

A Teacher's Tale

Joe Gilliland

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A Teacher's Tale is a memoir in which learning and labor meet.

Humanities professor Joe Gilliland's memoir *A Teacher's Tale* concerns his dedication to his career, but also his experiences as a student and an independent reader.

From an almost sixty-year veteran of teaching, this memoir is centered on how people learn in both formal and informal settings. It also covers how Gilliland became convinced, after many diversions, that teaching was the ideal career for him. As a young, curious learner, he was thrilled when his teachers treated students as individuals, and disappointed when classes were taught by rote, or were not demanding enough. Along the way, it became clear to him that children needed interactivity in order to think about material on their own, and that classrooms should be supportive environments in which students never feel "threatened or belittled in any way."

Though its general arrangement is chronological, the book sometimes wanders from its focus on teaching and learning, particularly to cover Gilliland's service in the army at the end of World War II and during the occupation of Korea. In such places, the dramatic events leave little room for contemplation. Still, they feature quiet moments: in one scene, Gilliland shares ideas about novels provided in Armed Services Editions with his fellow soldiers, making the important discovery that it is possible to "invite others into meaning."

Two themes dominate: on the nature of education and the nature of employment. Theories of education are presented via concrete examples, as of a college professor who believes in "education by irritation," and who makes propositions that he knows students will disagree with, and then requires them to find the evidence to prove him wrong. Important lessons about how people learn are illustrated with anecdotes rather than research, as are ideas about the purpose of employment—in classrooms, funeral homes, remote military outposts, and urban financial institutions. The question of whether jobs are about simple paychecks, services, or answering a true calling arises; Gilliland posits that they can also be anything in between.

Eventually, Gilliland realized that he wanted to be a "student in perpetuity," continually learning and accepting new information and ideas. His conversational, expansive tone combines with enough details to visualize the scenes and people in his life with clarity. Despite its frequent detours into anecdotes outside of education—many of which serve to illustrate the social customs of the times and places covered—the narrative returns again and again to what makes a great teacher: treating students as "partners in learning."

Eschewing conformity in favor of authenticity, *A Teacher's Tale* is a memoir in which learning and labor meet, thanks to Joe Gilliland's love for education.

MICHELE SHARPE (November 17, 2021)

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