

Spring 3-2017

Dr. William Frank: A Philosopher Bringing Timeless Relevance to Education

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Recommended Citation

Kennedy, Kerry, "Dr. William Frank: A Philosopher Bringing Timeless Relevance to Education" (2017). *Oral History Interview Projects*.
18.

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1 **William A Frank interviewed by Kerry Kennedy. Literal Transcript Revised.**

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3 Kerry: Okay, so it is March 23rd and 3:30pm. We're in Dr. Frank's office. Umm and I just
4 wanted to make sure that I have permission from you to conduct and record the interview to be
5 housed in the University of Dallas Oral History Repository.
6

7 Dr. Frank: Yes, Kerry. You certainly do have my permission to do so.
8

9 K: Thank you. Umm Okay, so do you mind starting off with just giving me a general overview
10 of your background...like, both as a student and then a teacher?
11

12 F: —As a student I did the normal thing. A little bit of preschool, kindergarten all the way
13 through the Ph.D. After a short lived trial in kindergarten I attended first grade St Mary Star of
14 the Sea, a Catholic school in Virginia. It was a very large class. I'm guessing those classes were
15 about forty children or something like that. Actually it was run by the Nashville Dominicans
16 before they were THE Nashville Dominicans. St Mary's was a happy place and I liked being
17 with my friends. After a year in the regional Catholic high school, I finished junior and senior
18 years in public education at Hampton High School. I enjoyed learning there and was a bright
19 enough guy, but it was more the social dimension of things that I think was most formative. My
20 academic predilections were always in the area of mathematics. I confess that literature was a bit
21 of a mystery to me. I hadn't learned to think with it. Which is probably why, at that time ... can I
22 say this? ... I didn't like to read. I surely wasn't ready for college at a place like the University of
23 Dallas!
24

25 K: It's all good.
26

27 F: The first two years of collage I spent at a very small Franciscan seminary called Duns Scotus
28 College, a little outside of Detroit, Michigan. It was a beautiful place. There I became
29 intellectually alive. It was the philosophy and theology and especially the ongoing conversations
30 with the other guys with whom I lived day in and day out. And for some reason, literature finally
31 clicked. It was drama. I especially remember Sophocles, Shakespeare, T. S Eliot and Samuel
32 Becket. After two years, the seminary and I parted, which was probably good for both of us. For
33 the last two years of college I ended up -- which in some ways was a particularly interesting part
34 of my life -- at the home town college called Hampton Institute, which is now is named Hampton
35 University. It was then, and still is now, one of the most successful and prominent of the
36 historically black colleges and universities. I wasn't trying to make a statement, nor did I think of
37 myself as a particularly "liberal" or "progressive" guy. I really didn't think much about it, but it
38 it was in my hometown, and for financial reasons it worked out fine. Educationally, it was
39 actually quite good for my purposes. When I showed up on campus I found out that I was one of
40 ten people who received handsome scholarships because we were white people (chuckles) to
41 integrate the college. I never did know what the reason was behind the initiative, which I'm
42 pretty sure was funded by the Ford Foundation. I was there 1967-1969. Those were fateful times
43 in America. It was the height of the Vietnam War protests and racial tensions were also high.
44 Martin Luther King was assassinated in the Spring of my Junior year. The campus was rife with
45 one sort of protest or another. I spent two years finding out what it was like to be a minority –
46 sort of. However, I would never compare my "*minoritas*" with a true minority status, because as

47 soon as I walked off campus, it changed. But when I was on campus, it was a sometimes
48 uncomfortable two-year experience of self-consciousness. But I had a number of friends,
49 particularly among the Africans and Middle Easterners. Two years after graduation I went on to
50 graduate school. In between I spent two years teaching 5th grade – I'll come back to that. In the
51 Fall of 1971 I began graduate studies in the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of
52 America where I subsequently received my Master of Arts and a Ph.D. in Philosophy. I would
53 say that it was there that I really came of age as a learner. I would never say that I was a slow
54 learner, but I do think that it took me a while to get started. CUA was just right for me, and I was
55 ready for it. Thinking back, I should've been red-shirted as a child. I was always behind,
56 physically for sure and in other areas of development as well. But I finally did catch-up with
57 myself. In my studies at the School of Philosophy I was blessed with professors who were
58 uniformly great teachers and scholars at the height of their profession.

59
60 Long winded, for sure, but this "recitation" pretty much covers my background as a student.

61
62 One of your questions asks, I believe, How it was that I got my first job as a teacher, or
63 something like that.

64
65 K: Yeah, how did you decide to become a teacher?

