

TEACHING



From the Inside Out



GREGORY WYNANT MARTIN

TEACHING



TEACHING

From The Inside Out

GREGORY WYNANT MARTIN



WYNANT PUBLISHING
SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA

This is a work of creative nonfiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Teaching From the Inside Out Copyright © 2017 by Gregory Martin. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Wynant Publishing, San Jose, California.

Cover and book design by Ray Rhamey

ISBN 978-0-692-82756-7

To all I've spoken with about teaching; thank you.

Contents

Backward	1	I had to learn to stay within myself.	62
I got under their skin a little and they knew I wasn't going anywhere.	3	The kind of program I wanted to run didn't have the right kids.	66
Little clues the kids are giving off let us know how much to push.	7	Assume honorable intent.	69
We aren't automatons and neither are the kids. Never have been.	11	We are counselors, friends, teachers, role models, disciplinarians, and plenty of other things.	72
I can't control the outside stuff, but in class I have autonomy and can be as creative as I want to be.	15	I don't want my students to experience that 'how-did-I-get-here' moment.	78
Sometimes it's who you know, isn't it?	21	I felt that if you loved the children and didn't judge them you could be good at what you did.	82
Most of our skills we learn on the job, making mistakes, correcting them, growing with the work.	26	The entire place seems to be driven buy the Booster Club and the Varsity football coach.	86
Good teaching is like jazz.	31	I want my students to understand America's policies and the choices awaiting them.	90
We had a powerful tool if we didn't overuse it.	35	They'll run it down your throats if you don't speak up.	95
Sometimes chaos is the best environment for learning.	39	Most people don't understand our commitment.	99
The passion to teach can't be faked.	43	I taught the kids nobody else wanted.	104
There's a certain segment of kids just looking for some place comfortable.	48	When the principal called me a 'Luddite,' I knew I was in trouble.	108
If people aren't engaged and having fun, they aren't learning.	52	The kids were a challenge, but sometimes the parents were a bigger one.	112
It became immediately obvious that I had to earn my students' respect.	57	I didn't see it coming.	116
		Almost everything we know about teaching we learned on the job.	120
		I must be doing something right; my classes are full and there's always a waiting list.	124

I know the most important thing; butts in seats.	128	The more you have control, the more the students just relax and get the job done.	203
Come to our school. At least you'll get to play.	132	I thought it prudent that we have a say in changing working conditions.	207
There's something wrong with teachers who think they've figured it all out.	137	What I'm teaching isn't kindergarten English.	211
First impressions count.	143	Support for what we were trying to do just eroded over time	214
I was in the middle of the de-professionalization of teaching.	148	Back then, in our district, everything came from the top down.	218
I'll stick to knives. It better suits my temper.	152	Interesting what you can learn skinny-dipping in the school swimming pool.	222
I found myself swimming upstream against a tide I didn't know existed.	155	Don't ignore opportunity when it comes knocking.	226
I had the usual problems as a beginning teacher; I was young and I didn't know what I was doing.	159	It's all about consistency and owning your classroom.	230
If it was broken, I was in charge of fixing it.	163	Everybody needs a reason to be in school.	235
The trick to my job is obvious; you make yourself seen.	170	Learning professional distance was a challenge.	239
My students knew I was working hard on their behalf.	174	Acknowledgements	244
Teaching is on-the-job training.	178		
Public education and our commonly shared sense of community seem a thing of the past.	182		
The playing field is becoming even less level.	186		
It's kind of funny, but my temper actually ended up helping me.	190		
With other resources, everything takes on so much more meaning.	194		
Well, I'm an artist, first of all.	199		



Backward

Our public schools are in more jeopardy and under more scrutiny today than ever before. Problems are numerous as are opinions about what might be done to address those issues.

Teaching, From The Inside Out does not pretend to solve problems our schools face. Instead, it is an attempt to let those in our classrooms tell us what their jobs are like, what successes and failures they have experienced, what they love about their work and what they find most challenging. It is my belief that their voices should be included in any serious dialogue about our public schools.

I have spent my entire adult life working in public schools. I continue to do so because I love the work. Many of the people whose voices you will read in this book feel the same way, although some who speak here do not. Regardless, the focus of this book is from the inside out, on the people nearest the classroom and our public school students.

Teaching, From The Inside Out is the result of my interest in Studs Terkel's oral histories. Terkel was a writer, an actor, and a political activist who wrote *Working* and *The Good War*, among other books. He excelled at giving voice to those he interviewed, people who told us what they did, why they did it, and how they felt about it. For me, a logical extension of

my interest in his work was to take the subject of teaching and allow public school teachers the same opportunity.

In order to respect the anonymity of the subjects in this book, I have written composites of the interviews I held with teachers, coaches, administrators, and classified personnel. Though a work of creative nonfiction, the subjects' emotions, struggles, and accomplishments are very real as are their ideas about how we might improve the system.

I invite you to listen.

I got under their skin a little and they
knew I wasn't going anywhere.

Russell Peterson

My interview with Russell takes place one lunchtime at the Pruneyard in Campbell, California. I've caught up with Russ and a friend, Joe Altobelli, at the Togo's in the northwest corner of the shopping center. Both men are in their sixties. Both are wearing baseball caps, Russ's with a picture of an Italian-looking man holding a cigar. When I ask about it, Russ tells me it's the film he and Joe have just finished making, "Uncle Freddie," something he's wanted to do since he was a kid.



I thought I'd grow up to be a gambler, maybe a filmmaker. I'd done plenty of that before I got into teaching. I just lost money on both and decided that my mother had been right. She'd told me when I was a kid that I'd be a teacher when I grew up. How she knew that I'll never know. I fought the idea, to be frank. I loved the track, I loved the numbers in the racing form, I loved the smell of horseshit and watching the animals come out of the paddock, snorting and fussing. The colors, too. Oh, the colors, the silks, the whole beauty

of those horses arriving in the sun and on the track itself. My dad owned a liquor store downtown, but his love was the ponies, too. He got me there at an early age. I'll never forget the first time. We walked in through the gate right at the first turn. The race had just begun, the third, my lucky number, and they went pounding around the turn, dirt flying, and I was hooked. Ma always said, afterword, that dad had passed on early just to get me away from the track and the booze and into something worthwhile—teaching.

And so, as she was always saying, it came to pass. Of course, she didn't do the extra year in grad school getting a credential. I did that because I'd promised my father I'd go back to school and do something besides take over the store.

My first job was downtown at the local high school and it wasn't all that rewarding. I thought I knew what I was doing, but those around me had other ideas. I wanted them to read. They wanted to smoke dope and party. I wanted them to be able to express themselves. It seemed to me that they survived on the least amount of words possible, words like "wow" and "chill." I was spinning my wheels, clearly, so after a few useless years at that, I took a sabbatical. For two years I wrote in the mornings and used up my savings at the track in the afternoons or evenings. I thought I'd made a mistake, trying to teach, made a promise to my folks I couldn't keep.

I gave it a second chance though and got a gig I really enjoyed. It was on San Jose's East Side this time, and the setting was entirely different. I was tired of kids who were spoiled. These guys weren't. They were tough and as recalcitrant as they could possibly be, but once they began to appreciate what I was doing, they were the most loyal people in the world. Let's be honest here; they were nearly all Hispanic kids, raised in poverty, surrounded by lots of distractions. At first, I couldn't enter the cage without a whip and a chair. At

least that's what my administrators said I'd need to have with me, people who were mostly white and calloused as hell. I eschewed the props and just walked in and stuck my head in the lion's mouth. I had trust. Maybe I had a death wish, who knows?

It worked for me, though. I didn't want to teach Advanced Placement or any of those child-abuse classes. That pressure, those expectations, didn't fit where I was. I wanted more than teaching to a test. I wanted the kids to read and talk about what they saw in what they read. I wanted them to learn to listen to each other. I wanted them to respect the opinions and feelings of others. I wanted them to realize that learning wasn't a bad thing and that it might last a lifetime. It should last a lifetime. Go to college, if you can. Use your brains. Don't get stuck in some job where some dude is breathing over your shoulder and he doesn't have half the energy or brains you do.

