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## Under Review: The Way of the Teacher

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## UNDER REVIEW

### *The Way of the Teacher*

By J. M. Haile

Format: Paperback, 128 pp. ISBN: 0-9728602-1-5

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Teaching, like medicine, is a profession in which we expect practitioners to have reached an advanced level of competence before they begin to practice. While we support medical personnel in their efforts to keep up to date with the latest techniques and treatments, we are suspicious of teachers wanting to learn new methods and technique—and perhaps rightly so. After all, people have been teaching and learning for much longer than they have been practicing modern medicine. The skills involved have not changed. Despite all our new teaching programs and methods, we seem able to educate fewer students to the levels that once we obtained. Why waste time with the new-fangled when we achieve better results with the tried-and-true?

However, while there may not be a miracle pill for learning, teaching professionals should always be concerned with improving the ways in which they help students learn. This has less to do with throwing out everything we know to adopt a bold new approach than it does with thoughtful examination of what we do know and how current methods could be improved. This is what gives the power to Haile's thoughtful and thought-provoking collection of writings. They are a starting point for reflection, discussion, and discovery; a map for the journey of exploration.

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As Haile himself states,

This book is for the dissatisfied teacher: one who conscientiously performs the job but who feels that students are not benefiting as much as they should; one who wants to continue growing in the profession but who needs some, usually modest, guidance and encouragement; one who aspires to master teaching and inspire students (p. vii).

Note that the dissatisfied teacher Haile mentions is not one who is incompetent or tired of teaching, but one who knows there is more to be done—one who is looking for a refining or fine tuning of skills rather than a process of skills replacement.

*The Way of the Teacher* is organized into five chapters: Teaching, Learning, Students, Problem Solving, and Master Teachers. Each chapter is further divided into threads, each thread occupying a single page grouped round a single concept. It is a book that is designed for use over a period of time. While it is possible simply to read the book from cover to cover, the true value of the text lies in its use as a springboard for professional discussions and personal reflections.

The actual layout of the book is rather unusual, modeled on a modern translation of the *Tao Te Ching*. As the author notes, I quickly decided that a formal academic treatise would fail to serve the intended audience; instead the format should be small, of few words, and to the point. My aim is not to convince, but to stimulate: this book is not a map, but a sign post. I wanted a structure that helps emphasize the ideas, that is the unconventional, that is visually arresting (p. ix).

The method succeeds well when the reader focuses on particular threads or small portions of the book. The lightness of the layout and use of space cleverly place emphasis, illustrate relationships, and suggest patterns within the material. However the format quickly becomes tiresome when reading the book from cover to cover. After a time, I found it difficult to banish the

image of the master speaking to the novice as in some old episode of Kung Fu. As Clive James aptly described that program,

[Disciples] are also trained in the art of speaking their dialogue as if each sentence had a full stop every few words. 'I have seen. Something which. I cannot. Hold back.' The occasional rush of eloquence is allowed, but it must also sound like a poem. (James, 1983, p. 251)

However, this is a small quibble. Given the fact that the unusual format was chosen with one primary purpose, which it serves well—that of providing material to be visited and revisited in small sections—it detracts little from the usefulness of the book. The format becomes limiting only when the book is used for a secondary purpose—through-reading. Nevertheless, a word of warning might be given when sharing the book with others, particularly those who may be inclined to read straight through without reflection.

The actual text is a collection of carefully selected, elegantly crafted, and well-honed quotations, thoughts, propositions, and insights. There are some striking images and many propositions that should cause us all to stop and think about our teaching. Many of these will be familiar. Many are things our mothers could have told us. Many are things we already know about teaching, about ourselves, or about our students. Still, in the day-to-day pressures of the classroom, we may become so caught up in the routine mechanics of our teaching that we forget to apply what we know. Perhaps the greatest strength of the book is not in the individual thoughts or quotations, but in the way these have been spun together to form the threads which are then woven expertly together to create each chapter. It is this bringing together of ideas in new ways that leads us to greater reflection on our teaching and our students' learning. The goal of this book is not to promote a particular philosophy or method of teaching but rather to encourage each one of us take the threads of our skills, knowledge, and experience and knit these into strong new patterns of teaching.

This concept of creating new patterns is cleverly illustrated throughout the text by the use of tangrams: geometric

puzzles in which seven geometrical shapes (a square, a parallelogram, and five right-angled triangles) are arranged to create a given overall form. For each tangram, all seven shapes must be used, none can overlap or stand on edge. The message here is that there are always imaginative ways for us to take a set of given skills and from them create new learning environments for our students. The same basic components will be there every time, but will appear new with each different configuration.

The idea of conceptualizing our teaching with patterns and reflections may sound too esoteric for some tastes. However the ultimate goal of this book is to encourage all of us in the teaching profession to follow the road towards becoming master teachers, teachers who have a vast array of strategies and a depth of knowledge that can be used in multiple teaching situations, in a variety of contexts, with students of all different abilities. As such the book offers an excellent starting point for the journey and is highly recommended. With so many pressures on teachers, the practice of taking the time to examine what we do and how we do it may seem unnecessary, or, at best, self-indulgent. But in fact, it is an essential part of teaching.

As the poet W. H. Davies said, “What is life, if full of care, We have no time to stand and stare?” If we are so busy *doing* that we have little time for *being*, we are missing one of the great joys of teaching—recognizing the achievements of our students and, at the same time, recognizing our own achievements as teachers. In *The Way of the Teacher*, Haile encourages us to stand and stare—at our teaching, at our students, and at ourselves—so that we stop to acknowledge not only where we are, but also where it is we should be going.

### References

James, C. (1983). *Glued to the box: Television criticism from the Observer 1979-82*. London: Picador.