Why I Teach

My entry into teaching was accidental. While practicing law in Chicago, I received a letter from the University of Michigan Law School inviting me to apply for a two-year teaching position in their writing program. I had not given much attention to teaching beforehand, nor did I do so at the time as I discarded the letter in my waste basket at home. My wife, Sandi, soon discovered it and, using the Socratic method, she challenged me to examine the opportunity further.

Six months later we moved to Ann Arbor as I began my adventure into teaching law. I knew that as a law student and as a practicing lawyer I loved research and writing more than anything else, and I was attracted by the opportunity to devote my life to this kind of work. So this was my original reason for leaving private practice and commencing a career in academia. But the classroom experience was a huge unknown because I had never taught or done much public speaking. This was the wild card with respect to making the change permanent. Yet within one month I was convinced that I could fulfill my classroom responsibilities adequately, and I knew that I wanted to make teaching my lifelong career.

The following academic year, 1963–64, I moved to St. Louis and began my “love affair” with the Washington University School of Law. I say “love affair” because I know that my academic life elsewhere would never have been the same nor would my answer to the central question as to why I teach. The law school was a special place, one that was very different from the schools that I had attended and the school at which I had previously taught.

Why do I teach? Although I know the answer to the question, it is not the same one that I would have given many years ago.
The entering class consisted of 80 students, and I was assigned to teach both sections of Property. I was the 11th member of the faculty. The atmosphere was friendly and intimate. Faculty members took their responsibility to teach very seriously and made themselves accessible to students in the hallways, in Holmes Lounge immediately after class, and in their offices. I got to know every student and many very well over time. I soon recognized that I was comfortable as a teacher and very happy to be at the law school.

Yet even then my answer as to why I teach would have been very close to the answer I would have given at the outset. Nevertheless, after about six years at Washington University I finally recognized that graduation was a disquieting time for me. Graduates and their families celebrated while I was enveloped with sadness and at times mild depression. It took me several more years to fully grasp the underlying reasons for this unhappiness. By then I understood that wonderful students enter your life, maintain contact for several years after graduation, and thereafter are silent as they become preoccupied with their professional and family lives. Quite simply, I missed them. Yet I knew this was an inevitable reality as a teacher.

But why did I miss them? There aren’t many jobs which guarantee that a hundred or more new and exciting people would enter my life annually. These were people who always challenged me in the classroom with their intellect and imagination. Indeed, nearly every important idea that I have voiced in a book or an article has been conceived in the classroom or in my office as a result of student questions and input. Teaching is an exhilarating and exciting experience almost beyond description. It is quick, intense, educational, vigorous, and even exhausting. So why do I teach? The dedication of my book on perpetuities offers a partial explanation: “In appreciation of my students, from whom I have learned much.”

However, there was something more. As I got to know my students and forged friendships, I recognized how their diversity had enriched my life. These were men and women from different backgrounds, races, and even countries and cultures who possessed varied interests and expertise. I borrowed heavily from their diverse experiences, but I also borrowed from their vitality, ingenuity, courage, and resourcefulness.

These were the reasons I missed them. Nevertheless, over time my former students gave me even more. Ultimately they would reward me with their lasting friendship, their accomplishments within and beyond the law, and, most of all, they would reward me with their good deeds.

These, then, are the reasons why I have taught for over 46 years and want to continue teaching. It is because of what my students have given to me, including their ultimate gift of lives well lived. These gifts have made me a rich man. And after nearly 6,000 students, I still yearn for more.

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