

Schoolmasters

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"...[T]he secret of a teacher, what makes a teacher happy, for which there is no substitute and no extrinsic reward, [is] that when you are dealing with a boy or girl in your class, you are dealing with the thing that matters the most and lasts the longest, for you are dealing with the soul, which stretches into eternity."

I

AS ANYBODY may easily come to know, Frank Boyden was responsible for the greatness of Deerfield Academy.¹ When he came to the school, it was old, small, and near not being at all. He meant to stay for a year or two, and stayed for over sixty. When he left Deerfield, it was substantial, ancient, and likely to endure as long as our Republic. He found it wood and left it stone.

I know he wanted Deerfield to endure. I remember hearing Mr. Boyden, as we called him, tell the story of archaeologists digging somewhere within the borders of the Roman Empire, which Gibbon calls the most civilized and happy there has ever been, how 16 feet below the surface of modern Europe, the archaeologists found a standard belonging to the Third Parthica Legion with the legend, "Here the Third Legion fought and defeated the Parthians in the year 624 of the city." Then the archaeologists dug further, another 16 feet, down to 32 feet below modern Europe, where they found another standard, also belonging to the Third Parthica Legion, whose legend read, "Here the Twenty Third Legion fought and defeated the Parthians in the year 208 of the city." Then Mr. Boyden added, "That's what I want for this school." May it come to pass!

There can, I think, be very few present-

dayfounders of institutions with the same ambitions. In truth, there are very few founders of such institutions at all. Quite possibly because there are so few who look at the present with such far-seeing eyes. Mr. Boyden looked at things from the point of view of immortality. There was something Roman about him. He thought not only of the living but of the yet to live. If we are to be "worthy of our heritage," as the motto of the school enjoins us, we will do as Mr. Boyden did. Those who constitute our heritage did what they did for us. They founded, fashioned, and perpetuated the great institutions of our Republic for us. We can only perpetuate these institutions by thinking as they did, not only of our children or our children's children, but of their children, whom we shall never meet. Mr. Boyden was such a founder. He cared for boys, and for their boys, and the boys of their boys.

In his care for living children, Mr. Boyden was Roman in another way. The story is that the school grew by accepting boys who had not worked out at other schools, many of whom had been kicked out, who were wild and unhappy. Mr. Boyden took them, saw that bit of good still in them, brought it out, magnified it, till they made it stronger, and then made it dominant. I well remember in their testimony when they returned to

the school, what spoke in their eyes and their demeanor: an abiding gratitude to the man and the school that had helped them to become someone they liked to be with, perhaps saved them from wretchedness, by helping them do the things that a self-knowing esteem might be based on. Deerfield in its first twenty or thirty years under Mr. Boyden must have been very like Rome under Romulus: poor and yet thriving, ever gaining students other schools had given up on, just as Romulus received outcasts and outlaws from elsewhere and made them into citizens.

With this difference, however: while Romulus, the brother-slayer, was harsh, Mr. Boyden was gentle. I do not mean soft or uncertain. Talking with Mr. Boyden or hearing him talk, one had not the slightest doubt that some things are bad and some good. And Deerfield, like England at Trafalgar, expected every boy to do his duty. We were expected to do our best, our best to improve ourselves, and our best to promote the welfare of others. Hence, Mr. Boyden's command to us that whenever we should see a stranger or newcomer on campus, we were to step forward to greet them, offer to help them, and, if need be, lead them wherever they were going. No, Mr. Boyden was firm, but he was also gentle. It was said that there were no laws in the school. This was true. There was, we felt, no crime a boy might commit which he might not recover from, if his heart were good. It was not only that Mr. Boyden would, we knew, treat every one and every offense individually, but that, in addition, he would never, or seldom, give up on a boy.

He wanted the best for each boy. Laws, he knew, were made for boys not boys for laws. The good he wanted for us might be promoted by them, the virtues he wanted us to practice would surely include law abidingness, but he knew that laws are lower than virtues, and are

sometimes even impediments to the good. If he had had a law rather than a maxim against drinking, he would one day have had to expel some boy who might later turn into someone good and fine, if he were not kicked out now. So instead, Mr. Boyden gave him a talking-to, and most often that was enough.

