

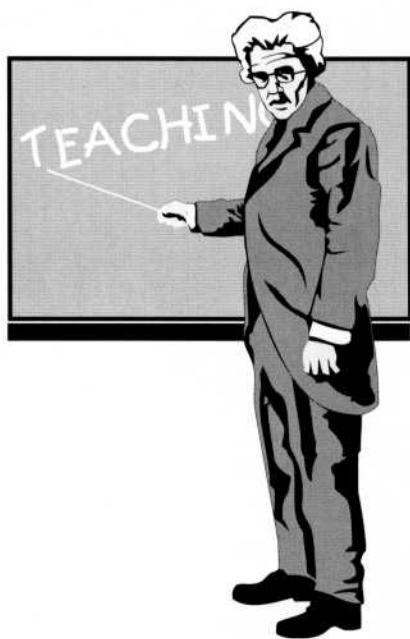
WHY DO THEY TEACH?

by Kathryn Jenson White

*For rigorous teachers seized my youth,
And purged its faith, and trimmed its fire,
Showed me the high, white star of Truth
There bade me gaze, and there aspire.*

Matthew Arnold

Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse



University teaching is the Democratic Party of professions; like its political counterpart, the Professor Party provides a big umbrella that shelters a large assortment of personalities. The cast of characters at large behind the ivy-covered walls of college campuses is well-known to readers of literature and viewers of film. The pipe-smoking philosophy professor with suede patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket, the business professor in his Brooks Brothers suit and the English professor in her Indian gauze and Birkenstocks are only a few of the commonly portrayed varieties. While these particular depictions may be more stereotypical than typical, wide-ranging diversity and difference do, indeed, seem more welcome in the halls of academe than within

the enclaves of other professions.

The three men and one woman who speak in this article about their chosen profession are a disparate group personally and professionally. They were born in places as far removed from each other as Malaysia and Oklahoma. Only one of the four always has had a life-long desire to teach; the other three had successful careers in physics, pharmacy and engineering before becoming academics. The youngster of the group has taught for only five years at the university level; the other three have been at it for a dozen years and more.

Stylistically, they are no less diverse. Their fashion choices range from T-shirt and jeans to natty three-piece suits; their classroom deportment from formal lecture to Socratic questioning to tossing a firecracker into a wastebasket to recapture wandering attentions. Their office décors run the gamut from teddy bears to a plastic skull hat rack; in one office towering, tottering piles of paper cover every surface; in another, little or no clutter is allowed. Where easy chairs, rugs and various personal knickknacks create a personal space for one professor, standard university-issue tables and chairs are sufficient for another.

The differences may seem great but are, in the end, insignificant. These four very individual individuals are bound together by common threads that make them part of the same fabric of university life. Above all else, they are dedicated and successful teachers, recipients of awards from students and colleagues.

Although interviewed individually, each comfortably ensconced in a home away from home—his or her university office—their thoughts all contained recurring themes and motifs. When pressed, each could imagine being something other than a teacher, but none would seriously consider changing careers. All insist that while all those other careers might produce much larger monthly fiscal paychecks, they would lag far, far behind in the psychic paychecks teaching allows them to bank daily.

Mary Lou Stiles, associate professor of pharmaceuticals; Stewart Ryan, associate professor of physics; Ralph E. Doty, associate professor of classics; and Nandkumar Nayar, assistant professor of finance, have given considerable thought to how they can be effective teachers and why they want to be. They put the lie to George Bernard Shaw's cranky assertion that, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches," and support the lesser-repeated but much truer declaration of Henry Adams: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."

"Why, I love that old witch!"

Although her mother was a teacher, Mary Lou Stiles says she knew from the time she cut her teeth on the counter of her grandparents' drugstore in Oklahoma Territory that she would grow up to be a pharmacist.

She did, and after serving 12 successful years in that profession, she came to the University of Oklahoma from a position as director of a hospital pharmacy to earn a



Robert H. Taylor

Mary Lou Stiles

master's in pharmaceuticals to advance her career. She got the degree, but somehow she never made it back to the pharmacy. A shortage of people to teach pharmaceuticals led to a job offer at the Health Sciences Center. Fifteen years later, Stiles has an academic record of teaching and professional awards, activities and publications that fill a vita more than 40 pages long.

Looking back at the beginning of her teaching career, she

“If you’re not excited about your subject, you shouldn’t be teaching.”

laughs at two pretty tough years, during which the pharmacist-turned-professor felt terribly inadequate.

“I went from awful to a little bit better,” she says. “First moments can be terrifying. I didn’t know how to connect my newly learned book theory with my years of experience. I finally realized that my education in the field could give my students something they couldn’t get from textbooks alone. It takes a while to realize who and what you are as a teacher.

