A Final Bow

By Emmerich Koller

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I used to feel a sense of loss, even sadness, whenever a good teacher retired. With each retiree, my school lost a very valuable source of knowledge and wisdom acquired over decades of dedicated work in the classroom. No one solicited the parting advice of these seasoned veterans. Their help was not sought to mentor beginning teachers. Then, a few years ago, it was finally my turn. For 36 years I had taught German, coached soccer, sponsored clubs, and organized trips and exchange programs to the German-speaking countries of Europe. Had I been asked, when I retired, I would have gladly shared the most salient lessons: teaching is best suited for idealists; growth and change are essential for students and teachers alike; our students are sometimes our best teachers. But no one asked.

My students often wondered if I had always wanted to be a teacher and were puzzled by my negative answer. Wasn't working in a job you didn't want a little bit like being married to a person you didn't love? To help them understand, I told them stories of my youth where my erstwhile dislike for teachers and teaching originated. I imagine there are similar stories out there of others who entered the teaching profession reluctantly or with questions in their hearts. Teachers are idealists by nature, and this influences their decisions to dedicate their lives to the education of young people. There are few pursuits nobler than that. On the practical side, an idealistic purpose is most helpful when difficult periods in a teacher's career threaten to overwhelm even the most determined among us. Moreover, our students can always sense that we care about them, and they in turn will care about what we know. Once we have managed to demonstrate to our students that our hearts are in the right place, we need to convince them that we are masters of our subject matter and skillful practitioners of our craft. Since we become master teachers only with experience, we must be willing to grow and change to meet the needs of our students. We want our students to be lifelong learners. Can we ask less of ourselves?

When I started my career, only my motivation was strong. Everything else needed extensive work. As a brand-new citizen of this country, I was still learning a new language and culture. My methods were homespun; my classroom management skills borrowed from teachers whose approaches were less than enlightened. What college courses didn't teach me, my students did. Challenging questions from my brightest students inspired me to learn everything about my subject. Looks of incomprehension from slower students made me search for better ways to present my material. Well into the third decade of teaching, at the zenith of my career when I had students achieving excellent results on national and A.P. tests, I was confronted with a very unsettling dissonance. Not all of my students were succeeding. Some didn't seem to be interested in

what I had to offer. Others tried very hard yet couldn't rise above a mediocre grade. How could I be a great teacher if I couldn't motivate and help these students? I started a search for an approach that would enable everyone to do well.

I found my answers in the work of Georgi Lozanov, the founder of Suggestopedia; in Stephen Krashen's compelling analysis of second language acquisition; in Leslie Hart's ground-breaking work on brain studies; in James Asher's Total Physical Response method; in Tracy Terrell's Natural Approach; in Eric Jensen's brain-based teaching methods; in the works of psychologist Robert Sternberg; in Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences; and in the works of many other experts. Their contributions were hotly debated during the 1980s and 1990s in the conferences of the Society for Accelerated Learning and Teaching, normally referred to as SALT. After considerable research, analysis, and soul searching, I cobbled together a new approach that was a radical departure from what I had been doing in the previous 25 years. I tried to incorporate some of the most fundamental findings from brain studies: students can't learn in a stressful atmosphere; they don't all learn in the same way; a language is to be acquired not learned; the brain is capable of forming patterns by itself—no need to organize everything down to the last detail; the use of music, especially certain Baroque music, helps in the presentation and internalization of new information. In the absence of suitable materials from publishers, I created my own text and audiotapes.

Traditional teacher that I was, some of the elements of my new approach called for a radical paradigm shift. I was known as a very demanding teacher, and the moniker "Killer Koller" wasn't entirely unjustified. So it wasn't easy for me at first to start a class with soft background music, body relaxation and stretching exercises, mind calming, controlled breathing exercises, and guided imagery. New language material was presented in the form of an engaging story, written and read by me just so to classical music. Mind mapping, dramatizations, and games replaced the old pencil and paper quizzes. By the time I was confident enough to bring in a puppet to alleviate my students' apprehensions and inhibitions, they were beyond being surprised and responded with delight, according to plan. They looked forward to each visit from *Schnupf die Schnecke*, a lovable brown snail that spoke only German. They were communicating with a mere puppet, not with their teacher, and who would be afraid to talk to a creature as innocuous as a snail?

The hoped-for results were immediate and dramatic. Third-year students Eric and Danielle, for example, had great difficulty in my classes, and I often wondered why they even bothered to go on. German wasn't a mandatory course. Suddenly their below average grades were replaced by As and Bs. They were turning in unexpectedly creative projects. Eric used to hide in the back row; now he spoke up in class and wanted to read the text to the accompaniment of the music. I was pleasantly surprised by his good delivery. He and his partner Dan were involved in the school's radio and TV broadcasting programs so they made use of their expertise in audio and video presentations. They gave full vent to their senses of humor, to the delight of their classmates. German class had become an enjoyable experience, and everyone was learning a new language, seemingly without much effort.

Danielle, who had only low grades since her first year, was finally earning top grades in her third year. She found the new approach "simply awesome." I had never seen her so excited and happy in my class. On one occasion, she produced a video in which she played the main role and her parents, who knew German, played the supporting roles. After one of the classes, she wanted to see her recent grades in the grade book. They were all As. The moment was as gratifying for me as for her. She wished that all her classes could be taught this way. For Danielle, I had found the perfect approach. It gave her the opportunity to receive and process information that corresponded to her learning style. She was artistic and involved in singing and dancing. Her talents now became a vehicle to a new language. I assured her that she was never less smart than her classmates, she just had not been taught the way she learned best.

