I Do Not Know How to Teach

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> As a teacher, what Derrida teaches is that without an unteachable, we cannot teach and are not teachers.
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> —Thomas Dutoit (2002, np)

> English has no word that conjoins learning and not learning, or that signifies the negativity that learning also contains.
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> —Deborah P. Britzman (2006, 3)

Although I have had the extraordinary privilege of teaching in four universities in two countries over the course of almost 40 years, I do not know how to teach. Hand on my heart, hand on my stupid heart, *I do not know how to teach*. I have taught classes on subjects ranging from British Romantic literature to Continental Philosophy, and from Critical Animal Studies to the history of HIV/AIDS activism. I have offered courses in programs in different academic units, including English and Cultural Studies, Health Studies, and Arts and Science. My students have honored me with undergraduate and graduate teaching awards. But I do not know how to teach. I say this with entirely unwarranted confidence, since it is not at all clear how or why I would *know* that I do not

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know how to teach, much less claim, as I am here, to be in a position to teach that. In other words, and, it appears, there will always only be other words, of all the things that I do not know it seems passing strange to think that not knowing how to teach is one. As someone who often identifies as a teacher, then, I am caught in a performative contradiction, and when I say I do not know how to teach, I am offering something closer to a prayer or supplication, an address made in the absence of knowing ahead of time to whom or about what I am speaking. It is always possible that when I say these words I am in fact saying that I do not *want* to know how to teach, that I am using these words to deflect thoughts that are too discomfiting to face much less embrace outright in my teaching practice. Perhaps. But how would I know with any certainty whether what I say when I say that I do not know how to teach I am saying this negatively as a defense against an unruly threat or positively as a way to shelter that very insurgency in myself? When I teach, or when I say that I am teaching, have I forgotten something or do I remember it but in the mode of its being forgotten? Strictly speaking, as a member of the teaching profession, I do not teach; I *profess* to teach, making claims or allegations whose truthfulness forever remains to be established and in the midst of indeterminacies that, I wager, ought to remain interminable. The teaching quotidian has taught me that exorbitant possibility, putting into words a wordless intuition I have felt and continue to feel each and every time I begin a class, both exposed and dispossessed, at once vulnerable to my vulnerability and to the vulnerability of the students whom I too quickly and anxiously claim are "mine." The startling work of the great educational theorist, Deborah Britzman, helps . . . a bit: "what is left to think is the impossibility of our work," she writes, "not so much from the place of its failure or the adequacy of technique but rather from within the areas of conflict, where our work is most incomplete, and where we are surprised by what we do not really know" (2009, 140–41). Stories, paintings, photographs, poems, and all manner of cultural and aesthetic objects and practices seem to confirm this insight for me. Surprising us with what we really do not know would be the occupational hazard of authors and artists if it weren't also their profession. Because formally I am a professor in literary studies, I often tarry with this not-knowing through a consideration of beautiful narratives, of twice-told tales. One of my favorites is the story of Cleopas

and his unnamed friend as they walk together on the road to Emmaus (Luke 34: 13–35). I happen not be a Christian but this sparse account speaks deeply to me. Being a scholar of William Blake's work does that to you; parts of the New Testament graft themselves into your imagination and become part of the tissue of your teaching. The disciples have borne witness to murderous sovereign power, egged on by a manipulated crowd. They walk with purpose over occupied territory—then, as now—that they have the temerity to call home. The disciples discover, to their surprise, that they are accompanied by an unrecognizable other. There is much to learn from this distant classroom. Cleopas and his fellow-traveler grieve their great loss, but they also know to share it, and in doing so they form the kernel of an insurgency. Unlike Walter Benjamin's angel of history, the disciples do not move ahead gazing back upon the debris of history, which to me always feels like a posture of individualizing and isolating regret. Instead they stumble forward, not only looking to each other but also to the stranger who walks beside them. When these three reach their destination a great truth will be revealed, but for today it is the path and who walks it together and the everyday communism of that togetherness that takes on a luminous power. What matters most is that the disciples are united in *welcoming* the interloper in the Greek spirit—never uncomplicated—of *philoxenia.* As T. S. Eliot writes, glossing the relevant passage from Luke but slyly claiming in a footnote that he knows nothing of the gospel story, a story, it should be said, about what it means to endure the passion of not-knowing:

