A passion for teaching

The first in a series of articles in which academics muse on the art of teaching

"Passionate and uncompromising dedication and commitment. Sparkling intelligence and enthusiasm. The greatest professor I ever had."

"He is the most passionate teacher I have ever had in my life. He flies around the room and makes every lecture enjoyable to attend."

Robert Citino, a military historian at Eastern Michigan University, attracted 26 pages of comments such as these to become RateMyProfessors' Number 1 Professor in the Nation last year.

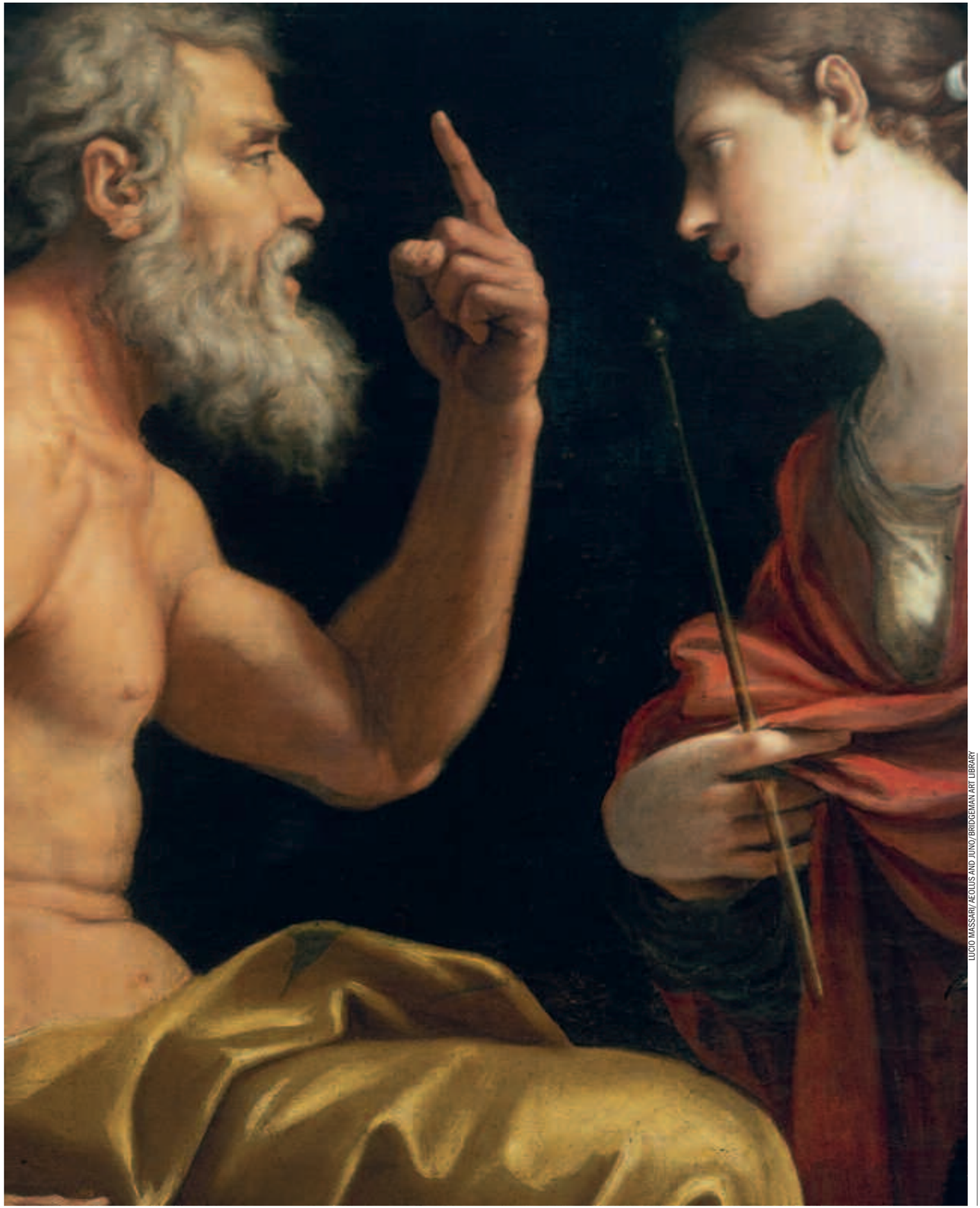
The word "passion" features regularly in students' descriptions of their best teachers – both the passion tutors have for their subject and the passion they summon for sharing their learning with others.