A word from him was something mighty. I well remember the Sunday afternoon, after the midday meal and after the daily meeting, when he stopped me to say a word. (Why was he stopping me? Was it one of my misdeeds, which I quickly reviewed, or something else?) It was a word of praise, for springing up the previous evening unasked to shut a door letting light into the auditorium as the movie began. A small deed and yet the right word from a revered man will set a boy not only repeating such deeds for a long time after but looking for greater ones as well. That is the kind of thing Mr. Boyden knew about the soul of a boy. He knew that although we must often correct, frequently chastise, and sometimes punish a youth, the soul we want to build up in a boy is one led by higher desires, among them the desire to win the praise of those he respects. "The influence of those we love have over us almost always exceeds our influence over ourselves" (La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims*, #525). The absence of evil achieved by law is not yet the good. If you appeal to the good as something to be done, not just avoided, you will strengthen the good in the soul of the boyish malefactor.

Accordingly, the school was governed by a firm sense of duty, especially the duty to serve the good of others. The duties made the worthy middling virtues, such as moderation, patience, and work, habitual in us boys. We knew, for example, that during the Second World War the boys had worked in the north fields harvesting the potato crop. There is a fine picture of Mr. Boyden in his horse and buggy, the boys standing up

from their dusty labor, and one of them waving at him. Perhaps there was even something of his Roman sense of virtue in the practice of having us march to the football games four abreast. That every boy had a sport, a team to play on, and that every team's victories and defeats, and every player's special feats or improvements, were reported to the whole school meeting together, was his American democratic addition, I think. That was sports as it should be, something to be done, not gawked at from a couch, something to be accomplished with grace, and something to be done with sportsmanship.

What about the higher aspirations? What about those great desires of the soul so superlatively satisfied and exhibited by a Pascal, a Rembrandt, a Goethe, a Bach, a Tocqueville? They were not Mr. Boyden's theme. What is very much to his credit is that the institution he built, the Rome he founded, was hospitable to these Athenian aspirations. Thus in two or three of the masters, most notably Mr. Lambert and Mr. McGlynn, masters who were excused from coaching a team, and the latter of whom was permitted to offer an intellectually challenging Senior Seminar, on tragedy, there was a support of higher aspiration. To me and to others, Mr. Lambert represented the independence of the mind and Mr. McGlynn its refinement. These teachers were allowed to cultivate higher things in us boys.

They were allowed. Should it have been more? Shouldn't they have been made the dominant type? At the time and for a long time after, I thought so; I enjoyed Harvard precisely for its making such things dominant, and I esteemed the Putney School, with its intellectual, musical, and artistic aspirations, far higher than Deerfield. Today, I do not think this: it is not the office of a school, as distinct from a college, to make pursuing of the highest things more important than doing the moral things. The most

rarely gifted man I know in the last two centuries is Nietzsche. At Schulpforta, he ranked third behind the most diligent and the most moral. Yet Nietzsche thought that was right and added that the exception should not wish to become the rule.² In truth, he meant that the exception who claims to be the rule is *ipso facto* not exceptional.

Mr. Boyden also allowed other things. Each year one section of Latin II was taught by a *senex iratus*. He seated us so that by walking across the front of the room he could collect the quizzes in alphabetical order. Every day, five days a week, there was a quiz. Most students failed them, each one, every day. As a consequence, sometime between Thanksgiving and Christmas, most of the class had failed most of the quizzes. Thus, sometime between the holiday in which we are thankful for what we already have and the holiday in which we look forward happily to something we don't have but soon will, we young Latin students already knew we were failing, that we would fail, that we had already failed. Any hope of ever raising your average enough to pass the course by the end of the year was irrational; a string of passing quizzes all the way to May could not raise your average sufficiently. Perhaps there was something Roman in this Latin class, something like a legion being decimated after a defeat or banished after Cannae.

However, I think it had more to do with old New England than old Rome. Sinners in the hands of an angry God probably felt more hope than we in that Latin class did. The theology of predestinate damnation was the most important thing a student might learn from this teacher. His name was Mr. Coffin, and if he did not teach much Latin, perhaps he taught something about the Romans. We democrats have occasional need of such ancient experiences. I believe teachers, like God, should be hard to satisfy, but also easy to please. I believe so in part be-

cause of Mr. Coffin. As Robert Frost says, it is hard to know just how much evil is necessary in a child's education. Sometimes a notable bad example is worth a thousand good words.