66
67 F: I didn't. I never decided to become a teacher. I was working right out of college, I had no idea
68 what I wanted to do. I thought maybe I wanted to go into graduate school, but I didn't have the
69 resources so I took a decent little job as a clerk in one of Virginia's ABC (Alcohol Beverage
70 Control) stores. Wine and hard liquor could only be (legally) purchased in these highly regulated
71 state stores. Well, anyway, one day, God only knows why, but Sister Cyrilla Zarek, O.P., who
72 was principal at St Mary Star of Sea, where I and my seven siblings had gone to grade school,
73 caught me as I was coming out of work. It was apparently an accidental meeting, as she was a
74 little late getting to the store before we closed. She knew who I was, though I had only met her
75 once some few month earlier. And as I remember it, she asked me out of nowhere whether I
76 would be willing to teach at St Mary's. They were short a fifth grade teacher. I didn't know what
77 I was going to do in the Fall, so I asked her to give me about three weeks to think about it. One
78 week later she calls and says she's gotta know now. She caught me off guard. I've often
79 wondered whether that was a calculated tactic. I did agree though. For the next two years I was a
80 fifth grade teacher at St Mary Star of the Sea. I always fancied I was a pretty good teacher. I
81 know I was well received. Students liked being in class. You know, I didn't have any education
82 in education. Probably could've used some. But fifth graders are forgiving and the textbooks
83 were good textbooks and that's how you taught in those days.... I took a great deal of liberty in
84 managing my class, and I was given a great deal of liberty. For instance, of an afternoon, maybe
85 once or twice a month, we'd just go out for long walks. The school backed up against a muddy
86 salt water creek that spun off Hampton Roads. It was a lovely place. There was an old bridge
87 over Mill Creek going to Fort Monroe Army Post. We'd walk the bridge half way and climb to a
88 sandbank where we'd collect hermit crabs, sea anemones, snails, and that kind of thing. Another
89 of our outings was to a nearby old soldiers' home – a rest home for veterans. It had lovely trees
90 and gardens. These outings weren't regularly scheduled events; they weren't part of the
91 curriculum. Only our class did such things. There was a lot of serendipity about it. Kids loved it,
92 as you could imagine. They were proud of their outings. Looking back, it seems like a big deal to

93 take thirty 5th graders with just me, the teacher. I don't remember we ever had real misbehavior.
94 We had a rule: they had to go two-by-two and they had to talk about nature or God or what they
95 were seeing or reading. They couldn't be jabbering about television or private, gossipy chit chat.
96 I really appreciated my principal giving me that freedom and extending her trust in me. These
97 adventures made a huge difference in the kid's willingness to work and I worked them pretty
98 hard. But... there was always a good attitude in the classroom.

99
100 Many years later, I look back and I realize I probably didn't do justice to some of the slower
101 students, I was solicitous of them, but I didn't really know what to do... I only had one success
102 that I'm sure of. A little boy named Paul couldn't do long division for the life of him. Good as
103 gold, high energy, bright. But when we got to long division, he just screwed it up all the time.
104 And his mother was so worried about him, she thought he had what we'd call today a learning
105 problem. Well he sort of did. I didn't know anything about learning problems in those days. My
106 family were what we call "normals." And I thought everybody was "a normal." I didn't know
107 what a non-normal was. You always see things from the side of your family experience. Paul's
108 mother asked me if I would tutor him after school. I liked students to do board work. So I had
109 Paul go up to the board – dusty chalk boards in those days – and work a long-division problem;
110 he probably had to go down three or four levels. I couldn't follow his work: he didn't write
111 numbers in straight columns or horizontal lines. His numbers never lined up, and I said, "Paul,
112 why don't you write one number right underneath the other? He'd try and thought he was doing
113 it right. And I realized he couldn't do it. I didn't know why, so I said "okay." Then I got a ruler
114 and I started drawing lines. And I said, "Now put it in there. Each square gets one number." He
115 solved the problem perfectly. So I told his mother he had to use quadrille rule paper for his math.
116 Solved the problem.

117
118 K: Wow.

119
120 F: Now what was his problem? He probably had one, I had no idea. Maybe it was vision or who
121 knows, dyslexia... I have no idea. It was a significant experience for me, one of these moments
122 when you realize: Boy, wasn't he lucky that I saw that? I'm sure now that there must have been
123 other such problems that I didn't see.

