

Emory Austin

For The Love of Students

The "Tablecloth Story"

It was never quiet at our house. There was a kind of peace about the place, but it surely didn't have anything to do with the absence of sound. I grew up in the heady atmosphere of a joyful fascination with learning, rambunctious playfulness with words and ideas, and excited anticipation of the next new discovery. I remember well our family's blazing and clear-eyed challenges of too-long held views and too-little-examined concepts, of staleness in any form. And then there was always the belly-laughing, head-thrown-back glee at a game well played, a phrase well said, a mountain well climbed.

I was born to a college professor father whose love of the Classics was third only to his adoration of us and his absorption in students; and a mother who was dauntless in her guileless, overflowing love of God, her family, people in general, parties, chocolate in any form, late nights, casseroles, hot coffee, mystery stories and red shoes. And students. Always the students.

My dad's love for his students was so obvious to them that they accepted his fearless and dogged insistence that they give every day and every class everything they had. No one escaped either his compassion when appropriate nor his fury at mediocre performance; and his praise for worthy effort was legendary. His classes were always jammed to overflowing with students of all descriptions and mindsets. His teaching load exceeded that of any other faculty member even though his subject was neither particularly popular nor "easy."

And when they were not in his classrooms they were at our house. Constantly. From the time my mother poured the orange juice in the morning until way past my bedtime at night, they were there. His students. Their friends. Talking and laughing in the house, playing badminton and croquet in our yard, cooking hamburgers on our backyard grill, sharing – hesitantly and shyly at first, but then with the growing confidence that comes with warmth, acceptance and respect – their dreams, their plans for the future, their growing awareness of who they were, what they had to offer and how they planned to pursue all of it.

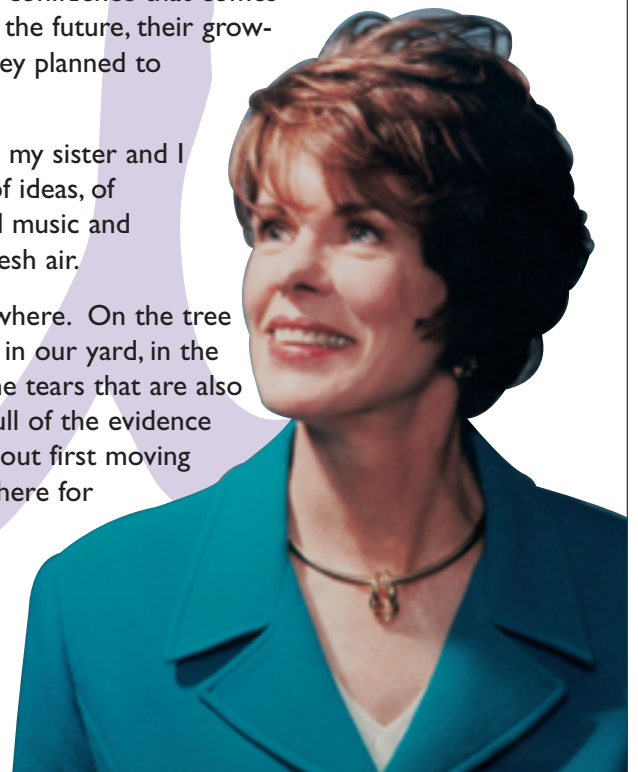
It was a lively way to grow up. A taken-for-granted lifestyle in which my sister and I assumed that everyone had what we had: a living, breathing world of ideas, of philosophy, of fun and frolic and words and questions and books and music and vigorous debate, of vehement dedication to truth and growth and fresh air.

The students were ALWAYS there. And they left their marks everywhere. On the tree trunks where croquet scores were kept, in the flowers they planted in our yard, in the rooms full of constant chatter, in joyful play and – quite often – in the tears that are also a necessary part of seeking for the self. Even the refrigerator was full of the evidence of the students – my sister and I could not pour a glass of milk without first moving out of the way all of the stacked-up boxes of corsages that waited there for the weekend dances.

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What a way to grow up! How wealthy we were with intangible riches, unbankable luxury, and thrilling investments in students who never forgot. Whose love for a teacher deepened, just as he wanted, into a love of the classics.

And there, happily whirling in circles in the center of all of it, was my mother. My dad fed them in the classrooms for over forty years, and my mother fed them around our table with her own brand of love in a biscuit, of bountiful Southern cooking. In addition to being a fabulous cook, she was also the most adventurous one I ever knew. Her spirited creativity in the kitchen inspired multitudes of delighted "Ah-h-h-hhhs" as well as dishes memorable for their shock value alone.

My mother had a keen sense of when to be spartan and when to spill lavishness out on others from her own alabaster jar. We didn't have much money...teachers do not pursue excellence for financial rewards...and so my mother had carefully saved all the unspoken-for coins and crumpled bills she could stash away. One day, when I was about 7, we counted them all and drove to Raleigh to buy her dreamed-about, carefully saved-for tablecloth. It took all day and much comparing of fabric and texture and design. I can still picture her rubbing the material of all those worthy of her consideration between her fingers until she found just the right one. It was white. It was beautiful. It was pure linen. She proudly paid cash for it and we took it home.

From that day forward and for 35 years, THE TABLECLOTH was always on our big dining-room table. At the end of every day, with good smells filling our home, my mother would make her way through our house and yard, gathering up students and inviting them to join our family around the table. Oh, the laughter and the teasing and the talking and the examining and the resolves made and the fun poked and the goals set around that table and over that precious tablecloth!

At the end of the meal, when mother would pass out dessert and coffee, she would also hand each student a pencil with a very dull point, and she would say, "*Sign your name to our tablecloth, and sometime tomorrow I will take my white linen thread, and I will embroider your name on our cloth.*"

And then my dad, in his always boisterous way, looked each student directly in the eye and proclaimed, "*We want YOUR NAME on the cloth...because the day is going to come when we will be able to say that YOU ate dinner with us...when you were just a student.*"

Every time I look at the tablecloth that is now mine, that is covered with embroidered names, some of which you would recognize – many in government; others who have made a strong mark on our world in other fields, particularly medicine, the ministry, law (and golf!) – I wonder all over again how many of those students became what they became and accomplished what they accomplished simply because an old professor and his shining-eyed wife thought they had it in them.

If they could do it, so can you.

[And so, dear reader, if you want to take one thing from this story about leadership and love that will make a measurable and ongoing difference in your life, pause and make a vow wherever you are right now to get out there and give away the gift of *encouragement*. In your own way, with your own heart and intelligence and imagination. You have no idea how starved people are for it...you have no idea the ripple effect that it will bring right back into your own life.]

The gift of love: the gift of encouragement. I thought my parents were doing it for the students. And they were. But more than anything else, they did it for me.

– Emory Austin