II

However, if Mr. Boyden built Deerfield, it was his remarkable wife, Helen Childs Boyden, who was its beating heart. If his probity and his prudence made it a good place, it was her heart that made it a loving place. She was over eighty when I knew her. Everyone who knew her knows she was through and through a teacher. Everyone who ever had her senior chemistry class remembers her frank account of Van der Wals forces, how as molecules get closer together, they get bound strongly to each other like sweethearts. And everyone who has, in addition, heard of her classes, knows what she used to write, "Other fools have done it, so can I," on the board the first day.

What I want to add to these stories is something else, although in accord with them. Mrs. Boyden took an interest in me. I do not know, because I did not notice at the time and have not since talked with others, whether this was common. I believe it was. I know that she took an interest in each student in her class, and followed the progress of graduates long after they graduated. I know I am grateful for the interest she took in me. It only increases with the years.

I was in her senior chemistry class, in a theoretical section of it, with far more gifted boy scientists than myself. I think I was part of an experiment of putting boys more gifted in literature and history in a theoretical section of science. It was probably on the observation, a quite correct one, that we were more likely to want to do all the memorization that goes with chemistry if our powers of understanding were addressed. Mrs. Boyden also knew that in the summer before senior year I had been to the Harvard Summer School, to see what

college was all about, by taking two courses, non-credit, and living with Mr. and Mrs. Shively. (Living with this good young master and his good family as much tended to my good education as the courses.) This was another reason, she later told me, that I had been put in theoretical chemistry.

When Mrs. Boyden discovered that I intended to do T.S. Eliot for my spring poet for Mr. McGlynn's Senior Seminar, she began to invite me to tea in the afternoon. After practice then, I would go over to their house. What a privilege and what a pleasure! There over tea we would talk of T.S. Eliot and other things, to and fro, perhaps Michelangelo. Can it really be that she did not know the answers to the questions she asked me about Eliot and his poetry? Surely she must have been feigning, in that most teacherly of ways, in order to spur me on. Spurred on I surely was. I remember that spring term as the one in which I studied more, and more happily, than any other. (I stole really long stretches of study time by slipping out of the Saturday night movies and going up to the Weather Club room, a theft I do not regret.) Quite possibly these teas had something to do, I thought recently, with my victorious return to the mile against Mount Hermon that spring.

During our teas, Mrs. Boyden told me three stories that I would like to share with others. I do not know whether or to how many others she told them. (I would be happy to hear she did, and happy to hear other stories from others.) Remembering them recently, I discovered for the first time that they were all about marriage. Here they are.

One day Mrs. Boyden told me about their early days, how the school was so small that she and the Head would have to go down by the boiler in the basement of the main building to have their arguments. (I was astonished that so revered and so harmonious a couple had ever

argued, far more than I was astonished by the size of the school then.) Another time, she told me about how she had once been so angry at the Headmaster that she had flung her wedding ring under the bed. This story ended with her description of herself crawling under the bed to get it, all a prelude to reconciliation. (Again I was astonished, at the tale, and at being told it, too.) A third time at tea, she told me of something more recent, of how she wanted Deerfield to have an arts building. Then, she twinkled as she said, "And you know, I have almost convinced him that it's his idea." (She meant the Head, and once again, I was astonished.)

What I have learned from these three stories, what I could have only divined then, and what she probably knew I would learn only years later—but if I had the stories, I might learn one day in time—is: first, that good marriages do not exclude quarrels, they make good come out of them; second, that the way they do is paved with the acknowledgment of sin and the seeking of forgiveness, even on one's knees; and third, that there can be a working around the weakness of your spouse that is quite as much loving of him or her as of the good you are working for. For all these I am grateful to that woman.