It's a word that is often lost in the jungle of bureaucracy or the demands of the research assessment exercise. And in the midst of both, it can be all too easy to lose sight of the privilege and responsibility of transforming the lives of a generation of students.

With the advent of university tuition fees, the National Student Survey, websites such as RateMyProfessors and a growing focus on the student experience, being a good teacher is rightly being brought centre stage.

Here, Tom Palaima of the University of Texas at Austin opens our series with a cri de coeur *about the importance of teaching. Although some details of his essay are specific to his location and situation, the story of the challenges in imparting knowledge to new generations is universal.*

Ann Mroz



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The spark that tingled to my bones

Tom Palaima tells of the passion that drove him to teach Classics and how it is at odds with the 'educational shopping mall' vision of officialdom

Genuine passion is not only largely missing in higher education nowadays, it is discouraged by institutional and government policies and practices.

Notice that I say "genuine passion". Even though it comes from a different Indo-European root, the Latin noun "*passio*" was used to represent the notions associated with the Greek verb "*paskho*", the root of which, "*penth*", means "experience".

Those two words – *paskho* and *passio* – have a fundamental sense of "suffering", that is, a serious knowledge of how grim life can be.

The hallmark character of "passion" in Greek tragedy, whose very name, Pentheus, means something like Mr Suffering, is a college-age new king exploring for the first time dimensions of adult power, self-identity and the mysteries of human sexuality and religious fervour.

In Euripides' tragedy the *Bacchae*, he is eventually ripped to death by his mother and the women of the city he rules while they are in the throes of an ecstatic religious cult and tapping into a part of our human nature that he has tried to suppress.

Part of my easily sustained lifelong passion for teaching Classics comes from trying to understand and convey more fully the real transformative power of communal myths such as this.

The experience of studying at any institution of post-secondary education is a privilege of a kind that an infinitesimal percentage of human beings in the history of the world have ever had. To have the native and schooled intelligence, the financial wherewithal and the freedom from life's often crushing obligations that are necessary to spend four or more years at a college or university is miraculous personal good luck.

The official core purpose of the University of Texas at Austin, where I have held a tenured position and endowed professorship now for 22 years, is that we "transform lives for the benefit of society". Among the core values that all members of the university community pledge to uphold are the commitment to expand human understanding, create a caring community and seek the truth and express it.

UT Austin is an enormous state research university of 50,000 students, 35,000 of whom are undergraduates, and 1,750 tenured or tenure-track full-time faculty. It is the

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flagship of this system of nine universities, six health institutions and a telecampus serving 160,000 students across our giant state. The student-to-faculty ratio in undergraduate courses at UT Austin is more than 19 to 1. State funding covers a mere 16 per cent of the annual operating budget of the university.

Right now, 85 per cent of beginning students gain admission by graduating in the top 10 per cent of their classes at secondary schools, both public and private, in the state.

This percentage is rising, and soon there will be more top-10 percenters than there are available places at the university. We are thus fulfilling a prediction made by our last president, Larry Faulkner, that attending UT Austin would come to be viewed as an entitlement rather than as the unique privilege that it still is.

With this sense of entitlement comes focus on self-gratification: "What's in it for me?" By contrast, a sense of privilege invokes the principle of noblesse oblige, of being duty-bound to pay a debt to the society that has given us such a rare blessing.

One easy way of keeping alive a passion for teaching and learning is to remember daily the core purpose of the university. Yet those faculty, students, administrators and state officials who do take the mission completely to heart are, in my opinion, powerless against those who actually control the processes that lead to decisions about education at our flagship state university and what resources we should receive.

At the end of May this year, Rick Perry, who succeeded George W. Bush as Governor of the State of Texas in 2000, organised an education summit to present to the regents who head the state's three large public university systems "breakthrough solutions" to the problems thought to be besetting higher education.

At a conservative think-tank, Dick Armey, the retired House majority leader of the US Congress, called faculty councils at public universities "imbecile institutions" and called on the regents to reduce the already limited role the faculty plays in governance.

The "breakthrough solutions" that were presented were based on what goes on at a five-year-old business school, called the Acton School, that offers a one-year degree in entrepreneurship to about 20 students, all of whom have full-tuition fellowships.