I have to say it worked pretty well for me and it worked for most of the kids I was teaching. Once I got under their skin a little and they knew I wasn't going anywhere, they took to what I was teaching. Then, when I began to get their friends, their cousins, their little brothers and sisters, they'd come in the door knowing me, knowing my reputation. That helped enormously.

I missed it immediately after I retired. Two thousand and eleven. So now I'm doing the other thing I always wanted to do, make films. Joe and I just finished "Uncle Freddie," and now Doug and I, a guy I taught with for most of my career, we're making a documentary about kids on the east side. It's mainly about this one student I had way back, a girl named Jessie, who was as tough as they came until she grew up and changed and became a kind of shining light for kids in her 'hood. Her name, back in school and on the official roll, was Juanita Esperanza Sanchez, a beautiful name, but

she wouldn't let anyone call her Juanita. She was a boxer, for Christ's sake, a kid who decided she wasn't going to take shit from anyone. I saw something else in Jessie, though and I think some of her other teachers did, too.

Low and behold, she comes back to me six years later with this book she's written. It's a book about her life and the steps she's taken to correct the path she was on. You talk about a self-motivated person! Juanita was one of those. She stood up for herself, put herself through school, and now she counsels kids where she works. It's the Gardner area, one of the toughest parts of town, the place where Juanita grew up. I loved that girl and now Doug and I are trying to do something using her example in the film.

That's what can happen to you as a teacher; you can actually get back more than you give.

Little clues the kids are giving off let
us know how much to push.

Theresa Oulette

Theresa lives in a small house off University in Palo Alto. I've just met one of her roommates, a woman who's rolled a bicycle past me in the foyer on her way to "do the dish." When we're seated a moment later, Theresa tells me that Shannon is riding her bike up the path to the satellite dish on the hill above highway 280.

For just a moment, I'm torn between what I've come to do and what I'd like to do, ride that impossibly steep path up to the top of the hill. I've seen others do it for years and now I experience a moment of true envy.

It's another warm spring afternoon and we settle in with mugs of tea. Theresa sits in the afternoon sunlight coming through the kitchen windows, I in the shade opposite. As a result, for much of the early part of the interview, Theresa is a shadowy outline and a voice. That voice, though, is filled with a compassion that fits her words perfectly.



I began teaching here in 1998 after I finished at Stanford. Funny how that went; I never consciously thought I'd just grow up in one place, go to high school and college here, and then become a teacher at my old school. I know. The little triangle I've lived my life in is a pretty small one.

Some of my old friends still shake their heads when I see them, people from high school and college. "Teaching? Really?" You don't have to have that great an imagination to hear their tone of voice in those words. It's obvious. They don't say it, but it's there. 'Why?' is always implied. I don't spend a lot of time trying to explain to them how satisfying teaching can be. How it takes me out of myself and makes me think about others. Care about them. It's sort of the definition of humanitarianism.

Money isn't in the equation, not like it is with so many of my classmates. A lot of people are kind of scared of teenagers, but I find being on campus exhilarating. You see all the kids, freshmen to seniors, and you see them change and grow. You see them on the cusp of their lives when so much is still possible.

I love my school. I teach junior and senior English and you could probably fill this room with the essays I've read in my career. It's probably the toughest academic public school in the whole Bay Area. Rigorous, more Advanced Placement classes than anybody, kids whose parents are professionals and still married, all of which creates pressure. And our students excel in almost everything. We have a fabulous Speech and Debate team, outstanding sports teams, we flat out kick ass in Robotics, and our Drama department is like a college theatre arts program. Of course, along with all that though, there are those expectations. For some of the kids, they're completely unrealistic. Not everybody's parents are professors at Stanford and not all the kids are headed to Ivy League colleges. It just seems that way.

I remember one day last year, it was in the spring. Beautiful May morning, typical for around here. I show up for first period a little late. I had to park in the back lot and just came directly to the classroom. I'm taking roll and I notice that Brett Foster isn't in class. Brett, the class clown, and underneath that exterior just a sweet boy.