I once received a letter from Mrs. Boyden. It was sent twenty-seven years ago, in the summer after my graduation, in 1960. Thinking of her, I searched out an old file and found it. In it she writes: "I came through New York and I thought of calling you, but since you had not answered my last letter, I decided not to, but I do want you to know that I think of you and that you are always welcome to visit us in the summer, here in New Hampshire." I believe it is the last I ever heard from her. I cannot too much praise what I am awed by in her letter, namely her loving care for me, so much that she was willing to express her disappointed af-

fection; when I saw, twenty-seven years too late, the quality of her love and how she risked being vulnerable to express it, I wept. Thinking about it now, I believe that the power in that letter, to be received at last after all these years, is greater and tends toward a higher good than the power in the legends attached to the standards of the Third Parthica Legion. Indeed, as Dante would understand, what justifies an empire is precisely the existence of such a person as Mrs. Boyden and the love that sprang ever fresh and ever daily from her good heart. Because of the portion of it she bestowed on me, I cannot thank her enough, feel more guilty at having ignored it, or rejoice more at the prospect of heaven, where I might resay all this. "Love is never lost," as Father Zossima says in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Boyden was a long-lasting conspiracy for the good, their good, and the good of all they taught and met. Its consequences were immense. They are still happening.

Christ tells us there are no marriages in heaven—which does not mean that there are no saints there because of the marriages they had on earth.

III

I said the consequences of the Boydens are still happening. And after I wrote that sentence, one of them occurred, one that touched me. Except for Mrs. Boyden, Deerfield was an impersonal place; firm, good, and gentle, but not affectionate. Most of the teachers never expressed, perhaps because they did not take, a personal interest in how you were feeling, whether you were discovering something that made your soul sing, or something that put you a step further to becoming a man. There was, however, one notable exception to this impersonality or indifference and that was Mr. Pidgeon, who taught Latin, coached track, swimming, and cross country, and left Deerfield to become headmaster elsewhere at the

end of my freshman year.

When you are a boy, especially a boy in a boy's school, sports is important. In truth, nothing in studies quite equals the challenge in a sport. At the time you think it is all about skill, prowess, and will. Reflecting later, you may see that it was about character and about self-knowledge. Both perspectives are right.

The first time I was aware of Mr. Pidgeon was one sunny day in the early fall. I was a Freshman. I was 109 lbs. I had just completed a circle of the lower level running. Suddenly there was a warm arm hugging me. Apparently I had run well. From then on it was mostly the shout "pay the price" that I got from the smiling coach, but also one private ride up Sugar Loaf Mountain as well. I must have paid the price that fall because I was allowed to run with the varsity in the final meet, against Mount Hermon. I scored fifth for us. I believe it was the last time Deerfield beat Mount Hermon. I know it was the last time I touched my toes. You see, the next year, not only did those demigods, the seniors, graduate, but Mr. Pidgeon left too, and with him went a good deal of the spirit of Deerfield.

With him went a good deal of my spirit, certainly. It was not only, as I've since realized, that had he stayed, I would have probably had him, not Mr. Coffin, for Latin II, but that without him, running was hard, and to me at that age, running meant everything, the way war meant everything to solitary Coriolanus. It was like carrying on some mortal struggle, when your older brothers and your father have already been slain. From then on, I always preferred practice to meets; in the spring of Junior year, I quit track, in a flood of tears daily renewed in walks in the north fields. (This had the very good benefit of introducing me to an entirely different set of boys, playing leisure soccer, a set far more inquiring than others.) Not until spring of Senior year, when for the last meet I switched from half mile to

mile, that is, back to the race I was meant for, and beat Wilson of Mount Hermon did I recapture the cheerfulness I lost when Mr. Pidgeon left, which cheerfulness I carried to Harvard next fall, where I enjoyed races more than practices, and beat Wilson, now moved on to Princeton, when he cut a corner and to visit justice upon him, I sprinted past him to the finish.

The story of the good effect of a good master does not end there. Five years ago I published an essay on the Liberal Arts Program that, twenty years before, I proposed at Dartmouth; it had been my political unmaking, but my intellectual making; Charles Sykes regards it as Dartmouth's last chance.³ Then from out of the past came the thundering hoofbeats of Coach Pidgeon, writing in a letter, "You must be the Michael Platt who ran for me at Deerfield." I wrote back, "You make me feel as if I have been running down on the lower level since 1956 and that now I can come up, have a shower, and a milk shake. Maybe two."

