

# The Lure of Learning in Teaching

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*Teaching entails the creation of connections among teacher, student, and content so*

*that educational experiences can be had. Powerful teaching engages and recalls a lure of learning. To explore this lure, or love of learning, and its place in teaching, I first evoke a bit of what this attraction feels and looks like. Depicting this lure conveys some of what the seduction of learning is all about. Following this section on the love of learning, I highlight features of what this love of learning looks like in teaching. In teaching with a love of learning, we (as teachers) attempt to lure our students into*

*reaching beyond themselves, to connect with the subject at hand. It is the teacher who invites us beyond the boundaries of ourselves, to another territory. The second major section of this essay focuses on the qualities of this educational invitation. It is an*

and the teacher can be occupied with the subject matter. But take away the subject, and the center, the entire relationship, vanishes. Teaching, at its

that educational experiences can be had. A love of learning, of inquiry, of coming to know is an essential ingredient in creating this web of interconnections. In this essay I try to uncover a bit of what these connections look like; I explore their texture and feel. I want to glimpse the minds and hearts at work in this love of learning and teaching, see the ways in which thinking and feeling combine to put us next to the grace of great things. My

expresses a respect for, faith in, and insistence that the students see what the

the qualities of the educational invitation.

Given the harsh lessons of teaching in today's schools, we can no

LIBRARIES, PONDS, AND STREAMS

Growing up in Pittsburgh in the 1950s, Annie Dillard was one of four lively children in a family that did not appear to want for money or resources. Annie loved to read, and the closest library was the branch in Homewood. This branch was located in one of the Black sections of town. Because it was some distance from her house, Annie's mother would drive her there. Entering the Homewood Library (which had "FREE TO THE PEOPLE"

engraved on its facade), a twelve-year-old child with an adult card, Dillard

Library. I would, in the same letter or in a subsequent one, ask him a question outside the scope of his book, which was where I personally might find a pond or a stream. But I did not know how to address

too, that my letter would disappoint him by betraying my ignorance . . . What, for example, was this noisome-sounding substance called cheesecloth, and what do scientists do with it? What, when you really got down to it, was enamel? If candy could, notoriously, "eat through

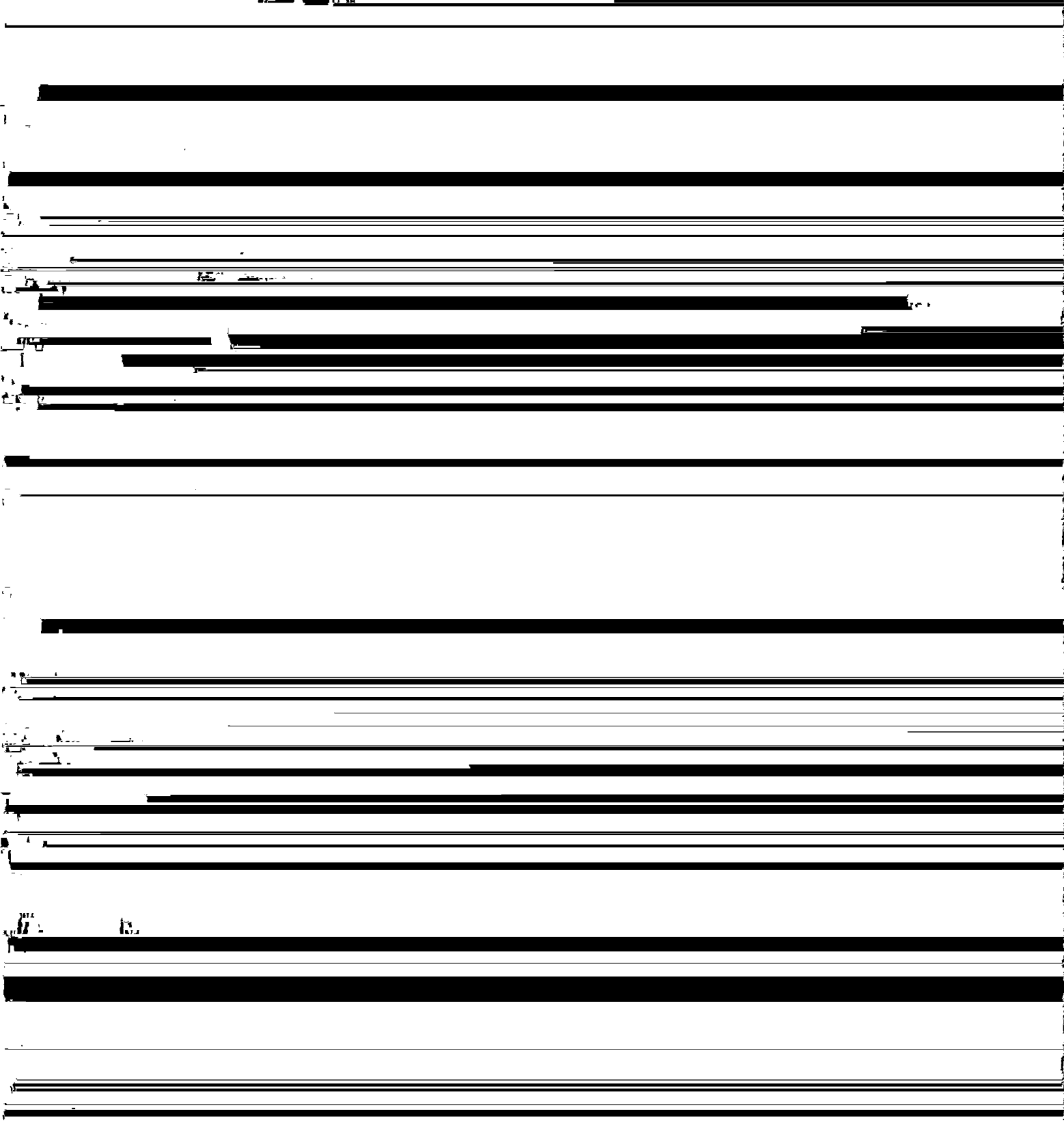
The *Field Book of Ponds and Streams* bowled Annie Dillard over. It was, as she

