

Dear Apostles Friends,

When you're under a stay-at-home order, I think the first order of business is to maintain harmony in the home you happen to be staying in. So, when my stay-at-home buddy suggested it was time to review our Star Words, I knew what my message this week was going to be about. For a review of what Star Words are and why they're important, please see Laurie's reflective message on her word, "Nurturing," from Friday, April 17th.

My Star Word is "teaching." This would have been an easy assignment for me back when I was in my twenties and knew everything. It wasn't until I was in my forties, I think, that I started slowly becoming aware of how vast the human experience really is and how little I understood it. If I could go back and deliver a message to my twenty-something self I would say, "Don't be so damn arrogant. You don't know anything."

My Star Word is coincidental in that when I was in high school, I actually wanted to be a teacher. I was accepted into the School of Education at what was then Millersville State College. My plan was to become a Social Studies teacher in middle or high school. It was a good plan, but it lacked one important element. I had not considered how I was going to pay for college, so in the fall of 1975 I headed to Navy bootcamp instead of Millersville. It all worked out ok in the end, as it usually does. Incidentally, "Social Studies" is defined as "the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence." In other words, good Social Studies teachers produce good citizens. My twenty-something self would have accepted that definition without question. My current, questioning self thinks it only scratches the surface.

There is something about words like "progressive and incurable" that will make you reorder your life, and I started to do that after I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease in 2009. Laurie and I decided we wanted to travel while I was still able. We've explored Neolithic (approx. 10,000 BC) burial tombs in Ireland, pondered Mayan ruins in Belize, prayed in the tomb of St. Francis in Assisi, and cried in front of the most heartbreakingly beautiful sculpture ever created, Michelangelo's Pieta, at St. Peter's in the Vatican. Travel is one way to expand your horizons, and I feel incredibly blessed to have seen these things. The more I see and understand, the more I'm aware of the vastness of God's creation and the breadth and depth of the human experience. I feel like the more I learn, the less I know. My Star Word must be a mistake. How can I be a teacher when I understand so little?

Thankfully, my stay-at-home companion is a process thinker. "Start with the synonyms," she said. The synonyms for "teaching" include "coaching," "guiding," "nurturing," and "learning," according to Thesaurus.com. Wait a minute. Isn't learning the antonym (opposite) of teaching, not a synonym? I checked, and it's both. But how can learning be the same as teaching and the opposite of teaching at the same time?

When you think about it, there is definitely a yin/yang quality to teaching and learning. Yin/Yang is an oriental philosophy of dualism that describes how seemingly opposite or contrary forces may actually be complementary, interconnected, and interdependent. Teaching and learning each contain the seeds of the other. Neither can exist without the other. The teacher has to first learn in order to prepare the lesson. Learners experience and understand the lesson according to their own backgrounds and individual experiences, which are different from the teacher's background and experience. I taught classes frequently as part of my job, and I felt like I learned from my students as they were learning from me.

Thinking of teaching and learning as opposite and complimentary parts of an interconnected whole helps me understand that receiving the gift of "teaching" is the same as receiving the gift of being curious about the world in which we live and the meaning and purpose of our existence in it. It's curiosity that makes you want to learn. Looking back, I realize that my best teachers were individuals who exhibited an insatiable curiosity about the world in general and their area of expertise specifically. Curiosity is infectious. A good teacher is one who transmits curiosity, not just facts, figures, and formulas.

Lord, you made us curious creatures because you wanted us to seek you. Help us to understand that we are all teachers. We are all learners. Each contains the seeds of the other. As teachers, help us to spread an infectious enthusiasm about and reverence for the world you've given us. As learners, help us to embrace our natural curiosity and trace it back to its source. Amen.

Take care,

Bert