“I look back at that first year, and I just feel so sorry for those students. I mean, I made every mistake in the world. Yet, I have students from those first couple of years for whom I’ve remained a surrogate mother. I can’t believe they’ve forgiven me; I can’t believe they’ve done so well.”

Stiles knew when she elected teaching over practice she was choosing a career in which the material rewards would not be as great. Today, she says, her students routinely earn more money in their first year in the field than she does after a decade and a half in her profession.

“You know, there really are some things money can’t buy,” she says. “I just came back from a national meeting where I met former students who were practicing all over the Southwest. When they run up and hug me—men with their wives as well as women with their husbands—and treat me like a mom and tell me how rewarding their profession has been for them, it’s an unbelievable feeling for me.”

Nurturing is clearly a key word in the Stiles style of teaching. Her office displays pill bottles filled with M & Ms and plastered with student parodies of prescription labels. Teddy Bears, plaques and other tokens of affection from students fill the walls and shelves.

“Caring” does not mean “easy,” however, and Stiles admits she has earned her reputation as a demanding teacher.

“You can’t fake things in pharmacy, because people die,” she says. “Students are truly overwhelmed after their first week in the program, and I’m the last lecture of the week. I tell them I’ll teach them to fill prescriptions, and that there is no margin for error. I say I’ll grade them on five points, and then I start naming all the things they can do wrong to lose those points. I tell them they’re the cream of the crop, often straight-A students, and that they’re going to work three to five hours in the lab on these assignments, and all they’ll have to show for it will be a zero.

“I say I’m being kind, actually; if I counted up everything that was wrong, they’d be so far in the hole they couldn’t dig their way out. So I have a heart and cut it off at zero.”

Not too long ago, a former student told Stiles that she had gone to her room exhausted after hearing this welcoming speech and called a friend from home.

“She said she told her friend it was the straw that broke the camel’s back,” Stiles recalls. “You should have heard

that old witch,’ she said she told her. Then she didn’t talk to the friend again until near the end of the semester. ‘How are you getting along with that old witch?’ the friend asked when they spoke again. My student said she was truly stumped and asked, ‘What old witch?’ The friend said, ‘You know, the old witch who teaches you to fill prescriptions.’ The student said she was shocked and said indignantly, ‘Why, I love that old witch!’ Isn’t that nice?”

Dr. Indestructo: “Physics is Phun.”

In his 20 years as a teacher, Stewart Ryan has had plenty of time to analyze the characteristics of an effective educator. Deciding to come to OU to teach physics rather than take a much more lucrative position in a government laboratory, he never imagined that those attributes might include the willingness to lie on a bed of nails while students swung sledge hammers to break cinder blocks stacked on his chest or the chutzpah to don a multi-colored wig and white lab coat to become Dr. Indestructo.

This wild and crazy character is a “physics is phun” kind of guy who is part Bozo, part Einstein and all intent on making those who see the show understand the wonder of the physical world around them. Ryan appears as Dr. Indestructo approximately 25 times each year, planting seeds of interest in physics in everyone from kindergartners to attendees at 50th high school class reunions.

Almost certainly Ryan could not have foreseen that his classroom equipment would include a mailbox on wheels from which he would retrieve “viewer mail” from students to be read whenever interest begins to lag. Hopefully some of the letters concern physics, but he has only two rules: he will not read aloud any letter that disparages anyone but himself or one that makes him blush. Otherwise, he’s open.

