

A Conversation about teaching

Jack Kelly



GRANDSON: Grandpa, years and years ago when you were a teacher.

SELF: You mean back when schools had coal stoves and oil lamps, and teachers were so old you would swear their skin would fall off their faces if a strong breeze blew through the classroom.

GRANDSON: My kindergarten teacher had a blister last year, and he let us see him poke a hole in it and all the stuff come squirting out. That's skin, isn't it, Grandpa?

SELF: Yes, but not the same sort of stuff that holds the bones of old teachers together.

GRANDSON: My dad says that you liked being a teacher.

SELF: **It was a great way for me to give things to people.** Things I seemed to have and they seemed to need.

GRANDSON: Like what? Candy? I really like candy, you know?

SELF: Yes, yes, I've been meaning to talk to your mother about that. No, not candy. I used to give them smiles.

GRANDSON: Grandpa, you gave them smiles?

SELF: **Not the regular kind of smiles, but the ones that start at one side of your cheeks and stretch all the way until Tuesday.** I figured that if they were happy and smiling, maybe we could all learn something on the sly.

GRANDSON: You mean they didn't want to learn all about space and pollution and wars and girls and God and and...

SELF: Yes, yes, they wanted to learn about all those things, **but school kept getting in the way of their learning.** Many children seemed to ask questions in their free time and cause trouble during school time.

GRANDSON: I don't do that.

SELF: They were like your baby sister after she's been in her playpen all afternoon and your mother lets her out. She is so eager to explore the house, you just can't stop her.

GRANDSON: She really smells a lot then. Sometimes I watch mum or dad change her diapers. Yuck!

SELF: My students smelled sometimes, too: the little ones from being dirty and messy and the big ones from making mistakes and being embarrassed about them. They were the ones I worried about because the smell was something only they knew about and I could just barely sense. They needed a lot of for-

giving and loving, and occasionally a hug or a pat on the shoulder to tell them that I still cared.

GRANDSON: You loved your students?

SELF: Yes, the kind of love that God gives to each of us, and trusts us to spread around like fertiliser in the garden of life. Only we don't do such a good job of it, do we?

GRANDSON: I try to Grandpa. I love you and mommy and daddy and...

SELF: Yes, I know you do.

GRANDSON: Tell me more about what teaching was like.

SELF: There were things that had to be learned. Some of them were really important. **I tried to help students like what they were doing and see what life was all about.** Sometimes they would tell me when they knew things already, and sometimes they wouldn't. It was like a game for some of them. They were the foxes and I was the hound. I was trying to catch them and make them enjoy being caught.

GRANDSON: I like foxes and hound.

*A thought provoking,
innovative and
challenging presentation
of the enormously
rewarding vocation of the
teacher.*

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SELF: Sometimes I'd never catch hold of them for a whole school year. At the end, they'd come back to me and say that they had enjoyed the game. Really, I'd caught them the first day, only half of the fun was to keep playing. So we kept playing.

GRANDSON: I play on the playground at recess, and I like getting dirty and muddy. Sometimes I'm not very quiet when I go to church.

SELF: I know. You're just a boy and little children should play while the rest of us pray. I tried to teach my students to pray and play at the same time. We'd sometimes go outside in the middle of a snowstorm, just to hear each tiny snowflake as it smashed into the ground and made its statement about creation. The students would say, "I'm cold, Mr. Kelly, you really make us do crazy things!" But they would stay. And they would listen. And they said that they learned that each snowflake, like each of them, had a story to tell and something to say for itself.

GRANDSON: You can really make the snowflakes talk? Dad said you did funny things sometimes.

SELF: But it wasn't all about time spent in the snow. There was pencil and paper and bookwork, too. We would spend a good bit of time following a curriculum.

GRANDSON: What's a curriculum?

SELF: It's kind of like a big bus that takes everyone to one spot, even though some people didn't want to get off there in the first place.

GRANDSON: Oh.

SELF: And principals and superintendents would peek their heads around the doorway and say, "See me in my office when this class is over." And I would report, and tell them what I was doing and why it was important and what the students were learning. And they'd lean back in the chairs behind their desks, adjust their ties, and say something like, "**Well, it sure is different. But the students seem to like you and not too many parents complain, and the priest says some of the students ask him the most unusual questions about Why? and How Come? and Since When?**" The interview would be over and I would go back to my corner of the school and they would go on to the important business of playing their own games.

GRANDSON: More games?

SELF: Their games were different. Sometimes they would spend hours playing Balance the Budget, or that old favourite, Hide When Students Come Looking for Something. **Sometimes their games were silly, but some of them we really wanted to play, only someone else held the pieces, all the cards, and the one die you had to roll if you wanted to move from space to space.**

GRANDSON: Were they selfish?

SELF: Not really. **Sometimes it is just hard to remember to share visions of a school without walls, authority without power, learning without grades, and God's love without obligation.** Some people listened, smiled, and walked away. Some people, or so they told me, tried to do something with the words that I presented to them. It was on those days that I would come home with a spring in my step, and an extra big hug for your father and his sister, and our silly old dog, Baron. We'd go out and have ice cream at

night and imagine playing songs on a blue guitar, when we really knew very little music.

GRANDSON: My dad says you used to sing and dance and tell really bad jokes sometimes.

SELF: When did I ever quit? I do miss school though, now that you get me talking about it. Retirement is fun, but every September when I hear the buzzers start to ring, I get lonely for kids, and chalk, and other teachers to share things with.

GRANDSON: It sounds like an ordinary school.

SELF: It was.

GRANDSON: I start Grade One tomorrow.

SELF: I know, I know. You'll climb hills that will soon turn into mountains. And you'll draw crayon pictures that will be masterpieces for you to explain to all of the world.

GRANDSON: I love you, Grandpa.

SELF: I love you, too, grandson. I love you very, very much.

(Inspired by Dylan Thomas, "A Conversation About Christmas" BBC Radio, 1945.)

