

## Prologue

---

*Dear colleague,*

*What you hold in your hand is a book about love.* This isn't much of a claim; after all, all good books on teaching come down to studies on love. Love—the active, earnest, and intelligent pursuit of our neighbors' good. Is this not what we spend our labors on each day in our classrooms with our students?

Schools exist for a single purpose: to promote the long-term flourishing of young people. *Specifically*, we do this by teaching them to master disciplines<sup>1</sup> that they likely wouldn't otherwise. The people who do the work of the school—the teachers, the paraprofessionals, the administrators, those who maintain the building, those who serve the food—help human beings become human. Not just some human beings, but every one of them who walks in the door.

In other words, schools are institutions of love—of this earnest seeking and serving of the fullness and wholeness of another. The trouble, of course, is that most of our schools have lost track of this purpose. Most of us still sense its presence, but it's obscured as if by fog. We've lost our grip on what an education *is*. Thankfully, this can change.

\* \* \*

As a university student in Germany in the 1930s, Austrian-born Peter Drucker witnessed the rise of Nazism. He watched as

---

<sup>1</sup>Whenever I say *disciplines* in this book, I mean everything taught in our secondary schools. There are the classic academic disciplines—things such as math and literature and science and social studies. There are the artistic disciplines—things such as painting and drawing and sculpture and theater and music. And there are the “practical” disciplines—things such as home technologies and personal finance and computer applications and construction. In short, we all teach disciplines—ways of seeing, ways of being in the world—and they are all *good, weighty, and important*.

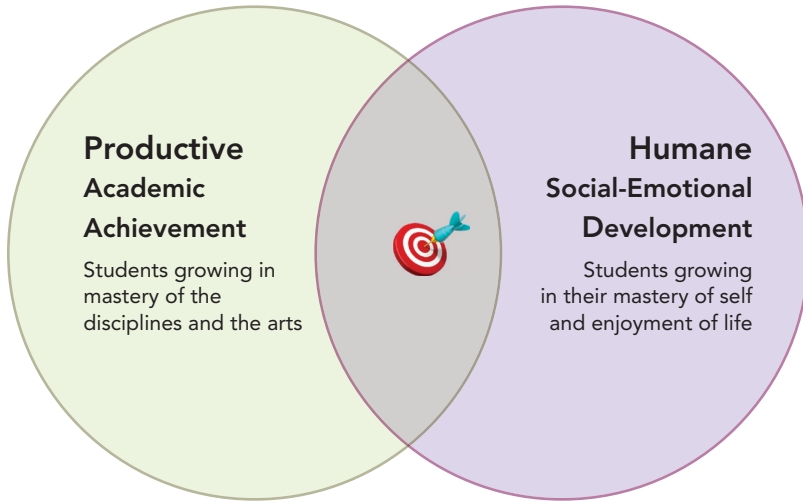
institutions—schools, hospitals, government bureaus, churches—became simultaneously *more* productive and *less* humane. The Nazi machine produced one of the most efficiently mobilized populations the world had ever seen—the productivity of its institutions was unmatched—and yet at its root humanity went missing. Nazism transformed institutions into hideous creatures bent on results and power.

So Drucker, who became one of the most influential management thinkers of the twentieth century, was obsessed his entire life with a simple, deep, beautiful question: How do we help institutions become both more productive *and* more humane? This, to me, is the fundamental question that almost no American schools are asking. We see instead two separate emphases.

On the one hand, we want schools to be more productive. Much talk and energy are spent on student achievement, standardized assessment, teacher evaluation, and the science of learning. On the other hand, we want schools to be more humane. Much talk and energy are spent on social-emotional learning, whole-child approaches, teacher work-life balance, self-care, and mental health.

But you *can't* pick just one or the other. To make a school, you must pursue both. The wise practitioner operates in that tiny slice at the center of the productive-humane diagram. In this book I'll share a theory for student motivation that enables our schools to strike this balance.

## Striking Drucker's Balance: An Imperative for Our Schools



\* \* \*

I don't think we have a very good *internal* picture of what demotivation in a student is like. We've got a great *external* picture of it—head laid on arms on the desk; dull, affectless eyes; broken record renditions of “I forgot” and “Do we haaaaaaaave to do this?” We know apathy well. And yet we're remarkably numb to how apathy *feels* in the heart of a human being.

Something that helps this, rather quickly, is the following exercise. Picture how you feel during a terrible professional development meeting day. I'm talking *terrible*, as in

- the presenter is incompetent or callous;
- the topic is detached from your work as a teacher;
- it's unclear how to even work toward or succeed at what the presenter is saying; and
- the presenter is focused on kinds of work that you are decidedly *not* a part of.

You can picture that, right? We've all experienced this kind of thing. So now imagine doing that *two* days in a row. Now imagine it three days. Five days. Ten working days. In a row. Of that kind of experience. This is what many of our secondary students experience *every day of the school year*. One hundred and eighty repeats. Day after day.

*In short, student demotivation is experienced as pain.* It exerts a pressure on the soul akin to the force found at the bottom of the Mariana Trench.

\* \* \*

And students aren't the only ones hurting from this, are they? *Student demotivation is one of the greatest drains on a teacher's spirit.* It's *hard* showing up to work each day and sensing in your soul that you're going to be dragging human beings into doing work that they really don't want to do. It's spiritually exhausting to lean on carrot-or-stick methodologies that cajole or coerce young-yet-total persons into doing things they don't want to do.

In response to this pain, we are reduced to a kind of professional thrashing about. We resort to complex grading systems, faddish pedagogies, "fix my problem" purchases on Teachers Pay Teachers. We complain; we become despondent. In all these reactions, we're like a patient in the hospital who mashes the bedside button for a fresh infusion of pain meds. Once in awhile, we can get the pain to go away, but the *problem's* not leaving.

\* \* \*

What's bizarre about all of this is something fundamental to young human beings in the twenty-first century: *You've never met a student who set out to become demotivated in school.* Every one of your students, down in the roots of their wills, *desires* to desire to learn.

That word *desire* is important to contemplate. It comes from the Latin *desirare*, with *de* connoting "from within, deep down," and *sidere* meaning "from the stars." That's a weird word, right? Etymologists surmise that originally the verb meant something like "to await what the stars will bring."

Let the word's beauty sink in.

Then look out on your classroom and see, deep in those eyes looking back, an unyielding *desire*—an awaiting of what the stars will bring.

\* \* \*

So what's the vision of this book? What am I aiming at for us—me here in my classroom in western Michigan, you there in your classroom in your part of the world? What will this book *practically* allow you and me to know and do?

To answer generally, my writing here aims at what it always does: to help us promote the long-term flourishing of young people without sacrificing our lives on the altars of professional success. I'm a *both-and* kind of guy. I believe being a *great teacher* requires cultivating a *great life*. You can't do one without the other. And to do both of those things, you've got to have time and space to think and practice and grow and sustain.

To answer for this book particularly, this volume contains the best ideas I've learned about creating the conditions that help students *want* to do the work of learning—the conditions that help them *genuinely care* to learn. It is an in-depth extension of ideas I began exploring in the second chapter of *These 6 Things: How to Focus Your Teaching on What Matters Most*. This book is that book's sequel.

Toward that end, I want to help you and me partner with reality by realizing

- that every one of our students *wants* to want to learn,
- that every instance of student demotivation is experienced as pain,
- that every school in the world can be both productive *and* humane—achievement and wellness aren't opposed to one another but instead are friends,

- that you and I have an outlandish (but not omnipotent) influence on the degree to which students in our classrooms experience the will to learn, and
- that the most powerful strategies for cultivating student motivation are far from complicated.

Partnership with reality—that is what we’re after.

\* \* \*

So, dear colleague, are you ready? Then let’s put on our gardening gloves and begin.

Teaching right beside you,

DSJR

April 2023