124
125 Besides those two years as a 5th grade teacher, I taught high school mathematics for a year when
126 I was in graduate school. I taught in an inner city Washington D.C. Catholic high school called
127 St. Anthony's. It was neighborhood, parish school. White flight had taken hold of the area at the
128 time. The students were African-American, save for five or six white kids. They were all good
129 kids, rambunctious teenagers. I taught mathematics, and was decently successful with the lower
130 level algebra students but with the higher algebra classes, I was not very successful. I never did
131 get control of those classes. I would consider myself a C...C- minus teacher. I would try to
132 blame it on them, but I knew it was me. The kids deserved better. It was a humbling experience.

133
134 K: And then, umm, how did you come about, well, being a professor at UD and then why have
135 you stayed so long? You came in 1986 right?

136
137 F: I did.

138

139 K: Yeah.

140
141 F: Prior to coming to UD, I spent the previous nine years in Atchison, Kansas at Benedictine
142 College, teaching philosophy. During the time I was there the college had fallen into a period of
143 declining of enrollment and loss of identity There were many wonderful things about teaching at
144 Benedictine and living in rural Kansas, but nine years into it, we had five children, and we just
145 couldn't make ends meet. And a young man who was a student in UD's doctoral IPS program
146 wrote me a letter saying that the university's philosophy department was looking for a
147 philosopher with expertise in the history of medieval philosophy and suggested I apply. Things
148 went pretty quickly from there. In August 1986 I found myself teaching Philosophy and the
149 Ethical Life to a class of thirty-six freshmen at 8:00am. The University had just finished a
150 revision of the Core Curriculum, so in fact, this 8:00am class was the very first session of
151 Philosophy and the Ethical Life ever taught at the University of Dallas. And why did I stay? First
152 of all, as a family, we could make a go of it. And secondly, I have always found it an undeserved
153 privilege to teach and to pursue philosophy at UD. It's a function of the character of my
154 colleagues, our seriousness about curriculum, our commitment to teaching, the character of our
155 students and their willingness to think philosophically in the broad sense (not necessarily in the
156 disciplinary sense) of the term. People at the University really do take seriously and personally
157 the University's stated mission. Among the students and the faculty there's a pretty uniform
158 commitment to liberal learning across the various majors and disciplines. I also greatly
159 appreciate the richness of Catholicism in its life and learning. Intellectually, it's a rare place.
160 Here I found an intellectual home.

161
162 K: Umm so how has your teaching impacted your family life? Like how did you decide where to
163 send your kids to school or that kind of thing?

164
165 F: Oh ... starting with my daughter in second grade or so, my wife, Therese, and I used to have,
166 what we called "spring fever." It was always a question: "Where are we going to send the kids
167 next year?" It was tough in Atchison. The Catholic school was adequate academically but
168 socially it was real catty and ...ridden with ideological battles. And...public school system was
169 was troubled with racial problems and we didn't want our kids involved in that. When we came
170 to Irving, the kids were enrolled in Elliot Elementary, a well-run public school, way down south
171 Irving. What made all the difference was the principal who listened to us and placed our
172 daughter and sons with the teacher right for them. Incidentally, that's when I learned how
173 important a principal could be. After two years we went to Rome as a family; it wasn't that
174 lovely Rome campus that you know. In the late 80's the Rome campus was a dump. (laughs) It
175 was a barely converted hotel. In our case we had a converted bathroom – which would have been
176 like a powder room, a very small powder room – as a kitchen, so narrow one person could be in
177 the kitchen at a time. The bathrooms regularly stunk of sewer gas. It was terrible. The place was
178 rat infested. But we lived there for a year and the kids went to the public schools. And mind you,
179 they knew no Italian. The beauty of the surrounding area, the proximity of Rome, and the
180 comradery with colleagues and students more than compensated for the hardships. A funny story
181 about working with the public schools in Rome: Our son Abraham was five years old. He was
182 supposed to go to kindergarten. They said "we don't have any room in kindergarten." "But that's
183 okay," they said, "we'll put him in first grade." So they put him a year too young into the first
184 grade ... because there's no room in kindergarten!

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K: Oh no

F: No, I shouldn't say that. It was very difficult for him in the beginning. We won't go into the details, it was hard, and Therese and I had begun to wonder – what are we doing to this boy. It seems to have worked out in the end. He repeated first grade when we returned to America. In addition to the first grader, we had sons in second and fourth grades, and a daughter in sixth grade. There were no special accommodations made for them. They just studied what the other students studied. The kids were never made to feel dumb or out of it, and in the long run, they learned a lot. We never cared about their grades. Neither did their teachers so long as they could see real effort. When they would come home from school Therese would spend more than a couple of hours every night working at the common table trying to get the content of the day's lessons down. If nothing else, they learned how to learn. At the end of the year, they acquired a decent passive comprehension of Italian, and some facility in speaking, reading, and writing. Back in the States, we eventually enrolled our children in what I'll call a homeschool type consortium that was "going normal." What we now know as Highlands School had just gotten off the ground. It was a pretty chaotic place but blessed with a few talented teachers. Our children learned a lot – all five of them. Now when I look back, I see that that early iteration of Highlands School was like a local primitive incubator for what has become the highly formalized genre of classical education. Let me add that in its current iteration the Highlands is a very different kind of school than what we experienced in its early years. Because we could not afford the tuition at Highlands, my wife taught theology at the high school level and I taught religion to the 5th-8th grades, as well as coached soccer.

