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If the best measure of influence is frequency of use, then there is a clear winner for the position of the most influential text on my teaching. It is a narrative about the growth of the student Satyakama, and it was composed in the ninth century BCE, probably somewhere in the Gangetic plain in India. While I did not realize it until now, I have told it in every single one of my classes in order to make my own pedagogical aims clear. Some of these classes were graduate classes in methodology in the study of religion; some of them were undergraduate classes in early Indian religions, and some of them were classes in the comparative study of sacred texts. Whatever the subject of the class, the narrative power of this early Indian text is, in many aspects, recognizable to us today.

Instead of focusing on several texts which have been influential on my teaching, my essay will be structured around this single Indian text and the pedagogical aims it makes clear. Before I tell the narrative and analyze the text, let me clarify my basic pedagogical commitments in the classroom. First, I focus on developing intellectual identity, and try to keep a sharp eye out for its absence or presence in any given students. Second, I try to convey to students that the teacher-student relationship can be productively thought of in terms of lineage. Third, I emphasize the inevitability of the text. Fourth, I emphasize the necessity of respect for and memory of other teachers at other times in one's life. Fifth, I portray teaching as dwelling together in a rule-governed home. I will return to all five of these principles as I discuss the story.

Now to the narrative: the story of the sage Satyakama is from the Chandogya Upanisad, a text heralded as one of the first philosophical texts of ancient India. In its lines emerge the first abstract musings on the nature of the universe, the force that animates the universe, and so on. While I think that philosophical questioning in India is present much earlier than the ninth century BCE date of this Upanisad, the narrative contained within it are a snapshot of what philosophical musings must have been like at this time: celibate (usually male) students gathered around a teacher in a small institution called an asrama, discussing the nature of Brahman, the name for the eternally animating force of the universe. The Upanisads are essentially notebooks of these discussions. The story of Satyakama is told by the sage Yajnavalkya in response to a student's question about heritage and lineage. It goes as follows:

Satyakama Jabala's mother did not know who his father was. His mother told him to go on a journey to find out. When he got the sage Uddhvasin's house, he stayed with him for a while.

Uddhvasin told him to gather wood, which he dutifully did, and asked him some questions, which he answered. You must be of brahmin lineage, said the teacher, because of the way you answer my questions. Your next task is to take care of my cows. Tend them and bring them back increased in number. Satyakama does so, and tends them so that they increase to a great number. On his return, Satyakama meets several elements of nature along the path: birds, geese, fire, wind. Each of these elements ask him if he wants to know about a part of Brahman, the object of all knowledge. He always answers yes, and they converse together. Each of them teaches him something new about Brahman. By the time he has finished these colloquies, his face begins to glow with the knowledge of Brahman. When he returns home to Uddhvasin's house, his teacher asks him, "Your face is bright with knowledge. Where did you learn all these things?" He replies, "From things other than human." Uddhvasin says, "It is now time; you are now ready to learn from a human." And they commenced studying together, dwelling in Uddhvasin's home.

This text has always moved its audience and it has always moved me. I find its early Indian details fascinating from a historical point or view. More importantly for the purposes of this issue of Spotlight, however, it moves students as a narrative about teaching itself. I have told it in the first week of class in order to let students know about my teaching style and principles. I have on occasion, however, waited until the end of a class, and used the narrative to make explicit the ways in which I have already been operating in the classroom throughout the semester. I have never presented it as a systematic commentary on pedagogy as I am doing in this essay. My use of the story of Satyakama is always by chance, partial, and opportunistic. Yet it is also a ubiquitous part of my teaching life.

Let me turn to the first principle: the absence and presence of intellectual identity. In the story, Satyakama does not know who he is; he does not know his paternal lineage and his mother isn't sure either. The only way he develops an identity is through his teacher, Uddhvasin. He isn't sure that he is a Brahmin — someone who can be sanctified to learn the knowledge of Brahman. Satyakama thus experiences the absence of intellectual (and social) identity at the beginning of his life. He knows he must seek and make it himself. At the end of the narrative, he still does not know of his paternal identity. But he has gained a sense of place through his teacher.

So too, the students I teach often begin from the absence of intellectual identity. They become slowly aware that they must find and make their own intellectual identity, no matter what their maternal or paternal lineage. For many students, the idea of intellectual identity is a new concept; they have not thought about taking pride and joy in the life of the mind per se. Yet the narrative of Satyakama illustrates that it is a crucial part of becoming an adult — something that one must actively cultivate, like Uddhvasin's cows. And the cultivation of intellectual identity happens through many conversations with unexpected teachers who appear unexpectedly along the way; ideally, every conversation contributes to the development of intellectual identity. (Even, or perhaps especially, we professional intellectuals forget this fact and have a rather utilitarian approach to our daily conversations.)

The second principle — the understanding of lineage — is in many ways a very conservative concept. If I approached the topic with contemporary examples, there are frequent objections and expressions of discomfort. In the story of Satyakama, however, the issue of lineage is easier to deal with because it is so distant and strange. Satyakama discovers that he is essentially obliged to Uddhvasin because Uddhvasin has given him shelter, and has agreed to teach him after he has passed the test (to be discussed below). Uddhvasin, in turn, is also obliged to him as a student; he has a set of things that Satyakama must learn and it is up to Uddhvasin to teach him. However, as I explain to the students, in ancient India this obligation does not stop when the period of studentship ends. It is a lasting, sacred relationship that exists mentally and emotionally and spiritually even after the teacher has died. Thus, to enter in to a relationship of teaching and learning is to remain forever obliged.

