

Thomas G. Palaima
REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

A master teacher

David Shribman's new book "I Remember My Teacher" and the Statesman's request for anecdotes about teachers in our lives hit me at just the right time. I have been meditating on the mystery of teaching for a long time and marveling at how human societies, ancient and modern, construct cultural values and then transmit them to succeeding generations.



The ancient Greeks never had anything like our public school system. What we would call private schools came into vogue in the fourth century B.C. These were centered on thinkers such as Plato and Aristotle. Aristotle's Lyceum developed features that we would liken to graduate research programs. The experience of a mentor was personal and powerful. In the four centuries of literacy that went before, the acquisition of knowledge about the world and the place of human beings came in oral form: songs, epic and lyric, communal performances of drama, public readings of histories in the making. Sophocles in his "Antigone" expresses awe at the mystery of the process: "Language, and thought like the wind and the feelings that make the town, man has taught himself, and shelter against the cold, and refuge from rain."

Hunting, fishing, sailing, agriculture, the building of ships and shelters, the development of crafts, trade and commerce, those are the easy things. The hard part is "the feelings that make the town." What are those feelings and who teaches them to us?

I got some answer — or at least some confirmation that this is the right question to ask — last summer in the reading groups organized by professors Evan Carton and Geraldine Heng, directors of the Humanities Institute in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin. Evan and I sat down with a dozen Austinites to exchange views about Robert Lowell's fourth moral essay. Lowell asks a Sophoclean question: How do we find and nurture the sacred in our everyday lives? As the dozen of us talked, we realized that we all had our own feelings about what was sacred, about what we thought gave meaning to our lives. But we all had acquired our feelings in the same way. Someone had taught us. And we could all remember the people who had been our prime "teachers."

Those "teachers" had shaped the different ways we go about our lives, the priorities we set, the way we treat our fellow human beings and the depths with which we feel awe, joy, reverence, respect, love, passion, devotion and dedication.

I have four people in my own life who came along at just the right time and showed me the way I wanted to be. I'll keep these people in my heart. But I'll tell you about someone I have watched for the past two years who has shaped the lives of children, including my 7-year-old son, James. His name is Sam Um. My son and his peers call him Master Um. Their parents do, too, and not because we have to. We have developed the feeling, as we experience how he works in what in Korean he calls his "place," that he is a master and he is in touch with something sacred.

His place is Master Martial Arts, and Master Um instructs groups of about 12 youngsters at a time in the ancient art of Tae Kwon Do. He and his assistants, Mr. Spear and Mrs. Black, never raise their voices, rarely have to do more to the packs of high-energy and fidgety kids than show them what Tae Kwon Do expects of them.

It was no surprise to learn that Master Um took up Tae Kwon Do as a true art. At age 6 in Korea, he was fascinated by the artistic movements of human bodies performing Tae Kwon Do. At age 7, he was teaching other children in his village who could not afford the cost of formal instruction. He has been teaching ever since. His own undergraduate degree, from the University of Houston, is in art, where he pursued painting and photography despite being colorblind. He choreographs martial arts in films. He has incorporated into his teaching artistic elements that are not in traditional Tae Kwon Do. These excite the kids and help them to absorb what honoring themselves, their classmates and an ancient tradition all mean.

Thank you, Master Um, for teaching my son, other boys and girls and me some of the "feelings that make the town."

Palaima is professor of classics in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin.