

Lessons of a Master Teacher— Confucius

For over 25 centuries, the doctrines of Confucius—the Master, as his disciples called him—have guided the most intimate aspects of the lives of the most populous nation on earth. They still do. Just recently the Ministry of Education of the provincial government of Taiwan extended the study of Confucius into the junior high school, and Confucian values pervade the Three Principles of the People, the charter governing the Republic of China.

Unless you can visualize a time when there were no schools, books, comput-

ers, philosophy, or science, you may not be impressed by Confucius' achievements. He established the first school, which drew young men from all over ancient China to study the classics. In a feudal society, he opened his school to all applicants: "There is no class in education." He wrote the first book, *Spring and Autumn*, chronicling the deeds and misdeeds of the Dukes of Chau from the 21st to the 5th centuries

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The ancient teachings of Confucius—teacher, philosopher and moral leader—offer guidance for today's educators.

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B.C. Incredibly, he conceptualized many psychological principles, such as habit, modeling, inquiry, peer influence, individual differences, readiness, sequencing, intuition, and performance-based education.

His most significant achievement, however, and the one that should be of intense interest to us, was his emphasis on moral education. As a result of Confucius' influence, the Chinese people throughout history have been one of the most moral civilizations in the world. Considering the moral crisis in this country, such a record warrants serious study.

Unable to pinpoint Confucius' birthdate, historians accept the year 551 B.C. as a close approximation. They would agree to Shantung Province, the cultural center of ancient China, as the place of his ancestral background. Little is known of his youth other than that the early death of his father introduced him to hard times and that at age 15 he was herding cattle. By his own admission, that period helped him acquire "the ability to do many things." It also explains why his interest in teaching didn't manifest itself until 518 B.C. when the wealthy Duke of Chau agreed to sponsor his intellectual career.

Confucius married when he was 19. Apparently, in the brief span of five years, he had earned an honorable reputation; on the birth of his son, the Duke of Chau sent him a carp to signify his favor. He had only one other child, a daughter who died young.

Confucius was insistent on filial piety within family relationships. His linking of the family to the national character indicates that he believed nurturing respect and obedience through daily family transactions was critical in creating and maintaining the moral order.

He began teaching at 22. Traveling throughout the kingdom, he attracted young men of all stations and instructed them in groups for a fee. "For a man bringing me a dried fish for teaching upwards, I have never refused instruction."

"If there were moral order in the world, why would I try to change it?"

During his middle years, he moved throughout provinces that were riddled with corruption and torn by internal strife, which led him to conclude that "oppressive government is fiercer than a tiger." The moral chaos in this period was incredible. Kings were murdered by their princes; princes married their fathers' concubines; incestuous relationships abounded; all powerful nobles called themselves kings; and there was great confusion in religious worship. A chronicle of his activities during these years simply recorded a series of skirmishes with all forms of hypocrisy, corruption, and ineptitude. His ideological rival, Lao Tzu, proved an unerring prophet when he advised Confucius on his departure from Lu in 520 B.C.:

A man who is brilliant in thought is often in danger because he is prone to criticize people. A man who is learned and well read and clever often endangers himself because he reveals the foibles of those around him.

Confucius' penchant for exposing malfasants and hypocrites and, ironically, his remarkable success in trouble-shooting for various rulers, occasionally placed him in peril. Because he was working in small principalities wary of each other's power, his successes upset the balance; he became the target of uneasy rulers who were not above harassing him, even to the point of sending assassins to slay him. On several occasions, his disciples spirited him away barely in time to save his life.

Except for an occasional adventure in politics, he spent most of his life in teaching and scholarship. He was an indefatigable researcher, especially in poetry, music, and history. Historians credit him for salvaging much of the lore of ancient China. Confucius considered poetry and music the essential disciplines in his system of education. He believed they functioned to ennoble and to inspire and, therefore, to regenerate. "Wake yourself up with poetry and complete your education with music."

Poetry was the first stage in his students' education. "Without studying the poems, one will have no hold on words.

It awakens inspiration. It enhances one's sociability and liberates one's frustrations."

In the course of his research, he located, edited, and classified 3,000 poems written since the 12th century. He culled 300 of them for his curriculum and composed a musical accompaniment for each.

He was equally thorough with music. He played several instruments and frequently sang. "To enjoy true manhood through music and not arrive at complete harmony with Nature is like eating and not being well fed."

He died at age 70, revered by the people he had saved from moral decadence. One of his disciples mourned at his tomb for seven years.

"Only those who fulfill their own nature can fulfill the nature of others."

"To establish himself, the teacher establishes others

...

Confucius' objectives were clear. He taught four things: literature, personal conduct, being one's true self, and honesty in social relationships. In addition, throughout the Analects, he fleshed out the character of the "jen" man, the paragon intended to comprise the elite upon whom he relied to energize and direct nothing less than a moral renaissance.

"The jen man is modest in speech and bold in action."

"In his private life, he is humble; to his superiors, he is respectful; in nourishing the people, he is kind; in ordering the people, he is just."

"The character of the jen man is in carrying out what he professes."

"The jen man is liberal towards others, but he does not always agree with them."

"The jen man is anxious to find the truth. He is not anxious lest poverty overtake him."

"The jen man is firm but does not fight; he is dignified but not proud."

Confucius' frequent references to the moral regeneration of humanity etched his goal unmistakably. "If there were moral order in the world, why would I try to change it?"

