

LIFE LESSONS FROM ATYPICAL TEACHERS

By Michael A. Schuler

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GLEANINGS FROM CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

From Carlos Casteneda's *The Fire From Within*

(According to the Yaqui Indian teacher Don Juan) the attainment of true warriorship requires the development of five inner attributes: control, discipline, forbearance, timing and will... And there is a sixth element, which pertains to the outside world and is called the "petty tyrant."

A petty tyrant is a tormenter...someone who either holds the power of life and death over warriors or simply annoys them to distraction. The petty tyrant is the outside element, the one we cannot control and the element that is perhaps the most important of them all. My own teacher used to say that the warrior who stumbles upon a petty tyrant is a lucky one. He meant that you're fortunate if you come upon one in your path, because if you don't, you have to go out and look for one.

Think, for instance, of La Gorda... She is an acting, small-fry petty tyrant. She annoys you to pieces and makes you rage. She even slaps you. With all that she is teaching you detachment... You see, nothing can temper the spirit of a warrior as much as the challenge of dealing with impossible people in positions of power. Only under those conditions can warriors acquire the sobriety and serenity to stand the pressure of the unknowable and the unpredictable.

From Tara Brach's, *Radical Acceptance*

One of my favorite stories of the Buddha shows the power of a wakeful and friendly heart. On the morning of Buddha's enlightenment Mara, the fearsome demon who symbolizes the shadow-side of human nature, fled in defeat and disarray. In Sanskrit "Mara" means "delusion" - that craving and fear that obscure our enlightened nature.

But it seems that he was only temporarily discouraged. Even after the Buddha had embarked on his teaching career and become a revered figure throughout Indian, Mara continued to make unexpected appearances. Instead of driving him away, however, the Buddha would calmly acknowledge the demon's presence saying, "I see you, Mara."

He would then invite him for tea and serve him as an honored guest.

Offering Mara a cushion so that he could sit comfortably, the Buddha would fill two earthen cups with tea and place them on a low table between them. Mara would stay for awhile and then go, but throughout, the Buddha remained free and undisturbed.

You see, when Mara visits us in the form of troubling emotions or fearsome stories, we can say, "I see you Mara," and clearly recognize the craving and fear that persists in each human heart. The objective is to see what is true and to hold what is seen with kindness...

Our habit of being a fair-weather friend to ourselves - of pushing away or ignoring whatever darkness we can - is deeply entrenched... We truly befriend ourselves when, rather than resisting our experience, we open our hearts and willingly invite Mara to tea.

** REFLECTIONS **

Two of the most notable figures in the literature of the Old Testament are **David** and his son, **Solomon**, who succeeded him on the throne of Israel.

David, it is said, was favored by God and divinely guided to fulfill his destiny. A courageous and determined warrior who defeated the Philistine giant, Goliath, he survived repeated attempts on his life by his enemies and eventually came to preside over a unified and powerful empire.

One of David's most difficult challenges was learning to manage **Saul**, the king who admired this young warrior but who also was jealous of his popularity and feared **David** as a rival for his throne. Saul was David's "**petty tyrant**" and the younger man ultimately prevailed because he was able to hone and to practice the warrior skills of control, discipline, forbearance, timing and will identified by the Indian teacher **Don Juan**. Saul's fickle personality, his hot and cold temperament, tested **David**, helped him become more astute about human behavior and more effective as a leader. A threat to David, **Saul** was also an unlikely gift.

Now, as **David** himself grew older and accumulated ever-greater power and prestige, his own openness to be taught and to learn diminished. Blinded by his desire and ambition, **David** stole the wife of one of his most reliable and noble warriors (Uriah) and then arranged for the cuckolded husband to be killed in battle. That woman was, you may remember, a famous beauty named **Bathsheba**. His own

sense of self-importance, and unwillingness to heed sound advice, led to **David's** fall from grace.

The apple, as the old saying goes, does not fall far from the tree. After **David's** passing, his son **Solomon** assumed the throne. The Bible describes him, too, as well-favored by God. The Lord had "Given Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure...that surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East and all the people of Egypt." His "largeness of mind was like the sand on the seashore," Scriptures say.

But despite his acuity, his breadth of knowledge and uncanny powers of judgment, **Solomon**, too, eventually was done-in by ego, the importance he ascribed to himself. As tribute from conquered peoples poured in, as his own harem grew to over 700 women, this wisest of the wise acted with increasing arrogance and impunity and (as the Bible puts it) "did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." **Solomon's** enemies multiplied and by the end of his reign, Israel's glory days were over. They had lasted less than a century.