I said, "Brett's probably still at the beach, huh?" There was this hush in the room when I said that. I remember looking up and beginning to register the faces before me. This wasn't a typical Monday morning first period. "What?" I remember saying.

This girl in the front row, Melanie, goes, "You don't know?" I looked up at Melanie. She turned half around, and then back. "You didn't check Facebook?"

Before I could ask her what she meant, another kid, a boy named Jarod, said, "Brett killed himself Sunday morning. At the University crossing. CalTrain."

I was stunned. I remember sitting down at my desk and not doing anything. We were all quiet for a long time and then Osie Frank, a friend of Brett's, began telling us a story about how his buddy had to feed the dog every night, a chore he hated doing. It wasn't Cisco, the dog, it was the idea of the chore itself. Brett used to flatten the cans out behind the garage, after he fed Cisco, and then sail them out over the neighbor's rooftops. We laughed at that and very slowly the class time became much different than what I'd planned.

There isn't a day that goes by that I don't reflect on that, think about Brett and that whole situation. Brett was a wonderful young man but I guess I didn't know him as well as I thought I did. I'm much more aware of the little clues the kids are giving off now than I was before that happened. I hope we all are.

He hasn't been the only one from here, from our school. That's why the expectation situation is such a delicate one,

knowing how much to push, how much to allow the kids to be kids. We don't do that enough. They find themselves lacking sometimes when they're surrounded with others who excel, or seem to, at everything they do. Not everyone can do that. Not everyone is on the debate team, the team's quarterback, the ones recruited by Stanford and Harvard.

I've seen our school really open up and accept that idea and make preparations for those kids who aren't geniuses like some of them are. We have multiple groups that deal with pressure the kids face, groups that deal with teen pressure as well as parental expectations. We have some great counselors here, something that plenty of public schools don't have. In fact, this district has instituted a number of changes trying to reduce stress as well as identify those kids who need extra attention. All of us know now that depression and mental health problems are so easy to mask, especially with high-achieving families. I guess more and more of us on campus are aware now that education needs to be about more than writing and reading and studying calculus.

We aren't automatons and neither are the kids. Never have been.

S.T. Dancing

S.T., my next-door neighbor, comes over one spring afternoon dressed in the same clothes I'd seen him in all morning; loose jeans, an old faded blue junior high sweatshirt from his last school, and a floppy sun hat. I know this because, from the computer in my living room, I can see him through a large plate glass window in the front of our house. He's been trimming and cutting, mowing and clearing for hours in his front yard. He looks like he can use one, so I bring him a cold can of beer and we get right to it.



I can't really believe it, but I've been retired now almost twenty years. I taught history in junior high and then in middle school when the system changed to 6-8 grades instead of the old 9-12. I ended up teaching eighth graders, for the most part. I really enjoyed those years. It might not sound possible, but kids could be entirely different personalities on any given day. You could see the maturation, or the struggle

at least, in the classroom with them and I liked that. After I retired, I got called back to administration for two years. Discipline, mostly. And that was very different from the classroom. I spent all my time chasing kids but I didn't like the idea that kids would do stuff dumb enough to get caught, so I gave that up.

What I remember most fondly about the job was the trips we took every year back to D.C. They were extensive. We knew we had to keep the kids busy all day long. If you didn't, you'd be chasing them all over the place. We used to go to all the universities while we were back there. We wanted to show them what was possible. Georgetown, N.Y.U, Columbia. We went to plays, ball games, Ellis Island, the Capital, and the White House. We wanted them to try and understand history, what was going on right then. I did this seventeen times and most of the kids I had in class went with us, twice, my own grandchildren.

I remember one day in particular. We'd been to Arlington and then, in the afternoon, the Holocaust Museum. My oldest grandson said, when we came out of the museum, "This is a really sad day." I think he grew up a little with that day's experiences.

