

The Doing and The Teaching

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Those who can't do, teach.

This adage has haunted me for as long as I can remember. The same way a mean girl making fun of my haircut used to haunt me in middle school. A slap of subjective criticism with a malicious swing. It stings. That idea. That teaching is somehow a failure. That it is an admittance of inability, a lack of talent or tenacity. I have always known I am a performer, and a writer and an artist. But I've also always known that I am a teacher. The doing and the teaching are both in me.

There are countless ways to approach education and training. As a student, one can study hard with an eye on achievement. One can absorb with skepticism maintaining psychological autonomy from the material. One can coast. Or one can take meticulous, illustrative notes – notes so specific and carefully crafted that they clearly aren't only meant for the note-taker. No, when I took notes in school, or read books or recorded lectures, I was not only studying for myself. I was studying to pass on the information. To have a clear record to draw from later. I always, always knew that my learning was for other people in addition to myself. Is that weird? I wonder if other teachers were the same way. We all joke about our enthusiasm for school supplies and color-coded organization, but I wonder if they always knew too. That they would be passing down their knowledge.

When I finished graduate school I knew I was going to practice my craft and I also knew I was going to teach. There was never a doubt in my mind that I would continue to live part of my artistic life in the classroom.

That's partially because by the time I got to grad school, I'd been out there already. I'd already weathered the hustle of juggling day jobs with auditions with rehearsal time with overtime. And in my experience, those who can't teach, wait tables. Or art model. They work the early shift at the bakery. They manage coffee shops and have part-time retail gigs. They work as handymen during the summer and do telemarketing for the ballet in the fall. They nanny your children and make your lattes. We all live double lives, for awhile at least, and most of us forever. Our Clark Kent pays our rent during the day and our Superman struggles and soars through long rehearsals during the night. We grow along two parallels, most artists. Our cash career and our artistic vocation.

I have been thinking about this lately. I have been thinking about it deeply. Now in my mid-thirties, the outline of my artistic life is more clear. And these lines draw a career that is unconventional, undefined by a regular rehearsal process and unreliable in terms of cashflow.

That's just how it is. Some folks are beautifully fortunate and their art-making leads them, through savvy or luck, into a profitable enterprise. Some of us move along a different path. All this considered, I have realized that my day job is not really a day job. It is an every day job - a growing, changing, probably lifelong engagement. And it deserves consideration.

There are many things about teaching that complement and bolster my work as a performer and a writer. Teaching acting keeps me close to the heart of the craft, it connects me to colleagues and thinkers in the theater world and it forces me to question my methodology and to consider the discipline in new, innovative ways. There is also an echo of performing in the very act of teaching. Every day I have the opportunity to connect to other people in a present, honest way with a clear objective. It demands improvisation and careful listening. Teaching, like acting, cultivates compassion. Most powerfully, though, teaching young acting students gives me a direct line into a youthful, insatiable hunger for this craft. It reminds me why I joined this crazy circus in the first place.

But I think one of the reasons "Those who can't do, teach" nags at me is because I know there is some truth in it. To balance teaching and doing is a delicate feat, to wake up with the intention to give and nurture and then maintain some time and stamina to also innovate and create - that is exhausting some days. And there is something in me, after almost a decade of teaching, that is beginning to run dry. It scares me. And I don't know that a six month sabbatical can cure it. I remember the teachers from my years as a student - the wise, experienced, intuitive, inspiring people who cupped a small emptiness in their hands. An empty place that used to hold their ambitions and their hunger and their risks. It seems to me, after teaching for awhile now, I've begun to let go of these things a little, they are beginning to slip through our fingers. It is a little more difficult to take risks or to entertain artistic failure. My steady, reliable pay check and the nine month school year can seem more desirable than crossing my fingers for another big break. By degrees, I move from a place of learning and asking to a space where I am the expert, the one who is supposed to know. Then I have to pull myself back to beginning. There are many days that I don't spend my effort on my art, I spend it on my students. There is absolutely nothing wrong with this. But I am not sure it is what I choose. I'm still thinking about it.

Of course, in addition to acting, writing and teaching, I have always dreamt of assembling a small army of performance artists to unleash upon the world to tell compelling stories and create form into chaos and chaos into form. Sometimes teaching feels like I'm doing just that - training theater ninjas and jedi knights. Other days, it feels like a job.

One thing is coming clear, though. I cannot give away what I don't have. If teaching continues to be my daytime occupation, I need to find new ways to engage my vocation. I need to reconnect to my own passion, rejoice in my own creative light, push the boundaries of what I know and what whets my artistic appetite before I can share any wisdom or earnestly lead anyone into their own light. Those who can't do, don't teach very well either, I think.