residents whom I knew had little money and little free time. The  
marble floor was beginning to chill me. It was not fair. (AC 83)

that of reaching, and entail the same pain, that of falling short or being deficient" (*EB* 71). Noisome cheesecloth and enamel trays don't quite fit. Is it a problem with me or the world? Dare I speak up and find out?

Dillard wanted to write to the author, to acknowledge the book's gift, and to connect with the author. Acknowledging these gifts is never a simple or easy task. With books I love, I generally have many purposes in mind, some of which I'm unaware. I want the author to know how special the experience was, that it touched me. Frequently, I want to respond to the author, to connect, commune, and communicate with "him." I have questions to ask. I also want to hear this powerful, creative, or keenly analytic voice; I want to be in the author's presence. I don't regularly acknowledge the gift but usually end up seeking out others who have delighted in the book's treasures. When I find others, I am pleased to know that they too have enjoyed the book's pleasures. I share with my fellow readers some of what I would have shared with the author and they with me. Annie Dillard did not write Ann Haven Morgan. She imagined the questions she might pose, but did not address, to the author. Instead she sought out other readers. Inscribed on the book's card were other patrons'

Some were red, others yellow, and one was green. They varied in size





open the thin lid and find a crystalline intelligence inside, a rayed and sidereal beauty. Crystals grew inside rock like arithmetical flowers. They lengthened and spread, adding plane to plane in awed and perfect obedience to an absolute geometry that even the stones—maybe only the stones—understood. (AC 139)

Rocks, it seems, not only have character, but also a sense of direction.

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the hills for more specimens is to act on that desire to reach for the unknown. When Dillard reaches out to understand the wet world of ponds and streams, she yearns to drench but not drown herself. Rocks, once

Dillard captures not only learning's excitement, but she also evokes a sense of awe, a sense of the sacredness of the world around her. Dillard's rocks touched her with the grace of great things. In those rocks she envisioned an intelligence other than her own. There was something sacred about those rocks, something precious that set them apart, and Dillard felt and knew that. Part of learning's lure seems to be this recognition, this revelation of the special otherness of our world's worlds. For some this sense of reverence for other worlds may seem reserved for natural phenomena. But the grace of great things, while certainly found aplenty in the natural world, is also present in so many other realms. When I was an undergraduate at Earlham College, Gordon Thompson, my humanities

themselves. He taught us to look at a story with a careful, patient, and attentive eye. We didn't set these stories alight with a match or try to dissolve them with chemicals. Instead Gordon tried to give us the tools of literary analysis. I'm afraid I probably frustrated him. My skills always seemed to me, and I believe to him, a bit underdeveloped. But I can recall the reverence and respect he reserved for the text. He could recall a minor character's eye color. I couldn't. He could recite the speech given in a pivotal scene while I struggled to make sense of its importance. He treated

we look for companionship and community. Perhaps we don't want to be alone. Or it could simply be that we want to share the pleasures of learning. But impelled as we are to leap into the unknown and explore other worlds, at some point we come back to something familiar. We seek companionship, we yearn for others who have or could share with us the intrigue and inroads of this learning. This seems to arise in a variety of ways. As learners, it is delightful to have other hungry learners around. In graduate school, I gained a great deal from my coursework, but in many ways it was the graduate student camaraderie that fueled and informed much of my graduate education. As I talk to middle and high school teachers, I hear that it is the absence of a community of meaningful discussion that deals a significant blow to their endurance as teachers. To endure as teachers they need to continue to learn. Without companionship in their love of learning, teaching feels quite isolated and can be difficult to sustain for a long period of time. It seems many teachers yearn for some sort of intellectual connection and companionship.