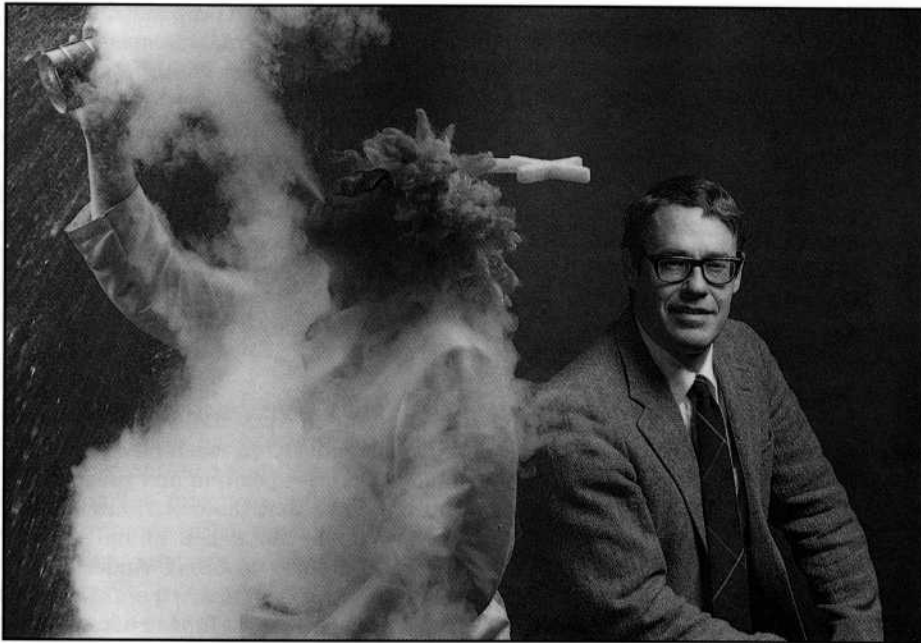
“Teaching is very, very exciting, which isn’t to say there aren’t a lot of downsides,” he says. “I hate making out exams. I hate assigning final grades. I don’t like the drudge work, but teaching is a real high. I don’t imagine people go out of my class thinking physics is the best thing since sliced bread, but my excitement is what I want to communicate. Basically, if you’re not excited about your subject, you shouldn’t be teaching.”

Ryan teaches a general education physics course for non-science majors, known colloquially as “physics for poets.” He has approximately 600 students a year in several large sections of the course, and 599 of them find the going tough. Knowing that from the start, Ryan engages in what some might see as unusual classroom tactics.

“My teaching style is one of trying to keep students off



you're not excited about your subject, you shouldn't be teaching.



Gil Jain

Stewart Ryan

balance,” he says. “I don’t know if I’d do the same in English or communications, but physics is very intimidating. One way to lessen that intimidation is to relieve tension by being not very dignified in class.

“Teaching is like acting. Especially in a large class, you’re performing. If a class is dragging, I might light a firecracker and toss it in the wastebasket. If things get a little dull, I might go for some viewer mail. Dr. Indestructo, my alter ego, is always lurking in the wings, too. He was developed as a vehicle for presenting shows to a younger audience, but college students enjoy seeing a professor making an ass out of himself. That’s always better than the professor *not* making an ass out of himself.”

It makes sense that a physicist, one who spends his life seeking to understand the laws of the universe, would approach understanding his career in a similar fashion.

“There are two rules for teaching,” he says. “Actually there are three, but the second two presuppose the first. Rule Zero is to know your subject so well you don’t have to think about it. That makes it possible to concentrate on presentation rather than the subject matter. Rule One is to be enthusiastic about your subject matter. If you’re not, your students won’t be. Rule Two is to really love your students.

“In some respects, Rule Two is self-serving. My handwriting is abysmal. I talk too fast. I do all sorts of things that really annoy students, but I figure if I

can communicate that I care about what I’m teaching and about their learning it, I can survive. It’s how I overcome all the things I wish I could do better.”

Ryan contends that the good teacher is always open to change in the effort to keep improving at his or her calling. Four years ago, he says, he had a student who helped him become a better teacher in a way he couldn’t have foreseen. She made him rethink the attitudes he had toward students who had great difficulty “getting it.”

“Doris Travis was 84 when she took my class,” he explains. “She dropped out of school when she was a teenager and joined ‘The Ziegfeld Follies.’ When she and her husband retired and bought a horse ranch in Oklahoma, she kept complaining about not having a degree. Her husband said, ‘You’re eight

miles from OU. Put up or shut up.’ She got her GED, then started college.

“She was the same age as my mother, was very financially successful and had the utmost motivation to do well in my class. If someone like her had a hard time, and she did, I thought that maybe I’d been too hard on my younger, less-motivated students. That didn’t mean I should stop holding them to standards, but that I wouldn’t judge them so harshly for not being prepared to do well in the class. Their inadequate preparation does not necessarily reflect on them.

“After her, I began treating the course a little differently. What I think is most important is that people come out of the course with an understanding that science and physics make the world go round, that the world is rational.”

No “Uncle Al, the Kiddies’ Pal.”

The most noticeable item in the very small office of Ralph Doty is a skull he uses for a hat rack. The most noticeable thing not in his home is a television. He shows up for class every day in a suit and tie, vest with watch chain and a hat. He is mildly horrified at the thought of addressing students by their first names. He insists that college professors are not taken seriously by a large segment of the population and

*"You don't have to be warm and cuddly;
I'm not. I'm cold and prickly."*

points to the absent-minded professor as a national figure of fun. That's just fine with him.

"That perception allows us mavericks a little bit of room to depart from the norm," he says. "If I were in business or politics, I couldn't afford not to own a television set. Some people consider it vaguely threatening, even downright un-American. I would be considered too weird for words."