Clearly, one of the key elements of life satisfaction and success is an ongoing willingness to receive instruction, not just by the most obvious sources, but from people and places we'd rather push away or ignore. As **Polly Berends** puts it,

Everything that happens to you is your teacher. The secret is to sit at the feet of your life and be taught. This means being constantly alert and throwing out pride.

Some of my most valuable teachers didn't provide much in the way of concrete information or theoretical understanding. Rather, they've helped me to gain deeper insight into myself and what I need to consider if I am to lead a more conscious, conscientious and constructive life. The most advantageous of my teachers probably weren't aware they were performing this role. The teaching was often subtle, and often took time to sink in.

"Walking in the company of three, the Chinese sage **Confucius** once said, "I can always find a teacher among them - one, at least, will have something to teach me." The wisdom **Confucius** possessed, the poise with which he lived, the creativity of thought he exhibited were not inborn and not merely the fruit of formal study. What made him so exceptional was a streak of humility that permitted

Confucius, without embarrassment, to shift from being the bearer to the recipient of wisdom at any given moment.

A traditional story about **Confucius** underscores this point. One day the sage was walking along, lost in thought, when he heard two children arguing. Stopping, he inquired as to the nature of their disagreement.

Recognizing the great philosopher, the children were eager to share their problem. One child thought that the sun was closer to the earth in the morning and farther away at midday. The other thought just the opposite - that the sun was closer at noon than in the morning.

Confucius asked the first child to justify his thesis, and the young man replied, "When the sun comes up in the morning, it looks huge - big like a red dinner plate. At noon it's small, like a saucer, so it must be farther away."

Turning to the second child, **Confucius** asked, "Why do you disagree?"

"Because," the child answered, "When the sun comes up in the morning it is very cool; but then the temperature rises and by noon it is quite warm. So the sun must be closer in that part of the day."

With this the children stopped talking and looked to the venerable elder to choose the best answer. **Confucius** stroked his chin, wrinkled his brow, and after several long moments he smiled and said, "You know...I'm going to have to study up on that because I don't know which of you is right."

At which reply the **children** laughed merrily at him and said, "Whoever said you were such a wise guy?"

Now, someone of **Confucius'** stature might have pretended to know the answer in order to protect his reputation and impress those children. But he didn't do that. By posing a question he couldn't resolve, the children in this instance became agents of his own further education, and **Confucius** welcomed that.

"The master," **William Segel** says, "doesn't want to deceive or impress people... If the master is trying to live her life as honestly and intentionally as she can, in that way she can truly help others."

In recalling some of the atypical teachers with whom I've had the good fortune to commune I think first of a Lutheran minister who supervised my internship as a prison chaplain in the mid-seventies. At the end of every week, for three months, we met one-on-one to review and process my interactions with the inmates. During those sessions **Pastor Nick** sat with his feet propped up on his desk

listening to me describe my work. He rarely offered any comment, withholding his own perspective so that I would be forced to wrestle with my thoughts, to make whatever sense I could of my ministry in that difficult environment. At times our sessions lapsed into long periods of silence. To be honest, I don't remember **Pastor Nick** ever offering a single concrete lesson in chaplaincy. More of a Zen Master than a Lutheran, he forced me to dig deeper, trust my intuition and to come up with my own answers.

During seminary I worked with another fellow, a semi-retired Unitarian Universalist minister, on issues related to migrant and seasonal workers. **Howard** was a small, stooped man whose weathered features betrayed years of exposure to the hot sun of California's central valley. In his retirement, he had devoted himself to assisting **Cesar Chavez** and the United Farm Workers Union in their struggle for social and economic justice. Under **Howard's** tutelage, I spent many hours leafleting in front of grocery stores, marching in demonstrations, standing with Latino farmhands on union picket lines - as well as working with **Trina** to prepare thousands of pieces of bulk-mail pamphlets and flyers.

Howard, too, was not much of an instructor, but through his demeanor, his quiet determination, his patience he convincingly demonstrated to me the power of gentleness. He was, to borrow the title of another well-known movie, a "little big man."

