

Frederick Gunn: Confidence between Boys and their Teachers (1877)

This confidence ought to be like that between boys and a wise father. The teacher must often stand in the place of parent as in the case of orphans, and those who are far from their homes. That firmness, that discretion, that patience, that love which the happiest child enjoys, but which so many fail to meet elsewhere, these must afford to all, or else we fail to fulfill our mission. Confidence in the child's heart is not so much a matter of reasoning as of instinct; it should not be a thing of growth, but of spontaneous impulse. The child should look into the teacher's face and find his heart's-home there.

How shall confidence be inspired? By what subtle art, by what study and discipline, from what books, by listening to whose lectures, in what Normal School shall the young teacher prepare himself to enter into the generous confidence of the good, and the more guarded, often suspicious, but at last self-surrendering trust of the evil?

There can be but one answer to this question. There is but one way. We must be *worthy* of this confidence, for it can repose only on realities. A generous boy-heart may rest on a heart as generous and on nothing else. You are mean, selfish, stingy, perhaps. You attempt to control a school of boys. But the boys have found you out; they have a nickname ready for you. Or you are sour, unloving, even unkind; do not dare to ask the loving trust of young hearts. My friend, if you aspire to teach and train the young, first set your own heart to school; learn the great lesson of reality; be yourself that which you would train your boys to be.

I suppose a very mean person may teach little ones successfully many things which they ought to learn – the alphabet, the multiplication tables, etc. But his efforts cannot go far; soon his pupils are stunted in some element of symmetrical growth. There is an unconscious influence, a mysterious, silent emanation going out from the personality of every teacher which is one of the strong forces of nature. Silent as the force of gravity, more powerful than the will of man, this influence works like the unnoticed electricity of the atmosphere, and makes it certain that every teacher will actually teach that which he is. How, for example, can a narrow, selfish, pinched-up man make good readers of a class of boys? The noble sentiments of poets and philosophers are naught to him. His intellect cannot receive, his soul cannot contain them; his cold lips cannot give expression to the voice of love, of heroism, of tender pity and generous grief. If you would teach children to read Milton, you must, in the act, *be* a Milton yourself. Therefore, I say, *if* you would enjoy the loving confidence of noble boys, you must, first of all, make yourself *worthy* of that confidence. Let your own conscience serve as examining committee, and enter the school-room only with a first class certificate.

My fellow-teachers, far be it from me to judge how many of us can safely abide this test. With humble head I must confess that though spending my life in teaching the young, and receiving all along many tokens of that loving confidence of which I speak, yet I tremble every term lest I be condemned as unworthy of the confidence I enjoy.

I remark again, to influence the young, get near to them. Here, as in the world of physics, the force of attraction varies inversely as the square of the distance. Often the feeble, inferior in capacity, in attainments, exert a greater influence than their superiors, because they get nearer to the objects to be moved. You propose to act on a child's heart which is set on quite sublunary things; and you, a true student of Nature, have your head among the stars. Perhaps you feel your own importance in the universe of worlds; and, looking aloft and studying high themes, you fail to notice and to understand the little urchin at your feet. Or, if you understand, you cannot condescend to get upon your knees to teach him. Your younger brother, who is still half boy and not yet through college, has won the hearts of half the school in a day, while you have reached only a dozen in a month. Why stand upon your dignity? You have these characters to mold and shape into the fashion of divine manhood; follow the example of Paul, who made himself all things to all men; and of Jesus, who took upon him the form of a servant. To get into a boy's heart you must first get the boy-heart into you, then bring him up with you into the thoughts and feelings of a man.

I am convinced that there is an immense amount of soul-power lost, because teachers hold themselves aloof and above their flocks. "Aim high" is a good motto when you turn your telescope upon the stars; but General Putnam's order, "Aim at their waistband," is often more practical. For one, I am not ashamed to have been and to be a boy among boys. And here comes in some consideration of Boys' Rights. We have secured, in some good degree, the right of the slave. We are laboring, not without hope, for the right of women to the vote – when she wishes it; but how few, even of the teachers of the land, ever made any ado about "The Rights of Boys?" We provide schools for their intellectual training, and urge them to fidelity in their studies, stimulating their ambition by appliances that are, to say the least, of somewhat doubtful propriety; but what school has fitly provided for the amusement of its pupils?

