Reflections of a Mid-career Clinician Educator—Fanning the Flames for Teaching

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Family medicine educators today face vast challenges. Clinical demands and the lack of specific revenue streams for our educational mission are among the many threats to the commitment of our faculty to keep education in its rightful place of honor and value within our academic institutions. To preserve our historic and critical mission, it is imperative that we find ways to rekindle the passion that called many of us to a teaching career path.

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My work is far from done. July 2007 marked the beginning of my 20th year as a clinician-teacher. This is my calling. My passion for this career path, though challenged constantly by external forces, burns brightly still. I am becoming, I hope, a master teacher. I continue to marvel at the joys that come from being able to influence the professional development of the learners who join me on the journey. I am honored by the trust my learners place in me to be the steward of their learning process. I remain a student myself. This makes me a better teacher; it makes me a better person, open to change. It encourages me to face my vulnerabilities, and it allows me to grow in my administrative and leadership roles as well.

Bloodied but unbowed, medical educators today face vast challenges. Clinical revenue generation, incentive models for salary determination, relentless pressure to see more patients, intrusive mandates from accrediting bodies, and shrinking educational budgets are forces that can, if allowed, break the spirit of those of us called to be teachers. It doesn’t take long for clinician-teachers to decide, when pressured by clinical productivity, that the first thing to dump is their commitment to our educational mission. After all, in most of our academic settings, teaching is unreimbursed and therefore, by association, undervalued. Although tempting to do so, dumping that commitment is tantamount to breaking a contract with our souls. It is a recipe for disillusionment among our faculty, and it is, I believe, a certain path to dissolution of our entire medical education system. As senior faculty member in family medicine education, I can, and indeed must, rekindle among my colleagues the flames of desire for our educational mission. We must return the commitment to education to its rightful place of honor and value in our academic institutions. My work is far from done.

As the background for looking ahead to the next steps of my career, I have reexamined my own written statement of my philosophy of teaching. I wrote this more than a decade ago to append to my CV. I find that it rings as true now as it did the day it was originally written:

Clinical teaching is most powerful when done by example, side by side with the learner in the environments in which they must learn to function. Clinical teachers must be clinicians first and foremost; the respect we engender is necessarily based on demonstrable patient care skills. Clinical teachers need to embrace a nurturing culture, yet we must hold our learners to extremely high standards. This is one area in which the “master teacher” excels, and can require an elaborate dance between compassion for the human limits of our learners and the unrelenting demands of our profession. To teach through harsh criticism embitters and encourages hard-

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line defenses. To teach with a passion for excellence promotes strength, wisdom, and intellectual flexibility. To teach with empathy grows the spirit and soul of the learner in such a way that allows recognition of the joys of service, self-sacrifice, and accountability.

I believe I am able to model this philosophy on a daily basis. It is the main reason that I cling to all of my clinical roles in the full spectrum of our discipline in spite of the professional burden that results from continuing my presence in all of the settings to which I send my learners. How can I expect to teach what I do not practice? If I do not hold myself to the same demanding standards, how can I expect my learners to embrace them? For as long as I remain a teacher, I will practice what I preach.

My efforts to model this philosophy have been recognized through the years with a number of teaching awards. But I am not satisfied. I need to learn how more effectively teach those who need me the most—the learner who is struggling. I need to learn to better recognize, with specificity, what each individual learner needs from me at the very moment our worlds intersect and choose in real time the most effective strategy to meet that learning need. I need to learn to recognize, with greater clarity, the individual emotional, cognitive, and environmental barriers that each learner faces. I need to work with them to find the ability to triumph over those burdens.

I have not been immune to the threatening forces that are around us; periodically I have questioned my commitment to this career path. Although I continue to conclude that I will remain true to my calling, I leave myself open to the possibility of change at some point in the future. This freedom keeps me from feeling trapped by factors that I cannot change. By questioning my own commitment to this endeavor, I have in fact, rekindled the flame within. My mission now is to fan those flames, both in myself but also in my colleagues. Teaching the future family physicians of the world is far too important a task to leave to a disaffected, distracted, and dysfunctional group of clinicians who are so busy that their last priority is to be educators. Teaching budding family doctors is not enough. If I am to leave a legacy to the profession, it will be in teaching the teachers how to teach with the passion and dedication that becomes self-sustaining. Codifying my own internal principles of teaching into usable and transferable skills to leave for the next generation of clinician-teachers will be a major focus for the next phase of my career.

Parker Palmer captured the essence of the renewed hope that teaching can bring to one’s life:

Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching’s great rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn.¹

My work is far from done; the dance floor beckons.

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