

The End Is Not Near

By Kevin Brown

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I spent the spring semester in the United Kingdom with 20 students, based in Cambridge, but traveling to London, Bath, Oxford, the Lake District, Edinburgh, Dublin, and Galway. I could write an essay about cross-cultural experiences and the benefits (and drawbacks) of those, but something happened in Bath that made me think about teaching, not from a practical point of view, but about making a life out of teaching. We were visiting Wells Cathedral outside of Bath, a site I had never seen before, and our guide told us two stories that relate directly to what I see as important in being a professor.

First, as we were standing in front of this huge cathedral, he spoke about how long it took to construct (begun about 1175 and completed about 1348). He then talked about the craftsmen who worked on the building, how they would work their entire lives on the cathedral, knowing they would never see it finished. They devoted the lives to work they would not be able to enjoy the fruits of. They would not be able to stand inside of it, attend worship there, or see their children or grandchildren married there.

Teaching is much the same way. Granted, we do see many students we teach walk across the graduation stage and receive their diploma. Some of them keep in touch with us, especially via social media these days, and we hear how their time in our classes made a difference in their lives. In some cases, they even become our colleagues in the fields we love. However, for the most part, the students who come through our classes disappear from our lives, going on to live theirs. We do not know if the quadratic equation or Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Reasoning or *The Scarlet Letter* made a difference in their lives. We do not know if we taught them to think more critically about the world they live in, helped them to speak or write more clearly and more accurately. Essentially, our teaching is an act of faith in the same way that the craftsmen's work once was.

In our postmodern world, we are uncomfortable thinking about our work in this way, save for those of us who are religious. Many professors are not comfortable with the idea that we have faith in anything, especially as it relates to our job. But we come back to the classroom every semester, and we believe that this class will go as well as we have planned it to; this group of students will understand exactly what we want them to understand. We are believers, just as the craftsmen were, which is what keeps us coming back.

In the same way, our guide told us a different story. On the side of Wells Cathedral, there is a statue of a knight wearing a helmet with a small slit on the front. One of our guide's colleagues was involved in restoration work on the cathedral, and he was able to climb up the scaffolding and see this knight more closely. He peered through the slit and was surprised to see the knight's eyes, a bright blue that had not been faded by the elements. The craftsman clearly knew that no one would ever see inside that slit, yet he worked on the eyes as diligently as he did the parts of the knight everyone would see.

Students do not see much of the work we professors do, nor do administrators or the public. We do our research in our offices, laboratories, homes, or libraries, largely alone; we spend hours reading and preparing lectures, class discussions, exams, and paper assignments that appear effortless; we work on committees that help make our universities and communities stronger; we spend summers reading in our fields or about teaching, working to improve for the coming school year. Much of what we do is unseen, especially by students, yet we do the work to the best of our ability, knowing that the work is important in and of itself.

Again, many professors do not have the faith that the craftsmen did, as they worked for the glory of God, but we do have faith in the liberal arts or critical thinking or the scientific method or education, in general. We do the work that is unseen with the same level of commitment because we believe it is important work, whether or not it is recognized. We do that work because we believe that literature or sociology or interpersonal communication or whatever we teach matters.

Some may argue that there are professors who do not do such work with any level of diligence, that there are those who do little, especially after earning tenure. And some may also argue that there are those who do not

care about their students, who became professors because they liked the hours or who were simply talented in a particular field and took their positions because they were all they could find. I have known such professors.

I'm sure there were some craftsmen who were stonecutters simply because their fathers were stonecutters or who did their job to simply survive, never thinking of the glory of God. Some would argue that the church simply exploited the workers, much as universities now exploit theirs. They would call me idealistic or naïve.

However, when I walk into a class full of students whose future I will probably never know, I do so with the faith that something I say or something one of them says will have an effect on at least one student. I believe that students listen to what we say, that they care what we say, that their lives will be better for having taken that class. In the same way that the craftsmen never saw the finished cathedral, I have no proof of this, of course, but I believe it to be true. Perhaps one day, someone will see that former student in the same way I saw Wells Cathedral and know that at least one person had the faith to do good work in that student's life.

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