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Guest Editorial: The Other Side of the Teacher's Desk

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The Other Side of the Teacher's Desk

by A. Koshy Muthalaly

With more than a little apprehension, I sit in the first class with other working adults sitting next to me, some of whom are almost half my age. I am beginning a fresh journey into the unknown, this time as a student again. Almost two decades after my doctoral work, here I am again on the other side of the teacher's desk—the “wrong” side at least from a teacher's perspective. I am pursuing another graduate degree in a field that is less familiar to me than the one I chose so very long ago. But it certainly has put things in fresh perspective, giving me a new appreciation for what our students go through. Assignments tend to pile up, readings need to be done and one needs to be constantly in a state of preparedness for those nerve-racking quizzes and tests. Christian university professors will have a better view of what it feels like to be students if they will take time to stand in their shoes. Here are some things I have learned from the other side of the teacher's desk.

I have learned *how important testing can be*. When teaching a class, I am energized and involved in the subject matter. I want my students to share my passion for what I have learned, and for what I have become as well. But the view from the other side is initially “unclear,” for want of a better term; the teacher's passionate interest obscured by assignments, tests, and all those annoying things that have to be done—to assess learning. The tests are not particularly pleasant, but they force me to read what I would not be otherwise motivated to read. So the quizzes don't become obstacles for me, but rather stimulants to learning. I can see more clearly now how my learning fits into my life. The view from the other side, the student's side, becomes a process of learning and discovery in itself.

I have learned of *new styles of teaching*. I have seen how different backgrounds and experiences of my professors have made my learning better. Each teacher is different, and yet all of them, with their diverse styles and voices, are so valuable, cumulatively making me, class after class, into the new me. As a student, I learn from who they are as individuals. And I see through my individual personality what the student next to me sees differently. I have seen how my professors have used different methods, (for example, how they affirm the work of their students) in the classroom to engage the students in positive academic thinking and application to life.

I have learned *from my peers in the classroom*. It is easy to overlook the vast resources they bring. They come from different backgrounds too. They work in areas to which I have never been exposed, and their experiences are valuable to me. The subject is approached through their manifold visions, and my single vision is enriched.

One learns quickly to be *sensitive to the need for change of activity*, for I do feel tired as a student—a different kind of tiredness from what I experience being a teacher. I am developing a new sensitivity to students in my own classes. Burdens brought from personal lives, busy schedules, parents needing to rush back to little ones—have all become issues I need to think about when teaching working adults. Now I can see things through the eyes of compassion; for as a student, I too, have issues to deal with on a daily basis. Dealing with those things is part of the learning process as well.

I have learned that *one doesn't always have to be in a position of authority*. Stepping down from the teacher's podium for a time gives me a new appreciation for the ways in which authority and the power of influence should be used. Looking at what a teacher must go through from the other side gives me a new appreciation for my vocation and calling. The other side of the teacher's desk can be a place of humility, as well as one of reflection and learning. It is a place where one receives new perceptions and fresh insights. It can also be a place of refreshing as a teacher re-examines his or her place of influence and authority.

Stepping down is the basis of the incarnation. Jesus, our Lord, stepped down from heaven and became like us so that we might find His way back to heaven. A view from the other side of the teacher's desk might in this sense be incarnational. It may serve a higher purpose, giving us a new way to look at our calling to the classroom and providing us with a new sense of vision and renewed purpose. I have found it worthwhile to step across from the teacher's desk—to sit where the student sits, to see how the other half lives, and to discover how I as a teacher can make academic life better for my students. This is my calling to ministry as a Christian university professor.

Dr. A. Koshy Muthalaly is a professor in the School of Adult Studies at Southern Nazarene University, Bethany, Oklahoma, where he has taught since 1999. He also taught for many years at Spring Arbor College, Michigan, in the area of Family Life Education. Dr. Muthalaly spent many years serving on the faculty of the United Theological College, Bangalore, India, primarily teaching practical theology and directing their counseling center. He also served as the Dean of Practical Work. Besides teaching, Dr. Muthalaly has had pastoral experience both in India and the USA, including serving as Chaplain of the Bangalore Baptist Hospital. He has a B.A.(HONS) in English Literature from Bangalore University, Bangalore, India; a B.D. from Union Biblical Seminary in Maharashtra, India; an M.Th. from the United Theological College (Serampore University), Bangalore, India (where he was the winner of two awards); and a Ph.D. in Psychology of Religion from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Dr. Muthalaly has spoken in conferences both in India and the USA and loves teaching in a Christian institution. He writes Bible curriculum and articles for Christian publications on a regular basis. He can be reached at koshy@snu.edu.