In his teaching, he was the quintessential professional. In the Analects he says: "To establish himself, the teacher establishes others. To enlarge others, the teacher enlarges himself"—as succinct and accurate a statement of the

service principle in professionalism as can be found in the literature. Another statement reflects an attitude of his that speaks to professional educators today: "The character of the superior man lies in his carrying out in his conduct what he professes. With coarse rice to eat, with water to drink and my bended arm for a pillow, I still have joy in the midst of these. Riches and honors acquired by unrighteousness are to me as floating clouds."

His assumptions are impressive. They reflect a breadth of wisdom and perspicuity that startle by their relevance to contemporary thought. "I seek an all pervading unity. There is no single thing in which principle does not inhere."

"Man is born for uprightness. Reciprocity is the rule of life."

"What Heaven has conferred is called Nature. Accordance with Nature is called the Path. Regulation of the Path is called instruction."

"What the superior man seeks is within himself."

"The system of moral order must be based on one's own consciousness."

"The process of teaching and learning stimulate each other. Teaching is half of learning."

The latter assumption places him in the company of theorists who believe the two processes are indivisible, a position consistent with his emphasis on morality. It is this reciprocal nature of teaching that imposes a moral obligation on the teacher, that imbues his work with professional responsibility. Accountability rests on this premise.

He further elucidated by defining the relationship between teacher and student:

The teacher guides the students but does not pull them. He urges them but does not suppress them. He opens the way but does not take them to the place. Guiding without pulling will make learning gentle. Urging without suppressing will make learning easy and opening the way makes students think for themselves.

Confucius deplored poor teaching:

The teacher of today just goes on repeat-

ing things in rigamarole fashion, annoys the students with constant questions and says the same things over and over. He does not try to find out what the student's natural inclinations are so that the student is forced to pretend to like his studies. What he gives the student is wrong in the first place and what he expects is just as wrong. As a result, the student hides his favorite readings and hates his teacher.

The teacher regards the student positively but insists he act responsibly:

"With the doctrine of love for teaching affection and the doctrine of duty for teaching rectitude, the people will learn to live in the moral order."

"... to enlarge others, the teacher enlarges himself."

"A youth must be respected. How do you know that his future may not exceed your present?"

"Can there be love which does not lead to strictness toward its object?"

"The prosecution of learning may be compared to building a mound. If there is only one basket of dirt left, and I stop, the stopping is mine."

The teacher sets an example for students:

"Only those who fulfill their own nature can fulfill the nature of others."

"In the matter of education, the most difficult thing is to respect the teacher. When a teacher is respected, people respect what he teaches, and when the people respect what he teaches they respect learning and scholarship."

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The teacher acts as a facilitator:
"Forbearance and gentleness and not seeking revenge for unreasonable conduct, the jen man makes these his study."

"A principle of teaching is to give students things when they are ready for them."

The teacher relies on group discussions to aid learning:

"The study of subjects alone without friends would make a student too narrow in scope and lacking in general knowledge."

"Hearing much and selecting what is good and following it, this is the second way to knowledge."

"The principles of teaching are these . . . mutual stimulation or letting students admire the excellence of others."

Characteristically, Confucius' most distinctive statement of method was compressed into a few words: "If I give a student one side of a subject and he cannot deduce the other three, I do not repeat the lesson." Thus he burdens the teacher with the responsibility of helping the student establish a foundation but reserves the major onus for the student.

In helping to lay the foundation, the Master is very definite about what he would do. Since most of the aphorisms in the Analects are responses to his disciples' questions, it's clear he believed in inquiry. He confirms this in his definition of a good inquisitor: "A good inquisitor proceeds like a man chopping wood. He begins at the easier and attacks the harder knot last, so that after a time the student understands the point with a sense of pleasure."

This seems to imply his preference for an internal source of evaluation and a conviction that learning should be pleasurable.

He also rejected the lecture method: "The teacher observes but does not lecture."

He urged that questions and answers be couched in clear, concise language: "When a jen man introduces something, he is sure by what terminology it is called. He never uses language indiscriminately." As a matter of fact, one of his central doctrines was "Rectification," which he based on the belief that, "Unless language be in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried to success."

He urged students to perfect basic skills: "The mechanic who wishes to work well must first sharpen his tools," because "The perfecting of knowledge

depends on the investigation of things," and to conduct his investigations so as to "Learn as if you could not reach your object and were always going to lose it."

In evaluating the success of his efforts, the Master was:

Thorough: "Look closely at his aims, observe the means by which he pursues them, discover what satisfies him." "If I do sometimes exceed in praise, there must be ground for it in the individual."

Performance based: "I used to hear a man's words and credit his conduct. Now I hear his words and look at his conduct." "If a man can recite the 300 odes, but if when given a government responsibility, he cannot perform it, of what good is his learning?"

Infrequent: "The Inspector should come to the school to evaluate only at the time of the Great Sacrifice (every three years) so that the students can develop themselves."

Fair: "To require from them the full fare of work without warning, this is called oppression."

Although he was unswerving in his insistence on principle, he did not reject flexibility: "Deep water must be crossed with the clothes on. Shallow water can be crossed with the clothes held high."

Impressive though Confucius' psychological insights into teaching are, his most valuable contributions to posterity are philosophical: his insistence on the unity of things, on the essential goodness of humankind, on the moral nature of social relationships, and on the supreme value of truth.

Teaching is the role specifically committed to the improvement of humanity. That is why teaching is a moral enterprise. That is why it should incorporate the ideals of unity, goodness, morality, and truth.

That is why, after whispering words of wisdom to his people through the ages, Confucius deserves an attentive ear from American educators. His philosophy provides a firm base for establishing an ordered society. □

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