Its 11 faculty all are successful business entrepreneurs. One of the key proposals put forward was that students at state universities in Texas be given contracts that stipulate what their starting salaries will be when they complete degrees in specific majors, correlated to their scores in standardised admission examinations. It is hard for me to imagine that this and the other "breakthrough" proposals were made with UT Austin's core purpose and values in mind.

> **Those who do take the mission completely to heart are powerless against those who actually control the processes that lead to decisions about education at our flagship university**

Most American professors now teach at colleges and universities that function as what the *New York Times* ten years ago called "career-credentialling stations".

A national commission appointed by Margaret Spellings, the US Secretary of Education, herself a Bush appointee from Houston, Texas, and charged with examining higher education in the US presented its findings and recommendations in a series of drafts and a final report in June to September 2006.

Charles Miller, a career investment fund manager who served briefly as chair of the University of Texas Board of Regents, headed the Spellings commission.

Its final report declares that many American post-secondary students "simply want to improve their career prospects by acquiring new skills that employers are demanding". The study stresses that American universities and other post-secondary institutions are now operating in a "consumer-driven environment" and need to provide "workplace skills", "create new knowledge" and "contribute to economic prosperity and global competitiveness". The benefits of education for individuals and society as a whole are defined explicitly in median annual and lifetime salary figures. Universities are defined as "economic engines".

One half-sentence in the entire 76-page document mentions in passing that universities and colleges "also serve as civic and cultural centres".

I am now 56 years old. In the past five years, I have received two teaching awards. I also head a research programme focusing on early pre-alphabetic writing systems in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. I have received distinguished awards for this work, too, most notably a five-year fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation and Fulbright professorship appointments at the University of Salzburg and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. I am a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London. I am already a dinosaur.

For the past 13 years, I have taught every summer but one in my university's 35-year-old summer intensive Greek programme. In that exceptional summer I team-taught with a gifted former student – who has already become a noted scholar on the work of Cormac McCarthy and the use and depiction of violence in film – a national Telluride seminar for gifted high-school juniors on the topic of myths of war and violence. The Telluride Association is a non-profit organisation that sponsors summer programmes to bring together young people from around the world who have a passion for learning.

AMERICAN MARINE DURING VIETNAM WAR/GETTY

I also taught in the inaugural year (2006) of our Humanities Institute's Free Minds Programme, which offers a year-long seminar in traditional humanities (history, philosophy, literature, theatre and Classics) to poverty-level adults. Two years ago, an undergraduate student of mine won the top prize for distinguished undergraduate achievement in research and a graduate student of mine won the award for best dissertation in humanities and fine arts.

In the past 15 years, I have chaired my large department for four years and then served regularly on the faculty council and key committees dealing with the budget, libraries, research policies and the overall co-ordination of faculty council legislation. I do this because I care deeply about higher education, especially public higher education, and feel I have a broad, well-informed international and historical perspective on issues.

I have given many distinguished visiting lectures at universities and at institutions such as the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London, the Leventis Foundation in Cyprus, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

A common theme is who and what human beings are, individually and collectively, and how they face the challenges of being alive.

During this time, I have taught and written about war and violence in human societies, ancient and modern, and for the past ten years I have written regular commentaries and book reviews – many of them in *Times Higher Education* – on cultural and political topics ranging from the social significance of the music of Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson and Pinetop Perkins to how policies were formed in the Kennedy, Johnson and now Bush administrations, and how the US looks from abroad (a series of six reports from Spain in 2007). I write frequently about political, social and economic issues, about higher education in Texas, and about values and decisions within my own university.

Never in my life or in my career have I made a choice based on how much money I would receive for doing what I took up next.

The total emphasis at the Texas Governor's summit and in the Secretary of Education's commission report on the financial and economic rewards of pursuing higher education strike me as symptomatic of larger trends ultimately detrimental to the good of our society.

> **Passionate teaching aims at nurturing the capacity for true human sympathy, for experiencing what other human beings experience. It is at odds with the philosophy of elected officials**

I had the luxury of being relatively poor growing up. My parents were the children of immigrants from Lithuania and Poland. My father worked in the US Postal Service and my mother part time as a grocery clerk and then in a school cafeteria.

I attended high school, college and graduate school on scholarships, fellowships and teaching assistantships. Since no one in my extended family had ever attended college or university, there were no expectations placed on me other than that I should "do well" at what my family saw as the incomprehensible things I was doing in the 11 years of post-secondary education it took to finish my doctorate.

