

## TRIBUTE TO A TEACHER

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Oriental societies always held their teachers in high esteem. The teachers were given to simple living and high thinking. They did not have many worldly goods but true “gurus” were always deeply respected. But slowly this social respectability to teachers is also eroding. In Germany a primary school teacher is treated like a civil servant. He / she is accorded a high social status.

But what is the social standing of a primary school teacher in our government school? Today she / he would stand at the very bottom of the social ladder – way below the peons and security guards. The uniform and arms lend the latter a semblance of power. The teacher carries no such symbol of authority. Teachers often work for long hours under tough conditions for a paltry pay. Despite their arduous circumstances many still do a wonderful job. What is the secret of becoming a good teacher?

Perceptive schools interested in good education always look for certain key attributes in teachers. They are suspicious of paper degrees but look for more tangible skills. While interviewing potential teachers apart from the academic qualifications they look seriously at their extra-curricular interests. Apart from knowing the subject someone who is interested in music, bird watching, astronomy, common trees or good literature – someone who pursues a passionate hobby is more likely to be a good teacher. After the initial euphoria and idealism has vaporised the going for a new teacher can get tough. The task of teaching, correcting assignments, filling scores of registers and shouldering other onerous responsibilities, day in and day out can become nerve breaking. The task of a conscientious teacher is not easy. She / he will go nuts. This is when the teacher’s passions, hobbies will sustain her. The genuine interest she has in music, books etc would provide the nurturance for her soul.

The school is a government unto itself – full of rules and regulations. A good teacher deals with them by creating her own private space – a sacred bond between her and the children. Why waste time on taking attendance? Instead spend time on something more inspiring. Why spend time on inspecting the uniform and doing other policing chores? Instead spend it something more tangible. Free children often express their joy of learning through a good laugh or roar. The other teachers brainwashed into authoritarianism may not like it. So, a clever teacher shuts her classroom doors.

Many teachers get into a “soup” by acting as know-alls. There is a “banking” model of education where the teacher is portrayed as a “jug” full of knowledge and the children as “empty” cups. The task of the teacher is pour knowledge into these empty cups. But true learning is far removed from this mechanistic schema. In real life children understand best what they reconstruct themselves. So, a good teacher must be a fellow traveller - learning as well as teaching the children. She is always willing to say, “I don’t know the answer, let’s explore it together.” David Horsburgh – the creative educationist who set up the Neelbagh School would often ask trainee teachers from North India to teach the

children Hindi and learn Telugu from them. The children could see their teacher's struggle with Telugu, which was akin to their own struggle with Hindi. This produced a bond of deep empathy between teacher and the children and made the teacher more humane. Both children and teacher learnt.

I met such a wonderful teacher when in school and she left an indelible imprint on me. My parents never went to school. But my mother ensured that all her children went to the best school. The best school in Bareilly (UP) was the St. Maria Goretti Convent School. This co-educational school was run by nuns. There were nine girls and three boys in my class. Three students opted for advanced maths in the Senior Cambridge exam. This included me.

My maths teacher was Mrs. Frey. I still don't know her first name. We three students and Mrs. Frey used to sit across a small table. The very first day she told us, "Look kids I don't know much maths myself, so you'll have to figure things out for yourself, and learn from one another." She knew that I was quite good at maths but weak in English. So she talked to me for hours in English and encouraged me to read more. She repeatedly told me, "Arvind, I have faith in you!" This boosted my confidence and I passed my English exam in distinctions.

I still cherish Mrs. Frey as my best teacher. She had the courage to be honest. She nudged us gently to relate things to real life. Once we were doing "hexaminoes". Given six squares how many original networks can one make? Copycats, rotations and reflections are discounted. After a while we figured out that there could be just 35 and no more. Then she asked us which networks could be folded to make a cube. For this we actually drew, cut and folded them. It was fun and great learning. Whereas our chemistry teacher made us "mug" up things this splendid maths teacher made us do "experiments".

Mrs. Frey's elder son David studied in Sherwood School, Nainital. David and I were the same age. A few days before the final Senior Cambridge exams Mrs. Frey along with David came home. To reach our house was not easy. One had to meander through numerous lanes and mazes. How Mrs. Frey found our house I have no clue. My elder sister was Mrs. Frey's old student. We were both overjoyed to see her and welcomed her. Mrs. Frey announced, "David is having some problems with maths and I thought I should take him to two of my brightest students!" My sister and I felt on top of the world with this "honour".

Mrs. Frey gave me a high "self-esteem". It is this sense of "self-worth" which made me choose a career far removed from my training. For over thirty years I have tried to make science fun for the children and I have loved every minute of it. For this I must thank Mrs. Frey for giving me faith in my own abilities.