> Who is the third who walks always beside you?
> When I count, there are only you and I together
> But when I look ahead up the white road
> There is always another one walking beside you
> Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded
> I do not know whether a man or a woman
> —But who is that on the other side of you? ("The Wasteland," Eliot 2001, 17)

Who indeed? In every class that I have ever taught, I too am on the road to Emmaus, my students and I, heads down in shared thought and mixed feelings only to look up and see that something curiously obscure accompanies us,

namely, the specter of not knowing. I welcome this dreamy apparition and in doing so I hope to model that complex and fragile hospitality for the students who walk with me and who I also do my best to welcome. We who tramp along this path of education, this *Holzweg*, no matter what we claim confidently or ultimately to know, will always also be the ones who, like Cleopas and his friend, did not know and yet felt obliged to shelter a place for that stranger, that third. I also especially like to remember a fragment by Franz Kafka from the summer of 1920, a few sentences spoken in the voice of an accomplished athlete who feels anything but accomplished, or rather, to be more precise, an athlete for whom success is not the opposite of failure but a species of failure, a particular way of failing, not unlike how walking is a controlled form of falling to the ground or orbiting the earth is a sustained plummeting to the surface below. This is Kafka:

> "The great swimmer! The great swimmer!" the people shouted. I was coming from the Olympic Games in X, where I had just set a world record in swimming. I stood on the stairs at the train station in my hometown—where is it?—and looked out at the indistinct crowd in the dusk. A girl, whose cheek I stroked briefly, hung a sash around me, on which was written in a foreign language: To the Olympic champion. (cited in Stach 2013, 370)

Whisked off to a banquet, the swimmer remains confused: he recognizes no one and cannot understand the language in which he is being addressed. But even amid this dreamlike setting, where things both make sense and make no sense at all, he musters the wherewithal to address those who fête him:

> "Honored guests! I have, admittedly, set a world record, but if you were to ask me how I did it, I could not give a satisfactory answer. The fact is that I cannot even swim. I have always wanted to learn, but never had the opportunity. So how did I happen to be sent by my country to the Olympic Games? This is the question I have been pondering." (cited in Stach 2013, 370–1)

Kafka ponders this dilemma too. As he will write in his notebook several months later, mostly to explain his fable to himself: "I can swim like the others,

only I have a better memory than the others, I have not forgotten my former not-being-able-to swim. But because I have not forgotten it, the being-able-to-swim does me no good, and I still cannot swim" (cited in Stach 2013, 375). Once upon a time, the swimmer did not know how to swim and that inability remains with him always. Part of swimming, indeed swimming well, must be not knowing how to swim. It is naively virile and anxiously revealing to assume that swimming first and last obliterates the very condition of swimming, that is, not knowing how to swim. And if this not knowing is an incompetence, it is of a very peculiar kind, an incompetence that is not the antithesis of ability but a phenomenon, beyond good and evil, that is irreducible to and older than that opposition between failure and success. Kafka's swimmer does not know how to swim. And I do not know how to teach. Part of teaching, the most important part of teaching, the one thing teaching cannot do without and continue to be teaching, beyond all the talk of gaining competences, developing techniques, managing classes, and forming lesson plans, is not knowing how to teach. To adapt something Paul de Man once said, nothing can overcome the resistance to teaching because teaching is itself this resistance.[1] Something always resists: I wonder if you, the ones who teach, feel it too—the raised heartbeat, the room temperature not quite right, the vertiginous sensation of jumping in who knows where or where from, that feeling in the back of the mind, "this is like a dream, it's all so strange while also familiar, how did I get here, why is this so fucking exhausting, why do I feel exposed, where are my words?" I have walked purposefully into this classroom and yet I often feel like I have been thrown into a pool, indeed, a pool that is all deep end, both with and against my will. I hope that every Teaching and Learning Institute, every Faculty of Education, every pro-seminar, is up to teaching that, whatever or wherever *that* is. What can teaching be if it is not "heart-ravishing," to recall Sir Philip Sidney's description of poetry (1980, 112)? A particular classroom experience comes to mind: It is the Friday afternoon before Yom Kippur. My observant students are restless, eager to take their leave before the sun sets. I am exhausted, suddenly aware of how the weight of the week has walked beside me. I near the end of a three hour class on Kant's "Toward Perpetual Peace." Kant is so right and so wrong, the angel from whom I seek a blessing that I will never receive. Yet I am excited to be sharing this vividly realized denunciation