Indeed, now that we have corresponded a little, talked on the phone, and now that I have visited him at the school he departed from Deerfield to head,⁴ I guess I am reconciled to the loss his departure meant to me and to others at Deerfield. It is good that Mr. Pidgeon had the spirit of Deerfield when he went to Kiski. When Mr. Boyden arrived at Deerfield, it was not sure the Board wouldn't close the school. Something like the same situation faced Mr. Pidgeon, only it was worse. One of the three buildings on the Kiski campus had fallen down between when Jack signed on and when he arrived, and a million dollar debt had emerged from the woodwork of the other two. That Mr. Pidgeon overcame that debt and has gone on to build a score of handsome buildings, in a humane scale, like Jefferson's University of Virginia, is less important than how he has done it, by paying affectionate attention to each

boy (a criterion that means he teaches, that the school stays small, and that he still coaches a sport). Principal in the American high school used to mean principal teacher. At Kiski, where Mr. Pidgeon is in his thirty-eighth year, Head means head teacher, head coach of coaches, and head guide of boys on their way to becoming men. He it is who gives out the grades each month; he it is who encourages and criticizes the boys as he walks about the school each day; and he it is who sends a birthday card to a score of graduates every day. It is by doing these things and bringing to the school others eager to do the same, that Kiski has attracted support from others, from the boys' parents, and from wealthy persons with a desire to support something good.

Charles E. Garman of Amherst, with whom such men as Calvin Coolidge, Dwight Morrow, and Mr. Boyden studied, once gave away the secret of a teacher, what makes a teacher happy, for which there is no substitute and no extrinsic reward, that when you are dealing with a boy or girl in your class, you are dealing with the thing that matters the most and lasts the longest, for you are dealing with the soul, which stretches into eternity. When Jack Pidgeon wrote a man who as a boy once ran on his team, that was the long view a teacher takes. When for thirty-eight years he has concentrated on the man that this boy, and this boy, and this boy, will become if one shouts "pay the price" and while saying that, smiles, he has taken that same long view of human things.⁵ What a pleasure it

is then, not only to benefit from that long view oneself, but also to find that by taking that long, affectionate, and personal view of teaching, a whole school has come into existence!

Comparing Kiski, the house that Jack Pidgeon has built, with the other such schools around America, one cannot but feel that it stands out, that it must be lonely, and hence be tempted to despair of the others, and indeed despair of the nation that here too shows signs of its rapid decline. However, every army in flight that ever turned, fought, and prevailed, did so because first one man turned and fought. Once Deerfield was about to fold and along came Mr. Boyden. Once Kiski was in worse shape and along came Mr. Pidgeon. Today our country is not in good shape. Yet I do not know that it is in worse shape than in the 1850s when the Missouri Compromise was repealed, when the Dred Scott decision meant that the Union might no longer be a house divided, but wholly slave, and when one great party embraced the view that one could be just while declaring one's moral indifference on a grave moral question. And I do know that if Jack Pidgeon could raise up his school from where he found it, someone could do it for the country as well. The fact of virtue is more important than all the unfavorable conditions it prevails against, or against whose background, it fails splendidly. Virtue is to be emulated. For giving us such virtues to emulate, I am grateful to these three masters, Frank Boyden, Helen Childs Boyden, and Jack Pidgeon.

1. John McPhee's *The Headmaster* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966) is good, as is John Gunther's story of the death of his Deerfield boy, *Death Be Not Proud* (New York: Modern Library, 1953); in Brian Cooke's more recent *Frank Boyden of Deerfield* (Lanham, MD: Madison Books, 1994), there are interesting things, but marred by the assumption that Mr. Boyden needs to be measured against recent trendy standards, including those of political correctness, more than the other way around. 2. This according to Meta von Salis, who talked with the mature Nietzsche in Sils Maria and Zurich; see Sander L. Gilman ed., *Begegnung mit Nietzsche* second ed. (Bonn: Bolivar, 1985); a representative portion of these conversations has been translated ably by David J. Parent, *Conversations with Nietzsche: A Life in the Words of His Contempo-*

raries (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For rule and reception, see *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*. 3. "A Road to Travel By: A Liberal Arts Curriculum for Dartmouth" (with Dain Trafton and Carnes Lord, as proposed in 1971), and "Two Roads Diverged in a Wood," *Dartmouth Review*, Vol. 10 (Issue 15) 14 Feb. 1990; see also Charles Sykes, *The Hollow Men* (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1990). 4. I am grateful to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and to the director of its preparatory school program, George Michos, for sponsoring my visit. 5. Those unable to visit the school and meet the man may get a good idea of both from a collection of his speeches over thirty five years, entitled *I Know Who You Are*, available from the school, in Saltsburg, PA (15681).