

# Preface

## A Family of Teachers

The two of us come from an extended family of teachers. It didn't start out that way, as our forbearers were originally farmers working a meager homesteaded quarter in Rock Lake, North Dakota. In fact, the Deal "quarter" can be recalled today by residents of the small town close to the Canadian border still without a paved main street. Our grandmother's vision was that her children would leave the farm for a college education and a better life. She embodied the values of schooling. She wasn't opposed to tilling the soil, but she saw a greater good in cultivating the human spirit. As she pushed her brood off the farm, one by one, they gravitated toward careers in teaching. Of the seven siblings in our father's family, all seven became teachers. Most of our relatives are teachers. Both of our fathers were teachers, one of our mothers was a teacher.

Ironically, growing up in this family dominated by teachers, no one talked much about teaching. It was embedded deeply in the yeasty atmosphere of the family unit. Our love for the profession just somehow seeped into our pores. When it came time to declare a college major, most of our generation picked teaching. As we entered the profession the reality proved to be different from the experience of our parents' era, but there were also common threads that spanned the generations. We learned that a classroom is a classroom wherever it happens to be located. We also learned some very basic principles about good teaching. Chief among these were that caring, compassion, and inspiration play a critical role in genuine

teaching and learning; that teachers are important for who they are as well as for what they teach; and that students bring their own unique gifts to the relationship.

Our generation taught in many different types of schools. Some were affluent; others were tough inner-city assignments. Some taught in primary grades; others taught in secondary settings. Like our parents, we didn't talk much about teaching at family gatherings, but something clearly trickled down because many in our children's generation are teachers. Their conception of teaching closely mirrors that of the two generations that preceded them. And so the tradition is carried forward.

The problem is that our children's generation has to fight for values commonly accepted in earlier eras. Long-term missions such as caring, compassion, encouragement, and building character now too often take second place to short-term goals of standardized performance and high-stakes testing. More and more, teachers are pushed to become dispensers of a limited range of only partially relevant facts. They have little time to share themselves and are seen as technically interchangeable. The active role played in the past by students has been supplanted by an emphasis on them as passive receptors of knowledge. Whatever they have to offer is largely irrelevant to the mandated lock-step curriculum prevalent in many schools today. Our family's unwritten credo was to draw out students' potential, not drum in facts and figures.

This fundamental shift in schooling has been underway for several decades. Reforming schools is the key battle cry of today's politicians. Even though many would agree that, in the past, they have screwed up, they won't give up. The beat goes on and on and on. The most recent and troublesome manifestation of this cycle of standardization and measurement is No Child Left Behind. At its core it assumes that test scores are the only measure for judging a school's performance, and it punishes those who don't measure up.

Three generations of Deals are among the critics of what this legislation is doing to teaching and learning. It is

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undermining the essence of imagination and creativity that are at the core of our strength as a nation. Very few are standing up to champion the emotional and spiritual side of schooling. Someone needs to call attention to the delight and faith that captures the hearts and souls of students and teachers. That's why we wrote this book. We know that our grandmother would be proud and that generations of Deals are standing shoulder to shoulder with us as we undertake this quest. We have been taught to teach this way, and we are going to make sure that we do not lose the traditional values that make teaching one of the most sacred professions. Our argument is based primarily on our personal experience as teachers, a lot of hours logged in schools and classrooms, and our direct contact with other educators across America. Where possible, we will draw on the work of others but make no claim to present a rigorous body of knowledge to back us up. This book is personal and at times we will become polemical. It is because we believe so ardently in the need to balance the mechanical and mystical aspects of teaching.

This is a battle we are fully prepared to engage and are determined to win. Our objective is not to overthrow accountability, but rather to counterweight its overemphasis with a fresh breath of passion and zest. Too often, policymakers and educators look to the business world for direction when top-performing businesses themselves seek parity between metrics and magic. Max DePree (1989), founder of Herman Miller and a well-known business writer, captures the issue elegantly, "Being faithful is more important than being successful. Corporations can and should have a redemptive purpose. We need to weigh the pragmatic in the clarifying light of the moral. We must understand that reaching our potential is more important than reaching our goal" (p. 69).

DePree is not a lone wolf in the business community. Other leaders of successful enterprises pepper their language with too-oft forgotten terms such as *soul*, *spirit*, *heart*, *faith*, *hope*, and *love*. Higher calling, ennobling purpose, and greater cause stir people's passion to strive to fulfill a shared hallowed potential.

It seems sad that this spiritual-like idiom is alive in organizations that fly aircrafts, brew coffee, make pet food, manufacture cars or adhesives, and formulate remedies, but absent in how we talk about our children and schools. Dominance of standards, bottom-line results, measurable outcomes, and pay for performance seem foreign in an institution devoted to the nurturing and shaping of the next generation. Teaching is more an art form than a mechanical assembly line. We hope you will join us in bringing more balance and buoyancy to one of our society's most righteous, majestic undertakings.

The book's thesis plays out in a series of chapters, each devoted to one of the challenges we need to confront in rescuing education from its trendy, perilous journey. The Introduction, "Teaching: Past and Prologue," traces where we've been, where we are, and highlights a fork in the road ahead. Chapter 1, "Reviving the Soul of Teaching," compares two conceptions of teaching, emphasizing literature that focuses on the heart and soul of the profession. Chapter 2, "Making a Difference: The Core of Teaching," examines what it means to make a difference through several examples. Chapter 3, "School Reform: A Ground Level Perspective," contrasts the views of once removed policymakers with teachers, students, and parents who experience changes directly. Chapter 4, "Being Real: The Authentic Teacher," shows how who a teacher is carries as much influence as what they teach. Chapter 5, "You Gotta Believe," highlights the importance of teachers believing in themselves and having faith and confidence in what they do. Chapter 6, "Setting the Spirit Free," shifts attention from the individual teacher and classroom to the school as a potentially spirit-filled context that fires the collective imagination and touches the heart and soul of the community. Chapter 7, "Speaking Up: Voices from the Trenches," encourages teachers to capture the ears of policymakers by aggressively mounting a chorus rather than whining or leaving the profession. Chapter 8, "Charting a New Course," provides a glimmer of a new direction in moving from the endless drift of school reform in search of some promising new destinations.

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We conclude without any new policies to pronounce or innovative specific steps to take. As the Wizard of Oz once said to the Cowardly Lion, "All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. True courage is facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty" (Baum, p. 114). The ball is now in the court of America's teachers and administrators. Give it your best shot. Our grandmother would be behind you all the way. So are we.