Our Declaration of Independence enumerates among the inalienable rights of man, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But boys, with their scanty vocabulary, sum up all their desired rights in one expressive word. Strange that one small word should convey so much of meaning to the boy-heart! Fun! Boys have an inalienable right to their fun. Our Puritan forefathers thought all fun was devil worship, and they put it under the ban – they drove it from the family; they bolted it out of the school-house, and left it only to harbor in the village tavern and the country store. Till within a few years cards have been forbidden in our Christian homes. I plead not for any special form; I would not admit any amusement that has the least taint of vice; but I do charge you, young teachers, let the boys have their *fun*. Nay, provide it, preside over it, protect it from dissipation – prevent only the excess; but do not bar the thing itself, rather share it with them. How much of a boy's life is comprised in that one word! How much healthy discipline, of both mind and body, it may bring! While sharing, directing wisely, and cheerily helping on the fun, without any lowering of your high, moral standard, or of your cherished dignity, you may easily find your way into the boy-heart. I am persuaded that very much of dissipation, the contamination of bad company, the frequent corruption of taste and manners, and sometimes loss of all, that is mourned in our higher institutions of learning, would be avoided if some rich and wise friend of each college would endow therein a Professorship of Fun.

I think it might go far to prevent the hazing which in some colleges has become a barbarism, if some genial tutor or professor had it for his care to prepare the Sophomore class to entertain with suitable plays, games, and even theatricals, the incoming Freshmen. An evening thus spent in a social and friendly way would tend powerfully to establish just and kind relations between the classes and bring them to acknowledge every student as a brother. But, if not necessary for young men, surely boys should have their fun.

I must refer to one more topic where, I think, our teachers often fail to enjoy and utilize the confidence of which I speak. Having earned and secured the faith of your best boys, now use it for their good and the good of the school. Good order, virtuous conduct, more habits, a pure heart, and a clean tongue – these are essential to the life of any school. All really good boys love these things as you do; it is for their interest our boys are moral agents as well as yourself. They know the right – the love it; now let them learn to defend it. I think many teachers are content to live autocrats, holding the reins of government in their sole hands, asking no sympathy, sharing no responsibility with their pupils. I cannot believe that this is the duty of an educator. You cannot make your school a democracy, perhaps; you must reign, I suppose; but cannot the throne be advised? Can you not, upon occasion, call an advisory council of boys? All moral intelligence must be exercised to grow strong and become a moral force. The boy who knows right from wrong, and loves the right, must be trained to stand up for the right, to fight for it with his feeble arm while young, and then he will be qualified to be a champion of the truth when his arm is mature. Therefore, call your boys to be judges of right and vindicators of it. If they love you they will be glad to help you; demand their help, their moral judgment, upon all questions that arise in school. How much instruction, of drill in the work of moral criticism, and how much strength of determination you may inspire in them by this means? How sadly we need men! - men who have the courage of their convictions, who will not lie, and who will not hold their peace. Let us train them in our schools to be morally intelligent and brave as boys that we may prepare a generation of men. Assuredly all good and faithful boys will share the confidence of their teacher. They will have no adverse confidence. They cannot be bribed or frightened into covering up a fault of crime. Not as spies, not as informers, but as faithful citizens let them share with you the responsibility of advice, and, in the last resort, of judgment.

There is a doctrine adverse to this prevalent in schools, which makes it the duty of pupils to keep the secrets of the guilty – to keep the guilty secrets of those who would lead them downward to perdition. This doctrine is the devil's own gospel, and, so far as accepted, blunts the moral sense of its victim, makes him a slave of the worst elements in school, and mars and destroys that sympathetic, generous, loving confidence which must always exist between ingenuous youth and a teacher whom they love. I am persuaded that a false principle and a fatally injurious practice prevail in many schools upon this point. Teachers are afraid to consult their scholars; boys are afraid to inform their teachers of the wrongs that exist and from which they are destined to suffer by a secret but swift contamination. The conscientious child, very likely one of the weakest in physical strength, comes to tell you that a certain one, older and smarter than himself, is a bully, and is every day exercising his tyranny over the small boys. He wants to tell you in confidence, for he is afraid of the bully's vengeance. Moreover, the other boys, for whom

more than for himself he speaks, will regard him as a tell-tale and will stigmatize him with one of those opprobrious epithets which their vocabulary, rich in epithets, furnishes for the occasion. What will you do? Tell the little fellow to go away and bear it? Will you hear him in confidence, keep his secret and thus make him a spy? Will you go through life skulking and hiding, spying yourself? No! Fold the little fellow in your arms; let him stand up before the school sure of your protection; make the charge boldly, and thus become the champion of his mates. There is a right and a wrong in this matter. Where is it right? Good government is right. Confidence between teachers and their pupils is right; and this monstrous doctrine that it is mean for a virtuous boy to complain against a vicious boy is wrong. What is the duty of a good citizen in similar cases in life? *I insist upon it that boys shall be trained up to be good citizens; brave to grapple with wrong-doers and bring them to justice; and they shall not, while young, be trained to be secret slaves of evil-doers.* For, see, if a boy of pure heart keeps a guilty secret once, he will again and again. He finds no reason to revolt – he grows familiar with the sin – he learns to love it at last and to practice it himself.