In seeking companionship, in asking others to come along and witness these worlds, Dillard also ran into injustice. The other worlds that were freely portrayed in her public library were not readily available to all in

Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh, if you were poor and Black, you could not easily

between the library's freedom and the real world's limitations struck Dillard as cold and unfair. When power determines who can and cannot experience these loves, whose worlds are open to beauty and whose are not, issues of

and mineralogists taught her how to listen to rocks and how open their

beauty. Dillard was not alone nor without instruction. But she wasn't in a

explore the dynamics of this love within that setting.

attend a breakfast as the School's representative. Generally these invitations have little or no educational purpose. They are neither motivated by a love

me, giving full voice to the gift of thought. Something in me knew that this gift was mine as well, though it was years before I could fully trust that knowledge" (CT 22). Palmer experienced this man's authentic engagement, felt the allure of his "gift of thought," and eventually accepted the invitation to a life of the mind the gift represented. There isn't a template for these invitations. But there are some shared features.

AN INVITATION TO RECEIVE THE HUMAN INHERITANCE AND  
JOIN THE DISCUSSION

When my son Matthew practiced his cursive loops and curls, he seemed to



... about these conversations. Understanding the

the assigned tasks or purported pragmatic payoffs. It will open neither mind nor heart.

AN INVITATION FROM THE DEPTHS

An invitation's authenticity issues from the source, and, in the case of teaching, a central source is the teacher's love. If this love of learning is real, it is inevitably conveyed. And if it is real, it taps and arises from the depths of the teacher's soul. Falling in love (with a text or another) is always an amaz-

fall in love with another human being, we find ourselves confronted and comforted by another's significance. We find ourselves surprised by what this other person knows of us, by what we see ourselves. What we see, what is brought to the surface, are some of our elemental features. Ortega

didn't seem to obstruct, perhaps even enhanced, his appreciation and love for the beauty that geometry conveyed. He capably conveyed to Jane his love and his ability to see in geometry "beauty bare." And his interests were

dropped in our heads. Mr. Barton seemed both amused and intrigued by

our reactions. At times I think he toyed with us, as we did with him. He was, I thought, a dear and ever gentle man.

Unfortunately, Mr. Barton did not last long at Burriss High School. Two years later in the early 1970s someone reported that he had offered a

student a beer in his home. That upset me. This man who, like a beat poet, had ranted, raved, and held rambling (and intriguing) monologues, was taken away from the kids. I was upset with the dolt(s) who reported him and angry with Mr. Barton for not knowing to whom and when to make his offer

some years past before a teacher of some renown. She talked about how

at that time how fearful she had been.

on other days the lessons did not rely on relating her life's personal details. For Miss Hughes, music appreciation was intensely, but not irreducibly, personal. Music was an animating force in her life: it stirred her depths and

connect the music with her students through her own love, sorrow, and joy. In inviting students to partake in the lure of music, she could not overlook the love and sorrows of her past, the fluid that connected her to the world around her. As she once related, "Some people's lives are affected by what happens to their person or their property; but for others fate is what happens to their feelings and their thought—that and nothing more" (TA 85). Miss Hughes didn't seem to fit into either category easily. Her injured hand and her musical love placed her in both. It seems she was able to

love of learning we invite students to come closer to those great things. To stand next to and to gaze on something beautiful is to be in the presence of

sacred.<sup>19</sup> But it need not be that way. Dillard's geodes, an orchid blooming, or a breathtaking theatrical performance, all seem to evoke a sacred, timeless beauty. And an encounter with beauty also, as Scarry notes, has an air of being unprecedented. When we experience beauty, we undergo the world anew; or to paraphrase Scarry, beauty makes the world new. It is as if the world suddenly stops for a few seconds, is reconfigured, remade in light of this encounter or event. The experience of beauty is also life affirming. Paraphrasing Proust, Scarry writes:

Beauty quickens. It adrenalizes. It makes the heart beat faster. It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living. . . . It lifts away from the neutral background as though coming forward to . . .



... AND SUPPORTIVE FAITH, INSISTENCE AND RESPECT

invitation into a bona fide one. She could no longer step into the classroom and deliver a shiny and bright performance. Over the years she came to see her bright performances as inadequate invitations. Others like Chris Zajac (in Tracy Kidder's *Among Schoolchildren*), teaching elementary students in our poor urban centers, spend a good portion of their academic year simply trying to get students to the point where they can hear the invitation to learn.<sup>22</sup> When reading *Among Schoolchildren* and thinking back to my days of

much time is spent simply getting kids ready, preparing them to be receptive to those doors onto the precious things. When our material needs



Kessler, and Ann Diller contributed essays to an edited (Liston and Garrison) collection entitled *Teaching, Learning, and Loving* (New York City, Routledge Falmer, 2003).

3 Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). This book will be cited as *EB* in the text for all subsequent references.

4 Annie Dillard, *An American Childhood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987). This book will be cited as *AC* in the text for all subsequent references.

5 Elsewhere I have commented on these matters. See Daniel P. Liston, "Love and Despair," *The Journal of Educational Thought*, 50 (2000), 91-109.

*Bittersweet*, is an exploration of, and attempt to gain a clearer understanding of eros. An