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The Alchemy of Teaching: The Transformation of Lives

Jeremiah Conway
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This volume offers an inspiring (at times, provocative) glimpse into the mysterious and unpredictable chemistry leading to the unleashing of human potential that sets true teaching apart from the mere pragmatics of rote instruction. A long-time professor of philosophy at the University of Southern Maine, Jeremiah Conway is a multiple recipient of the university's Outstanding Teaching Award. By no means an educational manual or prescriptive blueprint for change, this book delves right into the chaotic, unpredictable process whereby students can come to a truer understanding of themselves—and the world around them.

Bucking the lamentable trend to view higher education predominantly as job preparation, Conway takes us through a number of journeys of enlightenment (his own as well as those of his students). Unfettered by pedagogy—and, in fact, never having taken a teaching course before embarking on his university career—Conway is without doubt a born teacher, driven by a true joy for learning. He's keenly aware of the privileged opportunity that teachers enjoy, both to guide their students and to be inspired by them.

Right from the outset, Conway encourages us to recognize (or perhaps re-acknowledge) that education is not simply about transmitting facts or neatly presented analyses but about questioning our assumptions of the world and each other. As Conway sees it, our educational institutions are remiss in not seeing beyond their administrative and financial hurdles to a true and lasting mission to challenge and redefine what humanity seeks to accomplish and to understand.

The author highlights the varying paths to educational achievement by recounting a number of episodic, tightly woven vignettes featuring an array of some of the most interesting teaching experiences of his career. These chapters are highly compelling and almost cinematic in flavor.

With her "coiffed silver hair [and] flower print dresses," Mildred is an older student whose college career is defined not only by her desire to graduate but also by a regretful awareness of the women in her family who never made it to university. She is an inspiring woman—likeable and engaging. Her story is made all the more poignant by her struggle to finish college in the wake of a life-threatening illness. Mildred's chapter stands in stark contrast to that featuring Dante, a somewhat pedantic young evangelical student whom Conway describes as one of his "students from hell." Yet, the author comes to have a genuine respect for Dante's sincere emphasis on truth and his reluctance to back down from his beliefs. It's Conway's high regard for his students (endearing and otherwise) and his modestly underplayed scholarship, alongside his crisp writing style, that makes this such a worthwhile and informative read—both for teachers and for anyone interested in the transformative magic of the educational process.
SEAMUS MULLARKEY (February 26, 2013)

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