


## Teaching Writing While Standing on One Foot

Danberg, Robert
Sense Publishers, 2015

Book Review

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This book is an invitation, and is itself a somewhat circuitous reflection on teaching and learning. Directed at writing teachers, much of Danberg's advice applies to teaching in general, and not just because faculty teach forms of writing in class. The title borrows an image from a famous rabbinic story in which Rabbi Hillel was asked by a nonbeliever to teach the whole of Torah in the time the nonbeliever could stand on one foot. "That which is hateful to you do not do to others," Hillel instructed, "The rest is commentary; go and learn it" (13). Danberg reminds us that standing on one foot is a posture of instability, the position of both teachers and learners. He encourages teachers to remember their own difficulties in learning. Following Rosenzweig, Danberg suggests that Hillel did not mean "the rest is only commentary… To know Torah is to know the lesson, but also to participate in an ongoing conversation… into the lesson's value" (14). Students often seek facts, principles, or methods that they can then apply, but good teachers are able to set them on a path of lifelong inquiry. A series of autobiographical vignettes in prose and poetry, the book is punctuated by reflection prompts, or "commentary."

The author employs several metaphors, but cooking images dominate. A good cook has learned not just to follow a recipe but knows how to see the possibility of a meal in the ingredients on hand; a good cook knows what a dish needs and when it is done. The implied parallel perhaps works best with the craft of writing but the larger point is about what Danberg calls "enfolded knowledge." Teaching involves confronting the tension "between what we must tell students and what they can only know for themselves" (71).

He offers a compelling description of his own learning disability – his struggles, the strategies he developed, and how teachers reacted to him along the way (47). Danberg laments that

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schools often define gifts narrowly and he suggests the following exercise: “Spend a couple of days observing the people around you and see how many gifts you can identify… Think of yourself as a zoologist whose great pleasure it is to wait for a butterfly they’ve never seen before” (58). Later, he describes class as “an invitation to inhabit forms of attention and attunement, patterns of caution and regard… If all goes well, it is no more mysterious than the heart and mind, that tangle we are always entangled in” (73).

Danberg invokes the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum,* the contraction of the divine making space for creation. (This comes in a piece entitled “Four Principles and a Fifth” – but I counted six!). A good teacher knows when to get out of the way in order to make space for learning: “You can shape the problems and anticipate the obstacles. You can decide what a student encounters and the time it takes. But in the end, you simply must get out of the way, and leave them to do the work of learning” (98-99).

Reading this book is a bit like ruminating on a Zen koan. Danberg contradicts himself and revels in paradox. The bizarre organization and genre shifts can be frustrating. This is a quirky book, but one with many moments of glittering insight into the difficult joys of learning and teaching.

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