Although society may poke gentle fun at the generic college professor, this specific college professor takes what he does very seriously.

"I have a character in the classroom, and it is based on my belief that on the first day I have to show them that I am not Uncle Al, the Kiddies' Pal," he says. "A former student came back to tell me that when he had attended his little brother's grade school awards ceremony, 20 of the 24 teachers given recognition said their primary goal was to build a student's self-esteem.

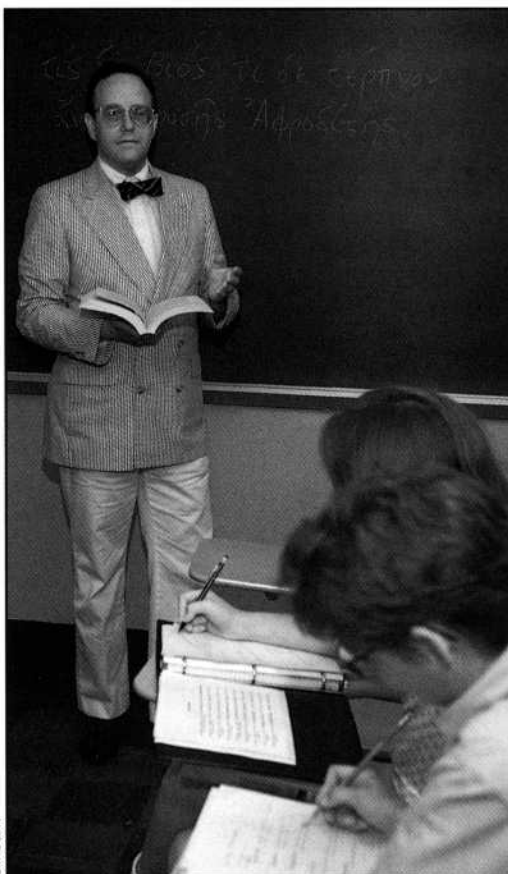
"Well, I get students here who have gobs of self-esteem, perhaps even arrogance, but who aren't prepared to read and write. About the fourth week they begin to learn I don't care about their self-esteem; all I care about is what they are learning and what use they can make of it."

Doty has had what he calls a "rather checkered career." He received an undergraduate degree in letters from OU, then completed his doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University.

"I was at OU in the early '60s when we were still in the Golden Age," he says. "I had some super professors: David French in English, Clayton Feaver and Francis Kovach in philosophy. I admired these men tremendously; I wanted to be like them and do the kinds of things they were doing.

"I felt as if they had a tremendous love for what they were doing, of what they were talking to us about. They inspired that same kind of love in me for literature and philosophy. It has always been my goal to teach, and I thought it would be a truly fine thing if someday I could come back to teach at the University of Oklahoma."

Doty finally got back, but his path was not a straight or short one. The year Doty got his doctorate was 1973, when, he says, 500 colleges closed their doors, and his fellow



Gil Jain

Ralph Doty

graduates from Columbia were driving taxis. For 12 years, he traveled around the country taking whatever job he could find, teaching whenever he could. He went back to school in California to get a teaching certificate and taught at high schools, junior colleges, technical schools, night schools, anywhere he could get a position.

Driven by the desire to teach and to do it well, Doty still finds it hard to explain what makes a successful teacher.

"Go ask Baryshnikov how one becomes an excellent ballet dancer," he says. "Teaching is an art, not a science. All that any school can teach you about it is technique; they can't teach you talent. It's something you either have or don't have. Sometimes when I'm in the classroom, it's almost as if something is teaching through me. If you love what you do so much that you get lost in it, you will sometimes have that feeling. Teaching really is a subdivision of acting, of performing."

Doty says that at the end of a really good day of teaching he feels revitalized. He characterizes his as "the best job in the world" but at the

same time he would hesitate to recommend it to one of his students without some careful questioning of that student.

"It takes someone who has a warped value system in terms of late 20th century America," he says. "You can't be a person who is terribly concerned about your social status. If you teach in Italy or Germany, you're next to God. Here, that's not so.

"You obviously can't be a person with a tremendous desire for riches or fame. You know, we often take visiting scholars to Luciano's for dinner. Luciano's used to have a trophy wall filled with pictures of OU sports figures; none of the many, many scholars who have eaten there were pictured. Would-be teachers, beware. If you need that kind of adulation, forget it. A trophy wall is not in your future.

"What you must be is a person with a tremendous interest in your subject matter and an equally tremendous interest in people. You don't have to be warm and cuddly and outgoing; I'm not. I'm cold and prickly, as my students will tell you. But you do have to be very interested in your students." *Continued*

“You can read their faces, you know.”