K: Yeah. So you'd go back and forth from UD to Highlands for teaching, kind of?

F: Yep.

K: Wow.

F: We stayed there for about five years, I guess. Then we were back to Rome for three years. This time the boys were in junior high school and high school. *Media* and *Liceo*. And again, they went directly into the public school, with nothing but the most elementary tourist quality Italian. Our daughter, Clare, was at this time a freshman at UD. After a hard year-long beginning, things clicked half way through the second year for the boys. In the end they excelled at school in their second and third years.

F: So, you might ask whether we followed a plan in educating our children. Hardly. In our lives ... we always moved forward as a family, and depending upon what the situation was at the time, we figured out what would be best in those circumstances. If there was a grand plan, we didn't know about it. When we were faced with the option either to go to Rome or to stay here and make sure the kids didn't miss a year of school ... we went to Rome. It didn't bother us that the boys might lose a year of school. As it turned out, Kerry, not one of our five children has a high school diploma.

K: Really?

231
232 F: Really ... and every one for a completely different reason. It wasn't our intention to do that;
233 it's just that when they had come to the end of their junior year, each was ready for life's next
234 stage. Our eldest son was an interesting case. He could've stayed in Irving and done senior year
235 or go with us to Rome. He went with us to Rome. What was he going to do there? Who wants
236 the company of an over active idle seventeen year old boy about? We were not going to put him
237 into a high school. It turned out he was able to work at the school where his two brothers were
238 enrolled for the first year. We bartered his work for a very helpful and necessary tuition break.
239 He also did a lot of handy-man work at the campus. He made a little money, but not much.
240 Mainly he just worked for his keep. Needless to say, he was a big help to us as a family. And
241 then when that year was over, he went off to college. He did well enough on his standardized
242 tests. Nobody cared whether he had a high school diploma. When we enrolled our second son in
243 a local Italian high school he had to start high school over at the freshman level, when if in
244 America, he would have gone on into his junior year. He spent three years in a Liceo Linguistico
245 called Ugo Fuscolo in the Castelli hill town of Ariccia. He had wanted badly to go to West Point
246 Military Academy. But here he was at the end of three years, 19 years old and a junior with no
247 extracurricular activities, no leadership posts or anything of that sort to his credit, because they
248 don't do that kind of thing in Italian high schools. And he didn't knock the scores off the top off
249 the SATs – not at all. But what he did have was a rare enough, invaluable experience of
250 persevering in a foreign language and culture till he had made it his own. This was the time when
251 the US Army was revising its way of making war, and especially the small wars where soldiers
252 often have to live and work with people of different cultures. West Point was very happy to
253 enroll him. I assure you, this wasn't in the plan three years earlier. You don't plan those kinds of
254 things. What we have here are instances of one my favorite proverbs: *don't let schooling get in*
255 *the way of education.*

256
257 K: Yeah for sure. Umm what skills do you think, like you just mentioned your son just like, kind
258 of acquired through his experiences, but what skills do you think students should learn in
259 elementary school for them to be prepared for higher education?

260
261 F: Well, I don't think they should prepare for higher education. Does that shock you?

262
263 K: Okay.

264
265 F: I think they should be learning in school, regardless if they're going on for higher education. I
266 don't have a lot of rules and specific required "learning objectives." That said, however, I do
267 believe that by third, fourth, and fifth grade, children should be doing a fair amount of grammar.
268 I'm pretty old- fashioned; I've never seen a better system than diagramming. If there is a better
269 system, God bless you, go use it. I also think children should memorize poetry, famous speeches,
270 and passages from the Bible from third grade all the way through high school. Vocabulary and
271 reading comprehension and of course mathematics are essential. Do I undervalue social studies?
272 No, no, but I am pretty confident that we grossly over-estimate what a child can actually
273 comprehend when we're teaching social studies, including history. Kids don't see things quite
274 the way we do, in terms of time and ages and causality and that sort of thing. Knowing the
275 literature and knowing the stories of the great characters of history and some of the great events -
276 that's important, especially when it comes to American history, if you're in America, Italian