I made a critical and decisive change in scholarly focus in my junior year in college. The catalyst was one of my professors in a graduate mathematics course who, uncharacteristically for him, spoke to us after a snowy winter weekend in Boston about what a wonderful time he had had curled up in his apartment working on maths problems. It struck me then that I should seek to do something in life about which I was passionate in this way—and mathematics was not it.

I also reasoned that the other rewards in academia were too few not to be involved with subjects I really loved studying. I enjoyed ancient history and literature and was literally overwhelmed when I read the first lines of Homer's *Iliad* in Greek.

I had never read anything so direct, honest and true in my life. It was then that I decided to study classical languages, history and literature, and to attend graduate school in Classics, as long as I could support myself (as I eventually did).

The first teaching award I received at the University of Texas at Austin was the Jean Holloway Award of the university's alumni association, the Texas Exes. I still consider it the most extraordinary honour I have received.

It is given to a professor in natural sciences or liberal arts who "demonstrates a warmth of spirit, a concern for society and for the individual, and the ability to impart knowledge while challenging his/her students to independent inquiry and creative thought, as well as a respect for the understanding of the permanent values of our culture". To be thought to have those qualities, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, made me feel a spark tingle to my bones.

In the semester that I received the award, spring 2004, members of the secret selection committee sat in on the large lecture course I

PERICLES/ALAMY

was teaching to well over a hundred students on the topic of Greek myths and our lives. In this course, I look at Greek myths and how they related to fundamental human problems the Greeks were facing and we still face. I introduce modern parallels where appropriate.

I discovered while giving my lectures that veterans of our use of military force in Iraq and Afghanistan or the girlfriends and spouses of soldiers still deployed in those countries were deeply moved by our discussions of the experiences of soldiers in the *Iliad* and Euripides' *Trojan Women*.

One young woman specifically said the scene between Hector and Andromache in book VI of the *Iliad* had made her better understand the deep and unexpressed feelings that she and her boyfriend or spouse – I forget which – had felt when he shipped out.

Other students appreciated our exploration of the figure of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* and why he might feel such a fierce desire for strict obedience to the laws of the state and for severe punishment of Polyneices, the brother of Antigone who had led a foreign mercenary force in a treasonous attack on his own city of Thebes. Here questions about social and political values and about the nature of political protest intersected with controversies about the Congressionally approved Patriot Act and revelations about violations of the human rights of prisoners.

Many of the veterans, and the students who were children of Vietnam veterans, said that our look at Achilles, in psychiatrist Jonathan Shay's terms, as an exemplary officer broken by his high command's "betrayal of what is right" had helped them understand their own post-traumatic stress symptoms or the behaviour of their fathers, uncles, brothers and friends.

When we compared the social conditions and psychological states of Medea in Euripides' play with the village grandmother, old Hadoula, who engages in serial infanticide in Papadiamantis' stark novel *The Murderess* (1903) and with Texan Andrea Yates' murder of her own five children (June 2001), some students admitted that they were looking at the potent mixture of religion, social isolation, familial or spousal psychological abuse, notions of justice and the subservient roles of women in meaningful ways for the first time.

I take the same approach in my ancient history courses. For want of a better term, I am after what good war writers such as Tim

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O'Brien call "heating up the truth" or what film-maker Werner Herzog calls "ecstatic truth".

I began doing this out of frustration that I was not able to communicate adequately to students the power in works of ancient literature or the stark truth in lessons of ancient or modern history. I found that watching a documentary about soldiers in Vietnam and reading letters they had written home helped me and my students realise, in the literal sense, what ancient soldiers were going through.

Likewise, the power that Pericles' funeral oration must have had for the collected grieving people of Athens comes alive if it is read aloud juxtaposed with the magnificent cadences and overview of periods of human history found in Martin Luther King's last speech.

Even the analysis of individual Greek words or rhetorical devices takes on new significance when students see what the stakes were for the Greeks whose words are preserved for us. Here passionate teaching aims at nurturing the capacity for true human sympathy, that is, for experiencing what other human beings experience. You will immediately notice how at odds the criteria of the Holloway award and the passion underlying my teaching are with the philosophy, if we can call it that, of public higher education put forward by the elected officials and political appointees who now control funding, programme initiatives and the overall goals of colleges and universities.

The Holloway criteria reflect the personal outlook of the remarkable individual after whom the award is named. Jean Holloway graduated from the University of Texas at the age of 17 in 1929.

