**Seven Thoughts on Education from a Lifelong Learner**

(Pacific Education Conference, Palau, July 2017)

It’s a special honor to be with you all this evening, for you are members of a profession as noble as any I know of. We could speak all night of how important education is, especially for young people just starting out in a geographic area that is usually regarded as marginal. Let me just say that when I first came to Micronesia 54 years ago, my ambition was simply to be a good high school teacher.

Over all those years in the islands, I’ve had the opportunity to move back and forth between the classroom and public education through writings and video programs. Even so, I’ve found myself learning far more than I have taught. Much of what I have to offer you tonight will not be new to you, but it is the fruit of my experience in Micronesia. Even if the insights are not novel, I hope you will find them useful, at least because of their autobiographical packaging.

Nowadays, seven seems to be something of a magic number–eg, Seven Habits of a Successful... (fill in the blank here). So let me present seven principles of education here.

1) Speaking of sevens, let me share with you my own problem with that number. When I was first instructed in my ABCs and my numbers, I found that for me letters came more easily than numbers. In time I dutifully learned how to write my numbers correctly, but not without some painful school experiences. I remember how, in second grade, I was scolded by the sister who taught us for writing my 7 backwards. She called me up to the board and had me fill half the blackboard with 7's written the right way. She was one of the many teachers who were charged with teaching us those basic skills: multiplication tables, spelling, the names of all the state capitals, and all the other things that were essential tools of the trade.

I bear no grudge against my 2ndgrade teacher who was just trying to provide me with the building blocks of what was considered an education. Nor against the 4th grade teacher who scolded me in front of the class for beginning a sentence with “and.” Without their persistent efforts, where would I be today? Certainly not here talking to you, half-way around the world from where I started out.

So my first lesson: ABCs are important, and so are the skills needed to handle numbers. No need to apologize if you’re spending the day trying to teach these basic skills. Your students will bless your name as they grow older and realize the importance of what you have given them, just as I revere my 2nd grade teacher for marching me to the board and having me write 7's the correct way.

Was I ashamed that day 70 years ago? You bet I was. That’s probably why I remember it so clearly. But it didn’t kill my self-confidence or traumatize me, as far as I know. “Shaming” is a dirty word in our day. Yet, shame is a tool–one that is nowhere as effective as it is in the Pacific. So use it without apology, as generations of Pacific educators have done.

Last year at a dinner with a few former students, including some of the first girls to be admitted to Xavier High School, two of them reminded me of the course in English literature I taught to the seniors. A book a week and a paper on the book were part of the course requirements. When returning the graded papers I would begin with the best ones, offering a few laudatory remarks as I handed the papers to the students. As we worked down the list, the remarks became briefer, and when we got to the papers that didn’t meet the standards, I’d just call the name of the student and let the paper flutter to the floor. They laughed as they recalled this... and they admitted to working extra hours on the weekend just to avoid the humiliation of having to pick their paper off the floor. I didn’t notice any permanent scars they bore from the experience.

Lesson 1: Just as learning the basics is indispensable, so shame is an important tool that shouldn’t be discounted in education.

2) But the formative influences in my life were not just the teachers in elementary school. Just as important were those in my family: my mother who taught me to read simple stories before I began first grade... and of my grandfather who introduced me to squares and square roots when I could barely add. Even my father, who barely completed vocational high school, contributed by insisting that I finish my homework before running off with my friends.

So the second lesson I learned is this: education is not simply the product of what happens in the classroom. What about the home? Without the persistent efforts of my mother and my grandfather and others in the family, I would have been so much poorer. I was fortunate: my education wasn’t entirely home-schooling, and it wasn’t confined only to the classroom. It was a wonderful combination of both. I just wish that more young people then and today had the same good fortune. We have to draw our students’ families in the education game.

Studies have been done correlating the number of books in the home to educational progress. By this standard most of us are lost–Pacific Island societies are not reading cultures. But can’t we use other strategies–eg, sending students home to gather information that will be used in the classroom to develop higher level thinking skills? (Example: exercise on building a personal genealogy that will be integrated into a classroom exercise).

Lesson 2: Whatever the problems in executing this in the Pacific, we should be constantly looking for ways to get family involvement in the education of the young.

3) “Curiosity killed the cat,” we were told as kids. We were admonished to control our exploratory instincts (or save them for Boy Scouts outings), keep our heads down, and do our homework and housework. But I had questions: Why do rivers flow the same way all the time? What are tides and how do they work? Why don’t my Protestant friends make the sign of the cross the way I do? What’s the point of a caboose on a train? How does a canoe sail against the wind if it has to rely solely on wind power?

The questions changed as I grew older, and there were so many more. What was life on the street like for Romans in the old republic? Why do all civilizations seem to have a story of a great flood? How is it that hysteria is identified throughout the world with women and not with men? What is a clan and why does it seem to be so important in this part of the world? But those are just some of my questions; young people I taught have had plenty of their own.

Did my basic education answer these questions? Certainly not all of them, but it provided the tools for me to answer them on my own. My curiosity pushed me to read, and to sit at the feet of those much more informed than myself, and to observe more carefully than I otherwise might have–all in the effort to answer the questions that kept coming up.

Curiosity killed the cat? How could that be, since curiosity is at the heart of our mission as educators? Not only does curiosity not kill the cat, but it gives it nine lives–prepares us for learning and relearning that will take place for the rest of our lives in a global society, and in a world that changes as often as ours does today. Far from being a distraction, curiosity is the engine that drives a lifetime of learning.

Lesson 3: Our task is to awaken curiosity rather than suppress it.