277 history, if you're in Italy. As far as geography is concerned, or other species of social studies,
 278 yes, I think children should actually know where rivers and mountain ranges are and where the
 279 states are. I think that at the elementary and junior high level kids should know about work. I'm
 280 not talking about economics or business in the standard sense of the terms, but I'm talking about,
 281 for instance, how if there's fish processing in southern Virginia, take the class over to the docks
 282 and packing sheds. Or if in Kansas, visit the grain elevators where the farmers bring in their
 283 crops of wheat or milo. In this way kids see work. It's this sort of thing that ought to be at the
 284 foundation of any sort of geography lesson! It's something they'll actually remember. Along a
 285 different line: in my limited experience teaching at the elementary and high school level, I did
 286 not master the art of group work. I didn't try it much either, because I knew I just didn't know
 287 how to do it. But I would do it, now. I'd have students work together in group projects.
 288 Unfortunately, I only learned its virtues at the end of my time at St Mary's Star of the Sea.
 289 Here's the story: the fifth graders wanted to put on a play. It was their idea. I agreed. It was the
 290 5th grade class's project. What I saw was how, for instance, a kid named David from a rough
 291 background who barely passed any of the standard course work, it turned out he was a great
 292 drawer and quite inventive in making things work. And he worked really well with this bright,
 293 shy little sliver of a girl named Crystal who pretty much kept to the periphery of the class. For
 294 the most part, the kids did the casting, with a little light handed help on my part. They chose
 295 well, and it wasn't the prettiest girl or the most popular boy who got the leads. I was surprised at
 296 how free of discipline problems those afternoons were. It was a delight to see the pride they took
 297 when their parents came of an evening. Again I have to say how much I appreciated the
 298 principal's indulgence in allowing us to use the cafeteria as a stage and workshop, and never
 299 worried me over the time "off task" in the classroom. The students learned how to collaborate
 300 with one another and to appreciate one another's gifts and skills. This sort of learning is not
 301 classroom learning which is largely mental and individualistic.

302
 303 Returning to the earlier question about what students should learn, there is something important
 304 almost universally neglected in American education. From at least the third grade all the way
 305 through junior high school, I believe students should do art. I'm not talking about crafts. In my
 306 view they would learn how to draw, they would learn how to paint, they would learn the various
 307 media, and they would learn how to interpret or read fine works of art. Right now they do a
 308 marvelous job of it at Great Hearts in Irving. This kind of learning enlivens history, it enlivens
 309 English, and it's a great equalizer among students. There's visual intelligence, not just oral,
 310 literary, and mathematical intelligence. Our neglect of visual intelligence is shameful.
 311 Developing facility in the arts should not be considered an extra, not a dispensable luxury.
 312 America does itself a great disservice when we don't teach art as part of our student's regular
 313 curriculum. And it should be done by people who are artists, by people who actually know what
 314 it is to make art, not just take some kind of a lesson plan out of a crafts manual to make
 315 something for mom on Mother's Day or an ornament for the Christmas tree. These are sweet
 316 things and carry forward treasured memories. But they are not art.

317
 318 K: Shifting gears a little bit. I remember you talking about authority, in connection with *Emile*.
 319 Do you think the um...What is the role of authority especially as the teacher and do you think
 320 that's been kind of undermined with the whole student-centered learning craze that's been going
 321 on?
 322

323 F: Yes, I think every teacher should have a very clear sense of what authority is, and what her
 324 authority is, and how authority is at work in the classroom. It's necessary, not optional. So, what
 325 is authority? It's a particular kind of relationship between two people. Or it could be between a
 326 person and a group, or one group and another. In this relationship one person or group is superior
 327 to the other, in terms of knowledge or judgment. And the other group, which is the inferior part
 328 of the pair, will actually need or want that knowledge or power of judgment. And so in addition
 329 to the hierarchical relationship of superior and inferior parties ... let me interrupt myself here –
 330 the language or the idea that one person is genuinely inferior or superior to another very often
 331 upsets people, which is absurd. In the learning situation, the child just *is* inferior to a teacher"--
 332 well for God's sakes of course she is, or he is. I mean they "don't know nothing," as one of my
 333 friends likes to put it. But the teacher does! And kids want to know what she knows and what she
 334 can do. They wouldn't be in school if they didn't. Or, at least, somebody wants them to know it.
 335 But, to get back to what authority is: in addition to hierarchy, there also has to be a kind of
 336 mutuality, there has to be a sense of a kind of interpersonal bond, a kind of trust on the part of
 337 the student, and a genuine caring on the part of the teacher. Youth trusts in the elder, and the
 338 elder has, I don't want to overstate it, but kind of abiding care for this young one, a belief that
 339 what I, the elder, teach is good for you, the youngster, to know. It's part of ordinary dynamic of
 340 growing up. The complementarity of trusting and caring is what I mean by mutuality. It helps to
 341 think of the elder's exercise of authority as a matter of witnessing. I get this idea from a
 342 wonderful philosopher and great teacher named Yves Simon in his little book entitled, *A General*
 343 *Theory of Authority*. When a teacher's teaching it's like her saying "I am going to show you what
 344 I know, and you're going to make the most of it. And if I didn't tell you, or the book didn't tell
 345 you, or you weren't allowed to ask anybody who knew, you would hardly learn anything in this
 346 world." Of course, the "telling" and the "showing" of teaching, as you've learned in the
 347 classroom and experienced in your practicum, can be a pretty sophisticated process. The main
 348 idea, though, is that we learn from the learning and the intelligence of others – it's just the way it
 349 is. The teacher or elder's authority-at-work is the orderly way of appreciating that interpersonal
 350 exchange.