Nandkumar Nayar should have known his well-paying, year-and-a-half-long career as a consultant in an engineering company was just a short detour on the road to his true calling. His mother taught English literature at a university in their homeland of Malaysia, and his father taught history at the secondary level. It was in his blood, but it was not until his first semester of teaching as a graduate student in finance at the University of Iowa that he was hooked.

He has been rewarded for his dedication repeatedly as the recipient of many teaching awards.

“Last year I won the Amoco Award for Teaching, and that really pleased my mother,” he says. “For that one, the department chair nominates you, I think. It’s nice to be recognized. The university awards are fine, but what I think really matters are the awards students vote for.”

Nayar has won three of those, and the reason students respond to him comes clear as he discusses his philosophy of teaching.

“Above average teachers do not make the material look difficult,” he says. “They can take the most difficult subject and break it down so that the student can understand it. I’ve seen lots of teachers who make a subject more difficult just to show they are the cat’s whiskers. Bad teachers sour the student’s disposition toward a subject; good ones make students want to learn even more. It’s never a chore to come to their classes.

“Another thing is that none of my best teachers has been reluctant to take questions. My feeling is that students are paying for this experience, and the instructor’s job is to give them their money’s worth. It’s their right to ask.”

Nayar runs a fairly structured, semi-formal classroom. Typically, he says, he wears a tie and usually a jacket. He has a body of material and never enough time to cover it, so he prepares carefully and thoroughly for each class session. He memorizes students’ names within the first two weeks and begins to call on them soon thereafter. Students learn quickly they must come to class prepared.

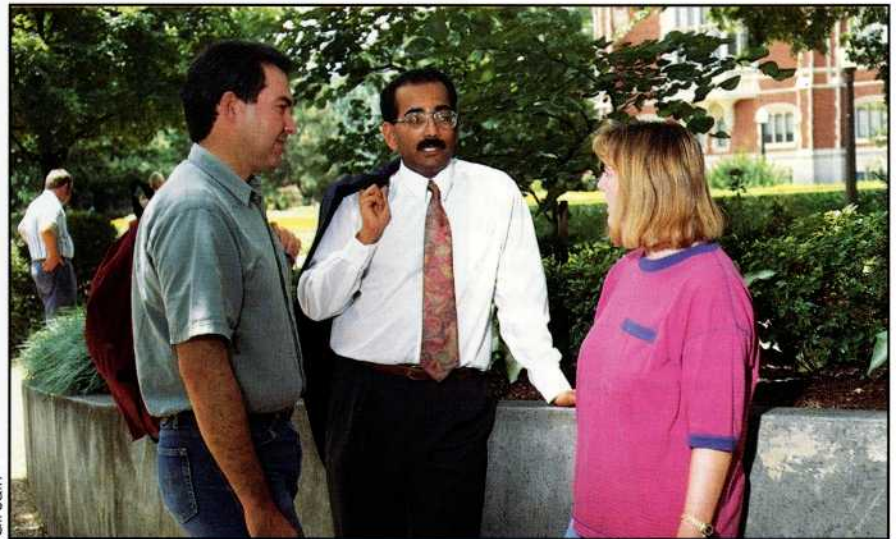
“I think I’m considered a difficult teacher,” he says. “One student said on my evaluation, ‘This guy was a hard ass.’ However, another said, ‘He deserves a bigger office, and let’s

give him a higher salary so we can keep him.’ I was thrilled when I read that one.

“I’ve gotten letters from former students telling me what a delight the course was, and I find that very satisfying. I feel obligated to teach a good course. I want my students to be able to compete with the best of the best without an inferiority complex.”

Nayar clearly articulates the pros and cons of his profession.

“Being able to do a great job gives me great satisfaction,” he says. “When I go into the classroom and find students struggling, and I help them, I like that. You can read their faces, you know. When you’ve done a good job, you can tell,



Gil Jain

Nandkumar Nayar

and it feels good.

“Least satisfying is when students don’t put in the effort, when you feel they have potential and are wasting it, and you can’t do anything about it. That’s when I don’t like teaching. And I don’t like giving grades. The worst part of teaching is telling someone, ‘You’re a C or D or F student.’ You have to do it, though, and it would violate my deepest principles to give a good grade to a student who hasn’t earned it.”

* * *

Each sings with a different voice, but all are singing the same song. Their voices blend to form a harmonious whole. Why do they teach? Because they love their subjects and their students. They believe that what they teach matters and that they have a positive impact on their world by teaching.

Those who can teach, do.

