

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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The Gifts of a Teacher

Amy Kass gave her students the chance to know themselves.



By

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Aug. 24, 2015 7:12 p.m. ET

Why teach? More than once in recent years I've heard from teachers, nearing or past retirement, who wondered whether they had chosen the right profession. One thought that maybe she would have done better as an architect. "That way," she said, "at least I could point to something I made."

I suspect that many teachers harbor these sorts of doubts—the wiser the teacher, the graver the doubt. Teaching at its best is less in the business of imparting knowledge than it is of shaping souls. But who can tell what, if anything, has been shaped, much less how well? How much can any single teacher do, in the space of a semester or two, to form the interior spaces of her students' intellectual and emotional lives?

Amy Kass, one of the best teachers I ever had (along with her husband, Leon, also at Chicago), was not immune to these sorts of doubts. She knew that even in the best classrooms at the University of Chicago, with the brightest students in the country, there was a limit to what she could accomplish.

Clever students in her humanities classes could disappoint her, in the way that clever people are often disappointing. A semester's course on Homer's "Odyssey" or Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein" would probably not long stay in the minds of students aiming at careers in law or finance. Even students destined for academic careers of their own were bound to get caught up in everything she disliked about university life: the need to publish, the intellectual faddishness, the petty careerism, the higher cynicism.



Amy Kass PHOTO: HUDSON INSTITUTE

Yet for nearly 40 years Mrs. Kass persevered, taking the extravagant gamble that every now and then she would find students whose minds would alight with recognition in, say, Levin's feelings for Kitty in "Anna Karenina," or in Malcolm X's reading of the dictionary in prison, or in Sullivan Ballou's letter to his wife on the eve of the first Battle of Bull Run. These were the students, and such were the texts, that redeemed the enterprise of teaching. They ennobled the profession not because the compensations were many, but because they were few. What's rare is also precious.

What was it like to sit in Mrs. Kass's classroom? The tone was set by the way in which we addressed one another. She was Mrs. Kass (not Dr. Kass, never Amy) to us; we were Mr.

Stephens, Ms. Lehman, Mr. Lohse and so on to her. It was anachronistically formal but radically egalitarian: Whatever our other differences, teacher and student were on an equal footing when it came to discussing the book at hand. We came to class not to be instructed on the meaning of a text (much less Mrs. Kass's views of it), but to read it

afresh, without preconceptions. And we read not for the sake of knowledge, but for self-knowledge: to understand ourselves, through stories told by others, as we hadn't fully (or vaguely) understood ourselves before.

Though I never once heard Mrs. Kass utter a political opinion, at the core of her teaching was the belief that, while it's never easy to really know oneself, modern life makes doing so much more difficult. The benefits of emancipation from the old conventions regarding status, sex, manners and morals may be vast. But they come with hidden costs, notably in the form of aimlessness.

We can satisfy our desires, but we have trouble recognizing our longings. We can do as we please but find it difficult to figure out what truly pleases us, or what we really ought to do. Limitless choice dissipates the possibility of fully realizing the choices we make, whether in our careers or communities or marriages. There's always the chance that something (or someplace, or someone) better is lurking around the corner.

Mrs. Kass believed that at least one aim of a higher education is to provide students with a sextant of sorts, by which they might better discover what it is they should know about life, what they might hope for it, and how they might go about getting it. Not that this belief made her censorious or doctrinaire: You cannot love literature the way she did without also knowing that it is the untidiness of life that makes it interesting. But she cared enough for her students to let them know that the steering aids offered by the modern world might not be enough. Jane Austen still offers the best advice on dating. Aristotle still has the last word on friendship.

About five years ago Mrs. Kass was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. Last week she succumbed to it, a little shy of her 75th birthday. Those of us who saw her in the final years never detected a trace of self-pity, an absence of grace, a lack of serious interest in the lives of those she cared for, not least her students. She was a model of what it means to live life wisely, and meaningfully, and—knowing the inevitable limits—fully.

In that sense, Amy Kass's truest teaching was the way in which she chose to lead her life. It left an indelible mark on mine. May her memory be for a blessing.

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