351
 352 You will remember from our unit on authority in the Philosophy of Education that there are
 353 certain practical rules when we are acting with authority in the classroom. The teacher has to
 354 maintain in the classroom an atmosphere, a real sense of "we're here to learn" In my teaching I
 355 typically have some fun or humor -- always did ... in grade school too. And sometimes it might
 356 get to the point of clowning, but everybody knew that that was a break or pause ... and then we
 357 would get back to business. So there has to be a sense of serious business going on, that we're
 358 doing something that's important. It doesn't have to be hard, it doesn't have to be onerous, but it
 359 does have to be serious. A second rule is to keep in mind that your having authority does not
 360 repose in you, the teacher, because you're older or have the learned academic degree or state
 361 certification or because you are the one in front of the classroom. You have authority because
 362 you have mastery of a subject area; you really possess that which you are going to witness. And
 363 more importantly, you have what the child and his parents are trusting in you to develop or pass
 364 on to the child. And that means, not just you have the information or knowledge – that's
 365 necessary, but nowhere near enough. You have authority because you know how your student
 366 will learn, you work with the order of learning and can identify the roadblocks to understanding,
 367 and devise ways for the student to overcome them. All this is mostly a matter of knowing your
 368 subject matter and knowing your students. Which brings us to the third rule: authority is acquired

369 with experience, which means observing and cogitating or munching over your successes and
370 failures. I have a couple of more points about authority. You have to appear to be a person in
371 authority. There's a modicum of deportment or conduct or dress that indicates that you are a
372 person who has authority. It's a level of dress, grooming, and comportment that says you deserve
373 the students' attention. So, I want to insist that authority is something which requires certain
374 forms of external manifestation. In America, things like the teacher's diction and dress can
375 communicate an air of authority. Of course, someone can dress well and speak correct English
376 with a bit of flair and can still be as dull as a fence post and a terrible teacher. Another important
377 point is that authority on the elder's side is complemented by obedience on the learner's side.
378 And obedience is not at all a matter of being coerced; it's not being punished. In obedience, you
379 willfully, intentionally do what somebody else bids you or asks you to do with the presumption
380 that it's a good thing to do that. Except for acting on the basis of obedience, why would you do
381 it? You don't know whether it's good for you. How do you know this work is going to make you
382 learn? How do you know that all this practicing is going to result in that skill? How could you
383 possibly know that? So you have to trust, and that trusting is another name for obedience.

384
385 Still another point that I like to emphasize – which I also learned from Ives Simon –is that a
386 teacher's authority is always *substitutional*. In other words, you are really successful when the
387 student doesn't need you anymore. The student may need another teacher, but you've taught him
388 all that you can teach him, or all that's appropriate for you to teach him. And sometimes,
389 curiously, a student can know or grasp something better than a teacher; that's probably not the
390 case in third or fourth grade, but it can be that way in middle school, high school, college. So it's
391 important to see that authority is something on loan. The teacher is ultimately meant to disappear
392 as a working authority in the lives of her students. A final rule: a teacher should maintain a
393 fundamental difference or distance between herself and her students. I think it's a mistake to
394 speak of one's students as friend or as family. This doesn't mean you shouldn't be empathetic
395 and sympathetic. It doesn't mean you don't like them, that you don't care for them, and it doesn't
396 mean that when it's all over your former students can't be friends. One good reason we shouldn't
397 think of our students as friends is because you have to correct them, and sometimes correction
398 can be hard to take. Friends don't often correct friends that much, and then only very gently, and
399 half the time they do the bad things together (laughs).

