed, and housed, but he didn't see fatherhood as involving much beyond this. In old age he has mellowed out, and he is a much better grandfather than he was a father, but when I was young he was not someone I looked to as a model for how to be a man.

Mr. B came as a revelation. Where my father was remote, Mr. B was open and accessible. Where my father was grumpy and easily irritated, Mr. B was jovial and serene. Where my father was humorless, Mr. B was full of laughs and gentle ribbing. He seemed to know everything about the skills of Scouting, and he taught them with patience and good humor. I wished Mr. B were my father, but since that was not possible, at least I wished to be like Mr. B. He was my model for how to be a man.

Once at a Boy Scout summer camp I got into some trouble, accidentally breaking a window, and I came to him full of tears, expecting to be admonished. I should have known better. He trusted me when I said it was an accident, and he consoled me and dried my tears with his handkerchief. He let me keep that handkerchief, and I still have it, with his monogram in the corner, JKB, for John Kenneth Bourgon. Recently I bought handkerchiefs of my own, and had them made with my own monogram in the corner, JJA. Forty years later, I still aspire to be like Mr. B.
ELEVENTH AND TWELFTH GRADE: A REBEL TAMED

I was a "good kid" throughout most of my childhood, well-behaved and eager to please my parents and teachers, but this changed once I reached high school. I decided there was more fun in being a rebel, rule-breaker, and risk-taker than a good student. I often exasperated my teachers with disruptive behavior in class, being more interested in a good laugh than in learning anything they had to offer.

However, my classroom antics varied depending on the teacher. I suspect this is true of most classroom rebels: we calibrate our behavior to the teacher, pushing just as far as we think we can get away with but not so far as to get into any real trouble. Perhaps because I was generally a good student, most of my teachers tolerated a lot from me—perhaps, as I see it now, more than they should have.

The teacher who ran the tightest classroom ship during my high school years was Jerry Smith, the choir director. In many schools being in choir lowers rather than raises a student's social status, but Dr. Smith made choir cool. The choir was a perennial winner of the highest state music awards, and performed at many school functions. Every year selected members of the choir took a "Spring Tour" for a week to some fun place—such as Washington, DC, my senior year—funded by the money raised at choir concerts and other fund-raisers.

You might think that, as a devoted hell-raiser, I chafed under Dr. Smith's discipline, but the opposite was true. I thrived under it, and I loved him for it. Adolescence is a time when unruly impulses surge. Developmentally, adolescents may need independence, but they need to learn self-restraint, too. They grow rapidly bigger and stronger, they become suddenly sexual, and for boys especially, the hormones that incite aggression rise sharply. I had perhaps more intense impulses of all kinds than most of my peers, so I was especially in need of training in self-restraint, and I wasn't getting that training at home or from most of my teachers. But Dr. Smith required it, and I eagerly complied.

I admired him tremendously. Like Mr. B, he provided me with a model, an ideal, of what a man can be. He was a dynamic choir leader and he drew the best possible performances out of us. He was always in complete control on the stage, and we sang our adolescent hearts out for him.

My senior year of high school I sent him a Christmas card expressing my admiration and devotion. At the choir Christmas dinner he stood up and told us he wanted to read aloud some of the cards he had received from us. I still remember vividly the moment when he began reading mine: "To the richest man I know..." I don't remember anything he read after that because I was weeping like a baby, unashamed despite the presence of my peers, my heart overflowing with love and gratitude.
Alas, this is a story that does not have a happy ending. Although I behaved well for Dr. Smith, outside of his presence I remained a wild child, and eventually my behavior within and outside choir came into collision. At the end of the year we made a record album, as the choir did every year. On the day we were to record the album, I went to the beach with my friends before the recording session and drank many beers. I wasn’t drunk when I came to the session, but I wasn’t exactly in top form either.

Dr. Smith knew it immediately. I could tell he was eying me as we warmed up our voices, and I tried to be inconspicuous, but to no avail. I still remember the dreadful moment when he stopped the warm-up, called my name, and asked me to leave. My voice does not appear on the album we recorded, and I have never been able to bring myself to listen to it. But that awful experience taught me a permanent lesson about the costs of selfishness and indiscipline.

COLLEGE: THE INSPIRATION OF IDEAS

I had many good teachers in college, as an undergraduate at Michigan State University and as a graduate student at the University of Virginia. However, none of them evoked the emotional intensity of the teachers I have described so far in this chapter. They were not lesser teachers than the ones I have described so far, but I was at a different developmental stage by then. Childhood and adolescence are stages when our selves and our views of the world are first being formed, so during those stages we look to teachers and other adults as models and ideals for the kinds of persons we might become. We focus a great deal of emotional intensity on the teachers we love best, partly because childhood and adolescence are times of high emotion, partly because we transfer some of the emotional intensity in our relations with parents to other adults we love, including teachers.

College and graduate school years, from the late teens through the twenties, are a much different stage of life. This is the age period that has been the focus of my research and writing as a developmental psychologist, and I call it “emerging adulthood.” It is distinct from adolescence, because emerging adults are no longer going through puberty, are no longer in secondary school, and many of them no longer live with their parents. It is not really “young adulthood” either, because emerging adults have not yet entered the roles we associate with adulthood: marriage (or other stable partnerships), parenthood, and stable full-time work. Emerging adulthood is an age in between adolescence and young adulthood, an age of exploring different possible futures in love and work. It is an age of freedom, instability, and high hopes.
Emerging adults are often optimistic and idealistic, and they can be inspired by their college teachers to see life differently than before, an inspiration that often carried a strong emotional charge. Relations between students and college teachers are sometimes emotionally close, as I know well from my own experience in two decades of college teaching. However, in my experience as a student, perhaps because I went to a large state university rather than a small college, the inspiration provided by college teachers was less about the personal relations and more about the ideas. I remember especially the power of the intellectual revelations of my first year of college. I took an excellent short story class my first semester, and one of the stories we read was “The Dead” by James Joyce. In the course of the story a man comes to realize that his beloved wife has an emotional life and a past to which he has been excluded. We can never really know each other, I concluded. The next semester I took my first course on psychology, and read Freud’s “Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis,” with its descriptions of the workings of the unconscious mind. We can never really even know ourselves, I concluded.

These are not happy revelations, yet discovering them was somehow exhilarating. Although my view of life has changed in many ways in the 30 years since (and now includes a healthy skepticism of everything Freudian), the exhilaration of new ideas has remained with me throughout my life as an academic.

**MY OWN LIFE AS A TEACHER**

I have been a college teacher for about 20 years, and I have taught a wide range of courses, ranging in size from five students to 300, at a wide range of institutions, from a small liberal arts college to large state universities. As a teacher I try to bring the same inspiration of ideas into the classroom I felt as an emerging adult years ago. Because I still feel the thrill of ideas in my life as an academic, it is natural for me to communicate that excitement to my students.

When I receive praise from students in their end-of-semester evaluations, I know they will remember me and my course always, as I remember the best teachers of my own youth. That is one of the great rewards of being a teacher, that you leave an enduring legacy in the lives of your students, hopefully a good one. Erik Erikson writes about development in midlife as, at its best, a time of *generativity*, meaning a time of doing what you can to nurture, support, and encourage the next generation. In my teaching I see myself as taking the torch of inspiration from my best teachers, from Mrs. Sterlitz and Miss Davis to Mr. B and Dr. Smith, and passing it on to my students to carry forward.