4) “What do you teach,” many of us ask one another. But we, of all people, should know that none of us teaches simply subjects. We teach young people, human beings with their own individual fears and hopes, their likes and their dislikes. One of the most difficult parts of being a teacher is trying to find what makes each of them tick–to learn what their particular talents and aspirations are. As they find what they are good at, they can develop confidence in themselves.

I remember one junior at Xavier who was getting by academically, but not much more. Some of us knew that he was a talented artist, but he never had a chance to show off his talents until finally one of the faculty asked him to draw pictures that would be used in a liturgical display at a Sunday mass. The transformation was not instantaneous, but it was still wonderful to behold. Over the remainder of the year his grades improved and he smiled a lot more than he had. Did this happen because, following his presentation, he felt a surge of new confidence in himself that spilled over into his studies? I can’t prove this, but I surely would like to think so.

We educators try to instill many things besides basic educational skills, but self-confidence has to rank up there with the most important values. With this comes the “can do” spirit that motivates students to take on ever more ambitious projects over the years. Of course, this demands finding room in our educational program to play to the strengths and skills of different individuals. This, by the way, is my argument for vocational education. Its value is not mainly as a preparation for finding a job, but as a means of developing those skills that might give students the confidence to keep learning throughout their lives.

Lesson 4: Whatever the discipline and grade level we work in, we all should be teaching young people to develop confidence in themselves.

5) While we educators can and should take a personal interest in our students, we have to understand the limits of what students will confide to us. Here in Pacific there is so much young people can’t talk about. I’m not speaking about raging love, but especially problems experienced at home with the family. I remember how difficult it was to learn why one of our better students showed a sudden loss of interest in studies that went on for some months (He was told that his real father was not the man he had called dad for so man years.)

As I have repeated over and over for the past 40 years, our high suicide rate is mostly the product of young people feeling that they have been alienated from their family. I would add that this feeling probably also accounts for many of our own most troubled students. Experts from the US recommend that we get them to spill out their problems with their counselor. Good luck with that solution! Now and then it may work, but more often educators will simply have to guess at what is happening, as I did in my Xavier High School teaching days. You can’t solve all their problems–or even learn what some of the biggest problems are–but you can still show students by personal care that they are important. And that, my friends, is plenty!

Lesson 5: Keep personal interest in students strong, but expectations limited.

6) Inspiration is a critical ingredient in education. But it may be helpful to keep in mind that it comes in different forms. There are skillful and caring teachers–the kind that we would all like to be–and there are individuals who models of what an educated person can be, even if these individuals might not themselves be model teachers.

In the seminary we had as our English professor a Jesuit priest who was forever rubbing his eyes with his hands and shifting from one leg to another as he struggled with what he would say. Nonetheless, his love of literature was transparent to all of his students from the first day. Whatever problems he had expressing himself, he managed to fire up all of us with the same love of literature.

We had another Jesuit teacher in classics whose love of learning knew no bounds. His bookshelf was filled with volumes on every conceivable subject, including ballet and early European drama. But this priest, who taught for many years at the University of Guam, also once delivered an impromptu 20-minute history of soul music. He was an embodiment of the classical saying: “I am a human being and so nothing is foreign to me.”

Now and then the two types of inspiration are found in the same person. My home room teacher in senior high school, for instance, spurred us on to greater achievements (more books read and insightful essays written). But he also took the time to bring me to an art museum and a concert featuring classical music, thus introducing me to other wonders in this marvelous world of ours. If you want further examples of the importance of inspiration, take the time to watch “To Sir with Love,” “Stand and Deliver,” “Mr. Holland’s Major Opus,” or even “Goodbye, Mr. Chips.”–all special movies celebrating what an inspiring teacher can mean to the young.

Lesson 6: Inspiration comes in different forms. Choose the flavor that suits your temperament, but serve up inspiration in some form or other.

7) Finally, remember the old adage that education is to prepare people for life. You’re not preparing them for a job–that’s small potatoes, especially in this age when people change jobs and homes many times over before they die. This is the era of globalization–just look at emigration throughout the Pacific to grasp that. One out of every three Pacific islanders is living abroad. Our students are preparing to be life-long learners. They’re going to have to scan the landscape and figure out how to deal with the scene, whether it’s a village on a far-off island or a housing project in Kansas City.

My own experience supports this. In high school and college I was trained in classical languages–then came to the move to Micronesia, unfamiliar territory. I had no background in history or in social change...but I could read and I had plenty of questions about my new home–in Chuuk, and then in Pohnpei, and now on Guam. Away we go! But I could read... and I learned to observe my surroundings and reflect on them. No one in the islands was too interested in what went on in the Roman forum or in Greek temples, but I had the skills I needed to adapt (or so I would like to believe).

Lesson 7: Education is for life not just for livelihood.

Let me conclude, then, by admitting that there is really nothing new in this presentation, nothing that you haven’t heard many times before. But I do hope that you have detected the personal conviction in what I have reminded you of in this presentation.

We all know that you have many pedestrian tasks to perform in the education you provide. But let this talk serve as a reminder of the importance of your profession. I’ve confessed earlier that my early goal in life was have the satisfaction of being a teacher. So be rightly proud of your trade. It might not pay as well as other professions, or offer the visibility that government officials receive, but it is a noble career.

Just remember that amid your struggle to meet test standards and do the dozens of other daily tasks expected of you, your mission is forever to think big. Don’t be afraid to “dream dreams and see visions,” as the Good Book says. After all, you are entrusted with the responsibility for young people and their future.