400
401 A last idea regarding authority. I think it fair to say that people tend to be suspicious of authority.
402 Authority has a bad name, but it's because we confuse it with power or coercion, just the same
403 way we confuse correction with punishment. When teachers correct a paper, sometimes they can
404 say things which are hurtful or it can appear hurtful because there are too many red marks, or
405 because, you know, "a 70% ! my dad won't accept this." But a correction is a correction, and
406 there are deft ways and pretty blunt ways to make corrections. Still, correction is not punishment.
407 You can't really expect a child to make that distinction easily because, while they are in the
408 midst of intellectual formation, they're under moral formation as well. And in the business of
409 moral formation, punishment's a good thing when there's wrong, but when there's error,
410 punishment is not a good thing: correction is needed. So those confusions between authority and
411 coercion and between correction and punishment, it's just bad thinking. And that bad thinking
412 can have unhappy effects on how you conceive of your work in education.

413

414 K: So do you think education is moving towards a more positive direction or a more negative
415 direction? And if you think it's negative, what would you advocate for at this point?
416

417 F: Well, I don't think there's ever been an age in the world that I've ever read about, where the
418 elders didn't think education isn't now what it used to be. I've seen it in my own life, I've seen it
419 in my own attitudes towards things, ... though I fancy I haven't been bitten by it so very much.
420 So, the important contrast to me is not whether educational systems are tagged as classical or
421 progressive. What matters is whether the content and the skills that are being transmitted
422 genuinely ennoble and enable the student for wonder, honest work, friendship, piety, service,
423 love. And no multiple-choice test can tell you that, no true-and-false test can tell you that. No
424 formulaic essay can tell you that. My thought is, kids spend too much time in school. They spend
425 too little time in activities that are, you know, part of everyday life, that is, where you're learning
426 by involvement in human affairs. In situations where you learn how to get along with people,
427 you learn how to be productive. I'm not sure about it -- you would answer this better than me --
428 but my impression is, from teaching teenage kids over at St. Luke's in south Irving, that unless
429 their dad has a job, a workplace, it's very hard for kids to get jobs when they're 14, 15, 16. My
430 neighborhood hasn't had paperboys in I don't know how long. Adults have all the lawn jobs.
431 There just aren't that many jobs where there is genuine responsibility, where there is the natural
432 mixing of different classes of people, where there is the exchange of goods and services, and
433 where you meet sourpusses, you meet happy people, and you meet people who aren't your
434 chosen friends ... on a regular basis. That's increasingly not there for our kids. And to me that is
435 a loss, of what should I call it, a "learning situation" that I don't think schools, whether classical
436 or progressive, can provide. And I don't think more schooling or more studies compensate. The
437 only things that comes somewhat close are extracurricular activities, and I don't mean the "semi-
438 professional" high school sports programs. Drama is often quite good, debating is good, public
439 speaking is good ... I'm sure they can have dance teams, music, those sorts of things are really
440 good I think. What I have in mind are activities where youth take responsibility for playing a part
441 in a whole. They practice without grades. They perform and excel without grades. In these
442 activities middle school and high school kids are acknowledged, recognized for their excellences
443 which go beyond the sort of inert intellectual capabilities that standardized tests such as SAT or
444 ACT measure. I've known teachers in progressive schools that actually demand their students to
445 memorize poetry, demand they learned grammar, and the kids come out just fine from that. And
446 I've known kids in classical education that come out knowing all kinds of stuff, but they really
447 don't know anything, you know. They've never learned how to think, they forget very soon what
448 they learned because it's just been informational. My genuine impression is that some of the
449 charter schools or new schools of classical education are trying to find that proper blend. But in
450 both the regular public schools and in charter schools such as, for instance, Great Hearts in
451 Irving, I think teachers are way over-worked. A teacher needs to have time to reflect on their
452 students and their work. Teachers seem overwhelmed with quantities of student work and
453 formulaic assessments. Teaching at its best, when it is most authentic, requires that the teacher
454 knows her kids. You remember in our class when we talked about the difference between a
455 person and an individual? I think that notion that Maritain has that the teacher has to pay
456 attention to the gaze of the student, is really important. And if we're so busy that we can't do
457 that, then we've lost our way.

458
459 K: Yeah.

460
461 F: Well, way too much is put on these individuating characteristics: their learning style, their
462 language, their background, their socioeconomic group, what their future's going to look like and
463 all that, and as important as those things are, the child himself is a person and he has to "own"
464 those qualities and has to fashion a way of living within those circumstances which are typically
465 not of his own making. Teachers and elders can't tell him how to do that; it's not a curriculum
466 item or a "learning objective." But you can get to know the kid as somebody who is a real
467 person, and you get this sense – it's a metaphor -- that you're walking with him: "You'll be
468 alright, you'll be just fine. I trust you. You can figure that out." And people don't really figure
469 these things out all by themselves; they figure it out working with other people. And we know to
470 never underestimate the power of personal example.

