

Robert S. Behnke Address to the Attendees of the NATA Athletic Training Educators' Conference

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There is a great deal to learn from our colleagues who have had critical and noteworthy contributions to athletic training education. We are pleased, therefore, to periodically include the Robert S. Behnke keynote addresses from recipients of the Sayers "Bud" Miller Distinguished Educator Award in the current and forthcoming issues of the Athletic Training Education Journal. In this issue's special section we present the speech from Danny T. Foster, PhD who received the Distinguished Educator Award in 2005. Dr. Foster's career highlights can be found at <http://www.nata.org/DEWinners#2005>.

IT TAKES COURAGE TO TEACH

I should tell you that I am officially a "Baby Boomer;" however, I identify more with the "Silent Generation." Maybe to extend the conversation further I've always thought I was born in the wrong century! And to clarify some of my remarks today, I want you to know that I am very close to the thoughts of Parker Palmer, so you will recognize that as I get further along.

I have been to Washington DC a couple of times before but still to this day, I have not visited the Vietnam Memorial. As a veteran of the Vietnam War, I was stationed most of my tour of duty at a remote fire base called LZ Mary Ann. Thirty-eight years ago on March 28, 1971, we were overrun by a North Vietnamese Sapper attack. I recall there were 113 of us on the firebase at the time and on that early morning 31 were killed and 78 were wounded (109 of 113). I just learned from reading a book about the incident last month, almost 38 years later, that the perimeter company was considered unprepared, lazy in their practices, and lackadaisical in their discipline. Likewise, I learned that the battalion was lax in keeping the troops alert. In contrast, the Sappers were very effective. Even though I knew none of this at the time and I saw no Sappers, I was plenty scared. But I was in the right place at the right time to avoid being killed or taken prisoner.

That luck in place and time seems to be a pattern for me. My first experience in the accreditation of an education program followed my first year of membership on the old PEC (Professional Education Committee) and it turns out that I was paired with Sayers "Bud" Miller, who served as the chief officer of the onsite visit. My very last accreditation visit while still a PEC member was with Robert Behnke. He was a team member and I was the chief. What a great education for a young guy from Iowa. So I hope that gives you a measure of the depth and color that receiving the Distinguished Educator Award in 2005 means to me.

Being in the right place at the right time is definitely good in my experience, but being able to take advantage of it to do something good is even better. That takes courage of the heart.

The Heart of Teaching

After three decades of trying to learn to teach, I have found that every class comes down to this: my students and I, face-to-face, engaged in a conversation that connects us all to a subject. Sometimes, I lose heart when teaching and that connection gets broken.

I lose heart in part because teaching is a daily exercise in vulnerability. I don't need to reveal personal secrets to feel naked in front of a class. All I need to do is write something on the whiteboard while students doze off. No matter how technical or abstract my subject may be, the things I teach are things I care about.

Unlike many professions, teaching is always done at a dangerous intersection involving personal and public life. A good athletic trainer must work in a personal way, but avoid public disclosures. A good lawyer must work in a public forum, never swayed by personal opinion. But a good teacher stands where public and personal meet and connect. Believe me, it can feel like crossing a Washington area freeway on foot. In trying to connect, we make ourselves and our subjects vulnerable to indifference, judgment, and ridicule. To combat this, it is natural to distance ourselves from students and subjects. I've done that—I definitely was not in the right place at the right time or very courageous.

I have faced fear and felt utterly vulnerable in the face of that fear in the classroom. It was not war, but the feeling was there and more subtle in education, yet just as important to me. Even then, another way to face vulnerability in teaching is to use some

teaching techniques. Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives. I have come to find as many ways as possible to help that teacher show up. When I teach poorly, it is not because of poor technique. It is because I have allowed fear to get the upper hand. A teacher's nemesis is not ignorance, but fear. Fear gives ignorance its power.

We are always teaching in the face of fear - it paralyzes learning. That is why we all need the courage to teach. I have found that fear comes from three primary sources: my dominant way of knowing things, the lives of my students, and my personal self.

To deal with the first of these fears, I have found that being objective and evidence-based is my prized way of knowing science, medicine, and education. What I have come to fear at times is to consider a subjective answer when it might be most appropriate. That is a subtle fear but one that has forced me to deal more with facts than the inner wisdom of emotion. How dangerous is that? Is it more desirable to have students who have technical competence but no inner voice that says "this picture doesn't quite fit" or to have students with the wisdom to bring their whole being to the issues that we all face?

Being objective, however, drives me to teach students about the power of facts, and ultimately to teach them to have power over their world. My subjective side wants them to have a mutual destiny with their world. I asked myself a long time ago, "How would my life change if I let the world talk back?" And actually, I was thinking recently, "Why does a biologist think about and study nature?" I think it may be to give nature a voice so we can hear what it needs from us. Being obsessively objective is a way of knowing that seems very limiting to me, so teaching facts and sharing insights about ways of knowing takes a lot of courage.

I've heard many say that the biggest obstacle to good teaching is bad students. Here is a second fear that I think paralyzes

learning. The hallmark of bad students, known to all of us, is silence. It overcomes our classes whenever we ask a question. What does the silence mean? Is it indifference, cynicism, hostility; are they brain-dead?

I think a different diagnosis may exist about the reason for silence in my students. It may be the same silence known in other settings: the silence of the powerless in the presence of the powerful; the silence of marginal people, told their voices have no value. In silence there is safety, but still silence born in fear. This is part of the lives of our students.

My own fearful heart makes me as vulnerable as the other two fears in teaching that I have mentioned. To teach well I have to reveal things that I care deeply about. I think the courage to teach is the courage to risk the judgment that comes when I express my passions in public. There are fears of the peer review process for promotion and tenure for sure, but another source of fear easily as powerful as that, but hardly ever named, is the fear of the judgment of the young. Nature decrees that youth be dependent on their elders. Human nature decrees that the converse be true as well. When the young do not consent to be mentored by their elders something vital has been taken from the elder's life. Health comes when we have the courage to acknowledge that even as the young need our guidance, we need their vitality to help us live fully and well.

I have lived fully and well at times, still learning how to teach, still in the right place and trying to make sure that it is at the right time, by mustering up the courage to share myself with my students, and at times with you, which I think is a good thing. This is something I learned a long time ago with members of the PEC and continuing today with all of you.