In retrospect, my new approach was of great benefit not just for my struggling students but also for me. It infused my last decade of teaching with creativity and an almost playful approach to teaching. Learning has to be joyful to be effective; the same must be said of teaching. I retired on a high note. Scholars and experts were my teachers in a quest for a better approach in the classroom. However, my own students were my teachers in my quest for personal growth. Far from being mere recipients of information, they were all unique individuals with admirable traits that edified me.

One student who still stands out in my memory after four decades was a quiet, unassuming, skinny kid with the unusual name of Uwe. To my chagrin, his classmates called him Huey, just like that chopper they saw on TV flying over the jungles of Vietnam. He struggled mightily in my class and quit after two years. He never blamed me for his difficulties, but I felt a bit guilty, especially when he continued to greet me respectfully in the hallways and stopped by my office occasionally just to chat. A year after his graduation, Uwe showed up in my office, head shorn to the scalp, announcing proudly that he had just finished boot camp and was now a Marine. Two years later, looking tough and self-confident, he paid me a visit again. This time he informed me that he was one of those Marines in that unforgettable picture showing the evacuation from the rooftop of the American embassy in Saigon. He came to me seeking vindication for his perceived failure and validation for his triumph. I felt humbled by the fact that it mattered to him what I thought. He may not have succeeded in my class, but he was hugely successful in the big arena of life. For Uwe and many like him, the fact that I cared for them as individuals mattered more than the grades they earned in my class.

Though I was hired by my school to teach German, my most lasting contributions were made when I gave of myself. Ezra was one of several Jewish students in my school's gifted program that had an accelerated four-year foreign language component. After the third year, I usually took my students on a four-week study-trip to Germany. For some of Ezra's Jewish classmates, having to learn the language of their grandparents' murderers and tormentors was almost too much. Spending four weeks in a German household was indeed too much and some declined to participate. Because Ezra was one of the top German students in Illinois that year, his trip was paid for by the West German government. Such generosity helped him overcome his initial apprehension about going.

He spent four weeks in Heidelberg, had a wonderful time, and learned a great deal of German. But his trip evoked strong responses upon his return. Some in the Jewish community refused to talk to him. When customers in a delicatessen where he worked found out that he had gone to Germany, they asked for someone else to wait on them. He just remained silent because he knew what those people had lived through during the war. Ezra's courage and understanding in the face of hostility was uncommon, and I admired him greatly for it. Tolerance and understanding were the guiding principles of the school's gifted program, and Ezra demonstrated to his classmates and teachers how to live by those principles.

Agnes, a Polish immigrant, was a bright young lady but had difficulty keeping up with my class because of her frequent absences. To help her struggling family, she worked 30 to 40 hours a week. I knew first-hand the struggles of poor immigrants, and I couldn't hold her to the strict attendance rules of the school. When she wanted to drop my class, I managed to persuade her not to do so. Agnes graduated with her classmates. A few months into the following school year, now a student at a local community college, she thanked me for my patience and persistence with a bouquet of flowers. Three decades before Agnes showed up in my class, I too was a poor, struggling immigrant and her predicament tugged at my heart. Instinctively I did what so many thoughtful teachers did for me back then. I gave her break after break, convinced in my belief that she would ultimately prevail. Not bending the rules for her and other such students would have been counterproductive and cruel. Agnes taught me to be compassionate and forgiving and to never hide behind a rigid enforcement of the rules.

I had other students for whom nothing was too challenging. Like Ezra, they were part of a highly competitive gifted program. I seemed to have an advantage over them only in my own subject matter and in the wisdom I gained in the course of a very eventful life. These students awed and edified me with their honed talents and their impressive brainpower. The realization that I had some influence in the formation of such students—who usually stayed with me for four years—humbled and inspired me. Their impression on me was so great that I can still list their names decades after they had left my classroom: Brian, Scott, Jonathan, Kim, Jeff, Mark, Missy, Rupal, Catherine, David, and Dan. The list is much longer.

Andrew was one such student. At first, he only stood out among his class of bright students because of his occasional absences from class to travel for piano competitions or concerts in Japan, Moscow, Chicago, or New York. As a freshman, he was already an accomplished pianist. When I asked him how and where he practiced for his performances, he told me his family couldn't afford a decent grand piano. He did almost all of his practicing at his high school or at his music school. One morning he didn't have his homework because he was up all night serving as interpreter for his seriously ill mother. His duties to his immigrant parents were time consuming yet he kept pace with his overachieving and more fortunate classmates. When I found out that he was just as brilliant in his other classes, I knew I was dealing with a *Wunderkind*. In his four years of high school, he accumulated a most impressive array of awards. Shortly after his graduation, his father died of cancer. He became the emotional support for his grieving

mother and sister. By then, he was at Harvard on a full scholarship. As a Rhodes Scholar, he earned his Ph.D. at Oxford, then moved on to Yale where he earned his law degree. Recently, Andrew made one of the most difficult decisions of his life: He went public about being gay, knowing full well the scandal it would cause among his mother's conservative relatives and community. I admired his strength and courage to be true to himself in the face of the inevitable fallout of such a decision.

Through it all, Andrew stayed in touch with me, and I have often asked myself why. Could it be that German wasn't the most important thing he learned from me? Could it be that somehow I had a role in shaping this extraordinary human being and many others who stepped into my classroom? I would hope this is true, and if so, I consider this to be the greatest reward of my career as a teacher.