of war, including punitive war, which the philosopher says destroys both those who prosecute violence and those who are compelled to suffer it. That way lies only *ein Ausrottungskrieg*, a war of extermination. This is a new word in German, a new word for an old phenomenon, since it describes the practice of colonial violence that the Europeans have long perfected abroad. Before Kant is dead Johann Fichte will use same term but vacate it of censure: in his hands it names the Christian obligation to annihilate Islam. I remind my students that Kant denounces the cruelly boastful who take pleasure in crushing their enemies: the end of war is not a time for jubilation, but a time to ask for forgiveness. Kant's words clash with the images of carnage my students absorb on their social media accounts. I tremble at the sound of their worry and confusion, trying my best not to let them see me falter. But I do falter, not knowing how to teach in this uneducable moment. One side of the classroom has a large window facing westward. Westward, wasteward: I remember a professor telling me forty years ago that this is how sixteenth-century readers would have heard and understood the term. Outside the autumn leaves flare against black wet boughs. Figures hurry between buildings, casting long shadows in the time that remains. The sun is low in the sky, and an unnatural ochre light rakes through the dirty panes. It is late, very late, *entre chien et loup*. But as Levinas once wrote, what time is not this twilight? The Day of Atonement is at hand, but it arrives unbidden for everyone, the summons to reflect upon all that has been done and that must be undone. How to endure the agony of forgiving the only thing that can be forgiven, the unforgiveable? And so I falter. Long ago, yesterday, I did not know how to teach. And it seems to me important to shelter a place for that experience, if it is an experience, of not knowing how to teach or even knowing what teaching is in every classroom in which I find and lose myself. Each educational relation calls for a radical openness to the insurrection of not knowing how to teach and to being "surprised," as Britzman says, by what we do not really know. Teacher, student, classroom: none of these elements exists before they come into a relationship, and this relationship is never completed once and for all. I do not know how this miracle works. Like a murmuration of starlings, the scene of education is at its core an emergent phenomenon, irreducibly improvisational, happening both in time and in an eternal now.[2] We who teach and learn rehearse together, unceasingly, if "rehearsal" means,

after Robin Maynard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2023), embracing the labour of reimagining the world, free from the constraints of a predetermined outcome or final performance. As I often say to my students at the conclusion of class, echoing the words with which my mentor, Ross Grieg Woodman, often ended his letters to me, "I am joined with you in these endless labours." And so it is that I did not know how to teach and I do not know how to teach. I have never not known how not to teach. How I know that I do not know how to teach remains mysterious, enigmatic, in the manner of a dream, in the way that Kafka's fragment is a dream, located who knows where and in a language the dreamer doesn't understand. For this reason I am wary of slyly recuperating my teaching as a practice that is anchored in a negative knowledge, in the Socratic triumphalism of claiming to know at least this, that I do not know how to teach. No, in all rigor, I cannot know with any certainty that I do not know how to teach, but this uncertainty does not await knowledge; it is not something that can be known, and it is not knowledge. I feel a powerful need, from where I know not, and in a language I do not speak, to help my students see this, whatever *this* is, something that slides uncontrollably between a known unknown and an unknown unknown about teaching . . . even as I teach my heart out and because I teach my heart out. I dwell between two worlds, incommensurate but contiguous. I do not know how to teach—in my non-knowledge, which is not the absence of knowledge, and not a negative knowledge, but that which is not knowledge, I am abandoned to this stammer, this metonymy, this spell, this catachresis, this offering to the void where I teach and where I claim without warrant to be teaching. Perhaps what we call teaching is nothing more or less than a swerving from this null space, which I remember in the mode of forgetting, and avow only in the shape of a disavowal. I do not know how to teach. Because I do not know what teaching is, or what I am doing when I teach, I am abandoned to the task of trying to do justice to it. Like the "sklerophthalmic" animal that Derrida conjures, the creature that cannot close its eyes (1983, 5), Artificial Intelligence knows nothing of that responsibility, not while it scrapes the archive of its sentences, the latest in a long line of technologies driven by the implacable and unblinking logic of extraction. Because it cannot sleep, AI neither dreams of teaching, nor does it teach dreams. It seems especially important, today, at this very moment, amid this