This point about lineage goes over beautifully when I discuss the concept in ancient India. It even goes over beautifully when I ask my students to think of teachers to whom they are forever obliged. In response, they usually describe their favorite teachers and, engage in mental reveries about former classroom Utopias. However, I also suggest that they are forever obliged to all of their teachers in the same way as Satyakama. This relationship might not be so explicit, or even so pleasant, as in the Upanisadic story, but nonetheless the point opens up the possibility for students that their negative reactions to teachers might be of very real use to them as learners. Moreover, I also suggest that when a teacher teaches, she is also reflecting her earlier teachers in her actions. There is always a generational memory involved in teaching, and this is a point often forgotten.

The third principle is even more odiously conservative than the second: the inevitability of the test. In order even to be accepted as a student, Satyakama must pass oral and practical tests; he answers Uddhvasin's questions and increases his herd of cows. In fact, Satyakama's lineage is not really clear until the end of the story, when he completes these actions and is accepted by Uddhvasin into his home. This is not just an accidental quirk of a particularly harsh teacher; Uddhvasin is in fact conducting an everyday ritual ubiquitous in early India, and in many different religious traditions. The test is long, personally costly, and looks more like an initiation than an entrance exam. The test is costly because the value of teacher-student relationship that is won is so precious.

We have remnants of the test in the "by permission of instructor only" notes that we add to our course directories each semester. These colophons tend to be added to the most popular classes and smallest seminars, where the precious nature of the teacher/student relationship is still preserved. In discussing this point in class, I frequently mention that testing (and its pedagogical relative, grading) is directly related to the value of the learning relationship. As in the Satyakama story, acts of judgment and testing are ubiquitous in any good pedagogical situation, and should be accepted as the warp and woof of educational formation. Significantly, this point does not go over well without the help of the story of Satyakama; discussions of testing, grading and judgment usually raise anxieties to unmanageable levels and make very intelligent students behave stupidly. Yet when I refer to the situation of Satyakama (his life was really at stake in his test!), students tend to see the value and inevitability of the test in a new light. They do not think Satyakama's studentship would have had the same value if Uddhvasin had not conducted a formal rite of initiation. The story also helps when I receive complaints from younger students about grading in so soft a subject as religion: "How can you grade our writing about religion?" And I reply: "Satyakama was learning about nothing less than Brahman, the nature of the universe, and he got graded. Why shouldn't you?"

The fourth point that the narrative of Satyakama illustrates is about the necessity of respect for other teachers at other times. In the story, Uddhvasin directly asks Satyakama who else has taught him about Brahman. And Satyakama replies that he has had teachers "other than human." It is clear from Satyakama's face that he has had other teachers, for it is shining with knowledge. And Uddhvasin understands that these other voices (fire, wind, birds, and so on) are an essential part of Satyakama's education to date. "It is time you learned from a human" he responds to his new pupil. There is a timeliness to Satyakama's arrival back into a human home, as there was a timeliness to Satyakama's learning from nonhuman teachers.

While the issue of human or nonhuman teachers is not particularly relevant here, I think the Satyakama story contains a subtle but significant point. It is a very significant part of our experience as teachers of religion. As teachers of religion who often have more formative influence in our students' lives, we often hear the voices of other teachers in our classrooms: Sunday school teachers, pandits who came to perform worship at the family home; high school philosophy teachers, parents who wish to give their children some kind of religious formation. One of the most challenging questions I receive in the classroom is: "Last week you told us that and at the dinner table during Thanksgiving break my parents/pandit/priest/rabbi/etc. told me that this was not correct." I find this one of the most difficult moments in my teaching life, and it happens all the time. Yet these voices are just like the voices of Satyakama's earlier teachers; they have had a place in the formation of the student in his or her present incarnation, and they deserve to be respected. There was a timeliness to their presence in the student's life, and a timeliness to our presence in our students lives even as we dispense information and arguments contrary to what the students have previously learned. When I remember the story of Satyakama, it is easier to deal with the specifics of these questions. In addition, teaching the story of Satyakama makes the issue explicit for all of us in the classroom.

Satyakama is least explicit about the fifth and final principle, the portrait of teaching as dwelling together in a rule-governed home. The last line of the story only mentions that they studied together in the home of Uddhvasin. Here I expand a little for the students: in India, this means that Satyakama followed the domestic rules of Uddhvasin: how his wife ran the household, when and how he should eat, what kind of wood he should fetch; how he should tend the fires, and so on. This behavior was also part of the teacher/student contract, once it was entered into.

Students tend to respond to the idea of "domestic rules" fairly well. It conjures images of relational responsibility, not just contractual responsibility. Moreover, it adds punch to my overall goal of helping the students to see their responsibilities as both contractual and personal obligations. (Many students of the nineties tend to be more faithful to the letter, and not the spirit of the syllabus contract.) Moreover, because in the story of Satyakama such domestic rules are part of a very public, sacred learning process, the idea of the classroom as a kind of dwelling together is not simply "domesticating" the process of teaching. It intends to make students accountable to the very public act of learning in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

This brief essay could have easily referred to many other thinkers who have reflected on similar pedagogical themes (Levinas on the teacher/student relationship; Rousseau on the absence and presence of intellectual identity; Simone Weil or Mahatma Gandhi on the idea of the test; Ivan Illich on the idea of a dwelling place, and so on). While these thinkers have also exerted deep influence on my teaching style, I rarely refer to these works in the classroom itself. I tend to refer to them in private student conferences. Yet the Satyakama story is part of my public teaching canon; I always tell it, and it always gets one, if not several, of my pedagogical principles across. As an influential text, the narrative of Satyakama has begun to teach itself.