

Be Patient, then, Teachers

by Natalie Wickham

The question burned in my mind. I was on my way to an advanced music course, where I would be building on the 10+ years of piano lessons that I already had to my credit. It was there that I hoped, once and for all, to find the answer to my question. Three intense weeks later, my 17-year old brain felt ready to explode with the two-years worth of college-level coursework that had been crammed into it. Nevertheless, there was a sweetness to my mental fatigue, for I now possessed the answer to my question – I finally knew how to look at a piece of music and identify the musical key in which it was written. Yay! Mission accomplished!

I continued to revel in my newly-acquired knowledge until the day I happened upon a collection of music theory books that I had dutifully completed in the course of my years of private study. Scattered throughout the pages were numerous exercises teaching and reinforcing the concept of identifying musical key signatures. And there, in my own handwriting, were the correctly labeled answers. I was baffled! Apparently I “knew” my keys all along and I didn’t even know it!

This startling discovery led me to the conclusion that years of filling in workbook answers had been ineffective in transmitting real knowledge. Why? Not because such exercises are without any value, but because there was a complete disconnect between the music I was playing and the theoretical concepts in my workbook.

Although this personal illustration is specific to music study, the principle is paralleled in many schooling situations: The information presented is too far removed from the realities of daily life, rendering it virtually useless. Why do you suppose many of the great minds throughout history fared poorly in school settings? It was not due to a lack of intelligence. Perhaps it was because they weren’t motivated to learn just to fill in answers in a workbook or on a test paper. Instead, their passion was to know, to comprehend, to dig deeper for real understanding. They were intellectually honest, and the nature of their honesty was such that they wouldn’t communicate answers apart from an understanding of the process that allowed them to arrive at that point.

The shallowness of my scientific mind permits me to respond, when queried, that the energy released by a nuclear weapon is $E=mc^2$. But this answer stems from a weakly rooted plant which, upon further questioning, might easily be blown away by even the slightest wind. Albert Einstein, on the other hand, might be likened to a formidable tree of knowledge, formed thus as a result of years of intellectual inquiry and study. Rooted in the realities of life, his revolutionary discovery required a mind willing to explore beyond easy answers and into the depths of the yet unknown. But when the answer was reached, it bore meaning that was relevant to life, and upon which we continue to build.

The one who aims, then, to be a teacher of true knowledge must acquire patience. Is not this the model of our Lord Himself, who instructs each of us and patiently teaches and reinforces until we arrive at the “full assurance of understanding”?¹ May we who teach likewise never forsake the continued quest for real understanding in favor of vain displays of rootless knowledge. For while one teacher may bask in accolades bestowed for a colorful garden of students who return pages of correct answers, it is the patient teacher faithfully tending seeds and roots who will one day rejoice in the cornucopia resulting from her enduring labors. “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”²

¹Colossians 2:2

²Galatians 6:9

Natalie Wickham is an Independent Music Teacher who loves developing creative ways to help her students acquire real knowledge and understanding (and she works extra hard to ensure that they can identify the key signatures of their pieces!). Natalie is the author of the book, *Pajama School – stories from the life of a homeschool graduate*. Feel free to visit her at: <http://pajamaschool.com> to find additional homeschooling-related articles and resources.