IN PRAISE OF WORLD CLASS TEACHING

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I have observed hundreds of teachers teaching in all sorts of classrooms in several different countries on four of the earth's continents. I have taught hundreds of teachers to teach in Asia, Africa, North America, South America and the Caribbean. It is claimed that I have taught and observed in more classrooms in China than any other foreigner. I have sat on numerous panels, boards and committees that evaluate teachers and teaching. I have seen good teaching, some so good I cried for the joy, beauty and wonder of it, and I have seen bad teaching, some so bad I cried for the wasted lives and crushed spirits of the students.

Most of the teachers I have observed were good, some were excellent, but only a select few are what I would call "world class." World class teachers go beyond being excellent practitioners and dedicated professionals. They combine knowledge, skill, love and service in a way that leaves me awestruck. They perform with dignity, grace, grandeur, polish and refinement that are worthy of any world class individual, whether in the arts, athletics or elsewhere. When I see world class teaching--teaching that would stand up in any world competition--I am moved to tears.

Watching world class teachers is like watching world class skaters or gymnasts. I marvel and thrill as they elegantly and effortlessly do astounding turns. Watching world class teachers is like listening to world class musicians. The tones, rhythms, and melodies transport the soul to another realm. A world class teacher like a world class musician can bring rapture, ecstasy and life. Both can feed the soul and spirit as well as the mind and ear. They provide a ladder by which we are called to a higher realm, to our higher selves. Art and teaching at this level are worship, and have a wonderful sway and effect on those blessed to partake of it.

But the calling and task of the teacher are different from that of the athlete or artist. Teachers must perform every day in changing and challenging circumstances. Because teachers interact with and respond to other human lives that are changing from moment to moment and day to day, their work is especially demanding. The ever-changing instrument upon which the teacher must play may produce a flat when it should be a sharp. Teachers have to make split moment decisions--whether to keep the double flip or not, whether to do a move now or later, how to recover from a slip. The judges--the students, parents, administrators and colleagues--are ever vigilant, and may be lenient or harsh. Is it better to do an easy piece perfectly, or a difficult and risky one imperfectly?

I have personally known the 1995-96 and the 1996-97 Michigan Teachers of the Year. They are from Marquette, a small college town on the shores of Lake Superior in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I have worked with them over the years, have been in their classrooms and have seen them teach. I know of their qualities as teachers. Not only does watching them teach literally move me to tears, I cannot even talk or think about what they do in the classroom without being affected, in the same way I can be stirred by beautiful art or an extraordinary performance. I mentioned these two teachers because they have already been officially designated as outstanding teachers and my praise should do them no further harm, but there are dozens of others who have a similar affect on me.

If there was such a thing as an Olympics for teachers, I could nominate teachers from all over the world. Most of them are not recognized beyond their immediate communities for their contributions to our world. Some of them are not even recognized in their own communities. Like an opera among those who do not understand or appreciate it, the daily world class performances of excellent teachers in their classrooms are misunderstood and depreciated. When an athlete or artist does something especially well, they can stand triumphantly in the middle of the cheering crowds, their arms outstretched to the heavens, their faces beaming with the ecstasy of their accomplishment. We celebrate with and for them. All their work, dedication and practice have culminated in that moment of triumph.

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for them? Who recognizes all their work, dedication and practice?

I am honored and proud to be associated with the outstanding teachers I have known. They are an inspiration to me. I hope some of what they have will rub off on me so I can rub it off on my students so they may someday become worthy of being called "world class."