And for a few years I, too, had to cope with a petty tyrant. A laywoman who unexpectedly became the moderator of a church I previously served, she seemed determined to place me under her thumb. Despite the growth and financial stability that had been achieved in the years I'd served that church, she struck me as a fault-finder and an agitator. For better than two years she kept me off-balance and uneasy. And, although other members of the congregation expressed sympathy for my predicament, they chose not to get involved.

That was twenty years ago. I left that church satisfied with the progress that had been made, but also with significant regret because I just hadn't been able to change the terms and conditions of that problematic relationship. Later, however, I came to see this failure as perhaps the most instructive episode in my professional life - a time when I was confronted with my own ineptitude and did eventually recognize the value of warrior traits like forbearance, discipline and timing.

Dealing with a petty tyrant can be a deflating experience, but that church moderator reminded me of the skills a mature minister must possess and that I, at the age of 35, had not yet developed. The gift of her opposition is one reason I'm still in this racket two decades later.

Now, my petty tyrant inadvertently helped me to become a more effective practitioner of ministry. In other instances, such a person might push us out of an ill-chosen career or lifestyle into one for which we are much better suited.

James McNeill Whistler became one of 19th century America's most celebrated painters, but that was not the vocation his parents wanted for him. Designated for a career in the military, Whistler was sent to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. There he enrolled in an engineering course in which one of the first assignments was to draw a bridge. **Whistler** drew a romantic stone arch, complete with grassy banks and two small children fishing from it. "Get those children off that bridge," the **instructor** told him. "This is supposed to be an engineering exercise!"

So in his next drawing, **Whistler** got the children off the bridge. He resubmitted his work, with the children now positioned on the river-bank, fishing poles still in hand. "I told you to remove those children," the instructor thundered. "Get them completely out of the picture."

Challenged by this "petty tyrant," the irrepressibly creative young artist came up with a unique solution. His third drawing had indeed taken the children completely out of the picture. But on the riverbank where they had stood, **Whistler** added two small tombstones. It would not be long before he said good-bye to West Point and began serious study of the fine arts.

When our estimation of teachers and teaching is too restrictive we cannot take full advantage of our opportunities to learn. We can all recall educators who were inspirational, encouraging, who commended our efforts and with whom we enjoyed a good rapport. But many of life's most important lessons come through exposure to people and situations that cause discomfort and create resistance. The people who teach us the most about ourselves, and who give us the capacity to meet life's demands, aren't necessarily going to be obliging or likeable.

Take the tendency most of us have toward "negative projection." We have a disagreeable encounter with someone

and conclude that certain flaws in that person's personality make him or her difficult to deal with. Having made that judgment we then have a choice: we can avoid this individual in the future or we can step back and ask ourselves, "Why does he or she push my buttons? Is there anything in my makeup that might contribute to this friction?"

In the first instance, the person is dismissed as an enemy; in the second, he or she becomes our teacher, helping us identify aspects of our own self that we ought to attend to. As Jungian therapist **Marion Woodman** observes: "When you find something in another person really annoying, that quality likely also exists in you, but you don't know it." We become wiser and more self-aware when, like **The Buddha**, we invite **Mara** to tea; when we treat our antagonists as potential sources of fresh insight.

In an increasingly interconnected and pluralistic world, the importance of making this shift cannot be underestimated. Recent studies show that throughout the planet IQ's are rising by an average of three points per decade. People are getting smarter but, as Yale psychologist **Robert Sternberg** remarks, "we aren't necessarily becoming better or wiser people.

Sternberg attributes this gap between intelligence and wisdom to a "cognitive stance that permanently devalues the hated." In other words, once we have identified an individual or group as "the enemy," we no longer take into account the interests and values they hold. Whatever they might think or believe is *ipso facto* invalid. In a polarized world, in other words, the Russians, the Muslims and the Cubans have absolutely nothing to teach us.

And this gets to the very reason I consider myself a "liberal" -- because the liberal spirit, the liberal imagination is open-minded, susceptible to being taught, receptive even to unpleasant truths. For me, liberalism is not so much a political position as a conviction that there is always something to be gained in conversation; that it's always appropriate to revisit our assumptions and to reframe our experience; and that it's always helpful to curb our dogmatism. The true liberal is someone who strives to remain "teachable" throughout his or her life. **George Bernard Shaw** said it well:

There are many paths to knowledge already discovered; and no enlightened soul doubts that there are many more waiting to be discovered. Indeed, all paths lead to knowledge, because even the vilest and stupidest

action teaches us something about vileness and stupidity, and may accidentally teach us a good deal more.