Discussing the Holocaust with thirteen-year-olds is pretty difficult. We read, of course, and I talked, but watching those kids go through the museum in D.C. you could just begin to see all of it registering with them. I'll never forget this one kid I had. We always went for ten days and the last one was Easter Sunday. The museum was full of Hasidic Jews that day. It was my last year, '96, and this one student I had was a real tough kid. You could tell that. He got sent to the office nearly every day because his pants were belted below his butt. Everybody knew he was wearing the same boxers day after day. I'm sure his family, maybe brothers, maybe dad, had gang affiliations, but I could see beneath all

of that some potential, too. Fact is, that's what I loved about teaching, trying to get kids like that to drop the façade and get interested. It happened too, but we had to go all the way to D.C. to realize something had happened.

I remember standing in that room near the end of the museum where it's nothing but pictures of those who lost their lives in those camps. I'm telling you, not even thirteen-year-olds can get out of there without seeing all of those people looking back at them. It's powerful, and Angel got it too.

He was about the last person in the group to leave that space and when he did, I saw the tears on his cheeks. He didn't say anything to me when he passed me on the way out. He just looked at me. Right there, at that moment, I suspected he'd been listening all along.

I taught school in the day and age when you had to work two jobs to make ends meet, although now that I think about it, I suppose that's the case nowadays as well. So, I worked the summer cannery circuit for years. What better place, right? San Jose, back when we still had orchards and tomatoes and fruit in abundance. In fact, living here, I swear that in those days, you could close your eyes, lift your head up to the evening sky, smell, and tell exactly which cannery was working that night and what they were canning. Peaches? Tomatoes? Fruit cocktail? If the wind was right, it was obvious.

So I drove a forklift for Dole mostly during the summers. Good job, except for the first month that school began and the first month of summer when the jobs overlapped. I didn't see much of Gwen and the kids those months. I worked the swing shift, 3:30 to midnight, loading trucks that came into the warehouse. The pace wasn't always the same, but it seemed about fifteen minutes or so between trucks. I worked at the storage place right near Spartan Stadium and next to the railroad tracks and the old drive-in theatre. Randy, the other driver, used to go out between trucks and

sit at the open doorway watching whatever film they were playing at the time. Not me. I had my papers with me and I read student work between trucks and graded papers. That was a good way to do it, too. Both of us were good at the loading job; grab the pallet from the stack and slam six of them into our side of the truck. Easy, once you got the hang of it. Then I'd roll over to the office where the light was best and do my homework. In the summer proper, I read my own stuff between trucks. That was a good job, all right.

I've still got friends working in the district, guys who began after me.

I see them now and again, like at the end when I did that vice principal gig. I can tell you this, very few of them are happy. The amount of interference from people who don't know a damn thing about education! That's their biggest complaint now; restrictions and data, standards and testing up the butt. It's really piling on. Not much room any more for the autonomy we had or much creativity, either. We had fun teaching back then.

After a few years experience, I learned to stay out of the faculty room at lunch. You can't believe how a few sour people can bring everyone else down. I also requested a portable there towards the end. I wanted the isolation and I didn't want to be interrupted when I was teaching, so I cut the phone lines. I understood that kids learned in different ways and at different times and teachers, the good ones, taught that way too. We aren't automatons and never have been. We had to really work to make sure our lesson plans were successful, but we also got to devise the strategies and the approaches. They weren't handed to us by someone who imagined he knew how the job got done. It just doesn't seem to be that way anymore.

I can't control the outside stuff, but
in class I have autonomy and can be as
creative as I want to be.

Jason Weiler

Jason is one of several of my former students I interview for this project. His father and I taught together for years and I've known both Jason and his sister since their births.

Our conversation begins with Jason's first job in Baltimore, Maryland where both he and his wife were going to graduate school. With the birth of two sons, the longing to return to the Bay Area began. Now with three children, his two sons still at school and an infant daughter asleep in another room, we sit out on his back deck and talk. It's an overcast early afternoon in Oakland, but the Bay Bridge is still faintly visible in the fog beyond.



I think for obvious reasons I was always drawn to the profession. Clearly I knew what it meant to be a teacher from observing my parents, watching them grade papers and write lesson plans in the evenings after dinner. I pretty much knew what to expect. In fact, though, I wanted to do something different. I got a few jobs along the way in government,