But men say, “Will boys thus conscientiously bear witness against their mates? Will you have a school of tale-bearers?” The answer will depend upon the teacher. A friend of mine, a teacher, and at the same time a preacher of the Gospel, went to ask advice of another, - a Doctor of Divinity, who is also a teacher, - how to manage his school so to make it grow in numbers and in excellence. After a long interview the Doctor, with impressive voice and gesture, gave my friend this parting advice: “Remember, sir, every boy is a born devil!” If that declaration is true, or even if you believe it to be true, it is altogether probable that no boy will ever come to you with any complaint. But if, on the contrary, you find boys as a general thing true-hearted, lovable and loving; if you find the evil still so full of good traits that your heart will not give them up, then such confidence will spring up between you that, in all fidelity, you will be one. A school of tale-bearers? No! The tale-bearer cannot live among you. He will not dare to approach you. You will know the sneak afar off, and he will run and hide himself. You must pardon me if I allude to my own experience. As I write there rise up before me in visions of memory dear little ones, the living, and, alas! The dead, who stood up boldly before the school and manfully bore their willing and eager testimony against some big sinners – not without any trembling, with no shadow of reluctance, but calmly and cheerfully as the proper thing for them to do. Did I protect them? Never! I only asked the judgment of the school. “As many of you as feel in your hearts that little Dick has acted *nobly*, and will defend him against all harm, will rise!” It is astonishing how tall boys will suddenly become on such an invitation. You need never trouble yourselves about the safety and happiness of the little fellows who confide in you, if only you deserve their confidence.

My fellow-teachers, if you were required to repeat the most momentous statement ever expressed in human language, you need not utter but three words – “God is Love.” On this simple but sublime declaration hangs the Christian religion and whatever is of value in all the religions of the world. Love is the genial, all-pervading atmosphere which we must breathe, if we would hope to do our duty in our chosen sphere. *I have in mind a school. (You will pardon me, I was asked to speak of confidence between boys and their teacher, but, properly speaking,*

an ideal school should be composed about equally of boys and girls.). I have no time for the picture – a few traits must suffice. The school is situated in the country, or, if in the city, the generous city fathers have afforded it liberal space with trees and flowers – ample play-grounds kept scrupulously neat by the boys themselves. The buildings are not only commodious, but picturesque and attractive. The teachers are large-hearted and loving, and absolutely free from dyspepsia or any morbid tendency. A morbid teacher will communicate his favorite distemper to his whole school in one term. The boys are from all classes in society, and of all degrees of goodness, - and also many degrees of badness – just as they have always been from the time of that little kindergarten outside the city limits of Eden. You enter; the atmosphere is warm and genial. Love and confidence shine in every face, breath from every lip. There is fun and frolic in every eye you catch. A martinet in education would probably consider it a scene of confusion and disorder. He would first convert the boys into little machines, receiving their motions from one large wheel, himself. But in this school of which I dream, there is cooperation, there is helpfulness, and, so far as the laws of nature will permit, equality. All moves on in harmony and peace. Offenses come, of course. The teacher becomes impatient, sometimes unjust; but when he sees his error, by true repentance and self-humiliation, by hearty confession and apology, he heals the wounded confidence and makes it firmer than before. Some boys are disobedient or neglectful of duty; but they are soon found sitting, clothed and in their right mind, by the teacher's side. Now into this little paradise comes a serpent, one of those boys wise in wickedness above their years, who pass from school to school, polluting all. He reveals himself to one and another, and pledges them to secrecy. To the teacher he is fair and plausible, and with an air of freedom which a magnanimous teacher loves to meet. How sure is the new-comer to diffuse his poison unobserved! But no – some boy of more sensitive conscience perceives the venom. He warns his associates; he confers with his teacher; he arouses an opposition to the evil. A dozen youthful wits are set to work, not to entrap, not to punish, but to prevent mischief; to reform, if possible, - at least to guard the unsuspecting from the threatened danger. A hundred secret, silent influences are brought to bear upon the evil one. He is surrounded by the strongest moral forces these boys know how to wield. All the strategy of moral influence is called into exercise. Some by tender sympathy, some by strong rebuke and threats, some by avoidance – all arts are tried. The rebel, who has spurned the discipline of a dozen teachers, cannot withstand this ubiquitous and multitudinous attack. He yields, repents, and joins the little army of his captor and becomes a faithful pupil ever after – in the ideal school.