471
472 There are far too many of our youth that our schools have let down. There are areas where it is
473 very bad. It's just disgracefully bad. And we all know where those schools and neighborhoods
474 are, we teachers know where those place are, the principals know where they are, the parents
475 know where they are, and the kids know where they are. The political people, the people in
476 charge, the people who run the unions, maybe they won't admit it, but they know it too. The
477 profound neglect our youth at the periphery of society is immoral beyond criminal.

478
479 I want to temper my criticism of the schools. Schools and teachers are asked to do too much.
480 There's an attitude – well, more than an attitude, but an immediate social response: If there's a
481 problem in America, let the schools fix it. Put the burden on the teachers. Maybe it's the best
482 place. But try this on for a thought-experiment. Let's grant that if kids need a meal, then we send
483 them to the fire departments. If kids need medicine, send them to the libraries. If they need day
484 care, send them to the...I don't know...police departments, they're open all the time. Send them
485 to the rec centers. Of course not, that would be absurd! So, why are we so ready to have the
486 schools and its teachers pick up all the social slack You have to wonder, if you just look at it
487 objectively, what's happening? What goes on? The school is not the family. Raising children is a
488 wholly different order of things than schooling them. Raising children is the business of parents.
489 And if kids don't have parents – and many don't -- if they're neglected, abandoned, even in their
490 own homes – then the local, state, and national authorities and the churches should deal with the
491 problem at its source. As a society we can't abandon the kids, I understand that, but just because
492 the schools take on the task of social triage, such a society-wide response does almost nothing to
493 stem the steady currents of neglect at its sources. In my generation, it is the dehumanizing and
494 the neglect of our children by our politicians and our social services and maybe even our
495 churches that has overburdened the institutions of education. In all this discussion there's a
496 profound confusion: we confuse education with schooling. The responsibility for education is
497 widely distributed across many segments of society. Schools are just one. But we act as though
498 schools should bear all the responsibility.... I know I got off your question about the relative
499 merits of systems of classical and progressive education.

500
501 K: Okay, we probably have time for one more question, but well I'm going to combine two
502 questions, but after all your years of teaching, what do you think is the most important thing you
503 have learned as a teacher, and then what advice would you give to a new teacher such as myself?

504

505 F: Hmm. You know, I wish I could answer your question well. Perhaps one piece of advice I
506 would offer to a new teacher would be that for the most part, you won't know whether teaching
507 is really your calling in your first, or your second, or maybe even in your third year. You can be
508 well received, but turn out, in the long run, not to be really a good teacher. Perhaps you're just
509 lucky because of the students you've had, or maybe you've had a rush of energy or enthusiasm at
510 the beginning, but after a year or two you come to see your heart's not really in it. Or maybe the
511 experience was just the opposite for you. You could be a teacher who really had a hard time
512 relating to students at the beginning of your career, or you are one who has overambitious lesson
513 plans ---it could be two years, even three before you work that out, but you won't know until
514 you've had a chance to see how things work out over a fair amount of time with different classes
515 of students, and you've had the time for your heart for the students to temper your early
516 unrealistic vision of the realities of learning. A second piece of advice would be: work for a
517 good principal, a principal who cares for the students by caring for her teachers. Work for a good
518 principal. That's easy to say, but it's hard to do. But if you do work under a bad principal try to
519 get out of there as soon as possible, because it'll just be hell. A final piece of advice: always try
520 to find every other day, or every third day, some way for a genuine, personal interchange with
521 the student; it need not have anything to do with mathematics or English, or whatever the subject
522 of the day is. I remember my 5th grade teacher who would come by while I was working on some
523 assignment, she'd put her hand on my shoulder and say "Billy, how are things at the home
524 front?" I don't know why she said that, but I always thought she cared for me as a kid. To this
525 day, I remember that occasion and the welcoming atmosphere of her classroom. There's no end
526 to the ways to offer that "personal gaze." Notice a kid's shirt: "Looks to me like you like
527 baseball. Who's your favorite team?" Just something, every other day, every third day, once a
528 week – let the kids know that you care for them as a person, and I can assure you that that
529 personal care will translate into caring for them as learners. I'll leave you with those three
530 remarks. You've had a good education, and I'm sure that it'll come to your aid with the bit of
531 wisdom you need when the occasion calls for it.

532
533 K: Thank you.