She became at 19, and by her own special petition, the youngest person ever to take and pass the State of Texas Bar examination in order to practise law.

She learnt to fly and served as assistant to the director of the Women's Air Force Service Pilots during the Second World War. She received her PhD in English in 1950 and later worked for racial integration as founding member and newsletter editor of the Austin Commission on Human Relations.

In my opinion, the regents of the public universities of Texas and members of the US Secretary of Education's commission on higher education do not conceive of any students nowadays having the aspirations, sensibilities and social concerns reflected in my bare-bones account of Holloway's life. Their vision and their policies create no place for such an active mind, creative soul and socially conscious spirit.

In my short acceptance speech, I emphasised Holloway's ceaseless intellectual curiosity, her lack of pretension, her concern

MARTIN LUTHER KING/CORBIS

for the real world and her firm belief that the world of the mind is not separate from the real world. What I would say now is that her education and her life were guided by genuine passion.

I said these were rare qualities. As I have just intimated, they will soon be extinct qualities, if higher education in the US continues in the direction of the Spellings commission and Governor Perry's closed-door higher education summit.

Worse yet is that matters are so far gone right now that neither the commission report nor the Governor's summit generated much in the way of critical response. No regent spoke up in defence of faculty or dared to point out the problems that the supposed "breakthrough solutions" would perpetuate or create.

Whether students at our colleges and universities are headed towards professional careers in law, medicine, business, journalism, engineering, library studies, social work, public affairs or natural sciences, or as teachers or professors in the traditional liberal arts, they need to be "nourished", as the Latin verb "*alo*" that underlies the English terms "alumnus" and "alumna" implies.

They are not mere consumers shopping in educational malls. This widespread notion is reprehensible. However, higher education has virtually stopped nurturing the civic, social and moral values of general students, most of whom are at the critical transitional stage into adult citizenship, what the ancient Greeks called the "*ephebic*" stage.

It is hardly any cause for wonder that government officials who have gone through our educational shopping malls make political decisions that show no understanding of the lessons of human history or violate basic decencies within human culture. They have been trained as what Aristotle calls "animate tools".

During my entire formal education at a Jesuit high school and college and a large state university graduate programme, no one ever discussed with me how much money I would potentially earn by studying one discipline or another.

My love of learning, instilled by dedicated teachers in grade school, high school and college, was so strong and deep that I always lived very frugally to have the most precious commodity any human being can have: time.

We forget that the words "scholar" and "scholarship" come from the Greek word

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"*skholē*", meaning "leisure time". Our word "study" (Latin *studium*, Greek *spoudē*) has the fundamental meaning of zeal or passionate interest. We now use the word "zealous" mostly as a pejorative. It is to me an ignorant decision on the part of students and their parents for students to work part time to afford creature-comfort luxuries such as cars or televisions or extra spending money they could do without.

They will never, I tell them when and if I have the chance, have the time and the cultural and intellectual riches of a university at their disposal in the same way again.

Yet adults who should know better, including regents and high-ranking elected officials and political appointees, define the value of education in pure dollar terms and encourage students to view themselves as economic agents and their educations as economic tickets. At the same time they ignore the lesson of the Acton School featured at the Governor's summit. It fully funded higher education for all its students, permitting students to concentrate on their studies.

Sadly, other countries of the world now believe that the failing American model of ever-decreasing public funding for state universities is the one to follow.

The irony is that the Acton School also has an extremely low student-to-faculty ratio. Students thus get the close contact with professors that they need and deserve. Contrast UT Austin's 19-to-1 ratio. In an upper division ancient history course, emphasising primary evidence and historiographical methods, I regularly teach 60 or more students when ideally I should have no more than 20.

Some of the new freshman courses at UT Austin will have hundreds of students with professors performing as if on the internet. Students are being short-changed, and they do not even know what they are missing.

The ancient Greeks had another important social value, *aidos*, the shame that restrains individuals from doing something detrimental to society or to their own standing and roles within society. The late 8th-century BC Greek poet Hesiod, when he wanted to darken his own apocalyptic view of the age in which he lived, sang that *aidos* and *nemesis* (divine retribution) had fled the Earth together.

When I look at what public higher education in the US once was and what it has become, I think of this Hesiodic image. I am grateful for the pockets here and there where dedicated, passionate professors and students still feel shame and still fear the retribution that will come to them at the end of their lives if they see that they have neglected what is truly meaningful to themselves and their fellow human beings, and truly of service to society. ●

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