burning, cruel, and grossly unforgiving world, this seemingly uneducable place that we too quickly call "the world," to begin and to begin again, with humility and commitment, to teach without knowing how to teach and without knowing what we teach. I do not know how to teach in a country that supplies weapons to the slaughterous. I do not know how to teach alongside those who claim that there is a right to maim. I do not know how to teach in a polity that criminalizes protest. I do not know how to teach anguished students who are forced to choose between those lives and deaths that matter and those that are deemed not matter not at all. I do not know how to teach in a world in which terms like "forced starvation" and "pediatric amputees" fail to tear a hole in the universe. I do not know how to teach when classrooms are blasted to bits. I do not know how to teach while watching families die without electricity, without medical care, without clean water, without succor. I do not know how to teach this: the dead are not bricks in the walls of your homeland, and their desecration is not the price of your emaciated moralism. I do not know how to teach in the company of colleagues who refuse to see that saying nothing is a form of hate speech. I do not know how to teach if we break faith with one another. These metastasizing conditions make it impossible to teach. Impossible and compulsory. For whatever I am meant to do as a teacher, I must do it now without knowing what I am doing. On the road to Emmaus, let me then declare my love for that dreamt-of stranger, the third who walks beside me in every class I have taught and will ever teach. Let me declare my commitment to what Rebecca Gagan memorably and scandalously calls "teaching with love"—which is to say teaching alongside that strangest of strangers, undone by the losses and hopes, precariousness and affection, care and responsibility, that love can quicken in the classroom if it be given the place that it deserves.[3] Let us listen to Mary Wollstonecraft who points out that we cannot and should not "endeavour to reason love out of the world" (2014, 53). And I hope that my students glimpse something similarly worthy of their passion in this not knowing and that they learn to treasure that sacred part of themselves that does not know how to learn.

NOTES

This essay constitutes the third of a three-essay cluster about the vicissitudes of teaching and learning in the twenty-first-century public university. See also Clark (2018) and Clark (2021). Versions of this paper were presented at: *Psychosocial Transformations: The School, The Clinic, and The Archive* (November 7–8, 2024, York University), a conference honoring the work of Dr. Deborah P. Britzman; and as a plenary address at *Improvisation, Pedagogy, and Co-creative Worldmaking* (April 3, 2025, University of Guelph). I am grateful to the organizers and the participants at both events for giving me the opportunity to share and discuss this work in such collegial settings.

1. De Man writes: "Nothing can overcome the resistance to theory since theory *is* itself this resistance" (de Man 1986, 20).
2. The improvisational nature of teaching and learning is perhaps no better discussed than in Fischlin and Lommano (2025).
3. I am grateful to 3M National Teaching Fellow, Rebecca Gagan, for our ongoing conversations about "teaching with love," a concept and a practice whose importance she learned in turn from Indigenous educator, Andrea Cranmer. Gagan's moving account of that classroom encounter is worth citing: "I sat in the Big House in Alert Bay ['Yalis], British Columbia, as 'Nam̱nasolaga Andrea Cranmer introduced the Tsasała Cultural Group who would perform traditional Kwakwaka'wakw potlach dances. She warned us not to misunderstand the dancers' work: the group's youth members were not there just to 'entertain' us. Through the Tsasała Cultural Group, these children and youth had a chance to learn about their culture and to be 'taught with love.' Andrea reminded us that the trauma and abuse of residential schools meant that so many of her people never had the chance 'to learn with love.' Andrea's words forever changed my approach to teaching. Invited to join the dance along with everyone there, I committed to never again fear describing teaching as *a labor of love* (Ezeaku and Gagan [2024], 34)."

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