

Tolstoy as Teacher



Tolstoy, born on September 9th, 1828, was a Russian novelist, short story writer, playwright, and essayist. Already a well-known author, Tolstoy became passionate about teaching in 1859 considering it to be, in his own words, “the most important work in the world because everything we dream of can only come to life thanks to the next generations.” His hope was to bring together the nobility and peasantry, which he sought to do by teaching the younger generation.

"The brightest period of my life wasn't when I gave my love to a woman, but when I gave it all to people, to children. It was a great time, especially amid the background of dark times that preceded it." This quote illustrates how Leo Tolstoy remembered his days devoted to children's education.

“Maeterlinck has spoken recently of the ‘spirit of the bee-hive.’ Forty years ago Tolstoy wrote very much the same way of the “spirit of the school.” “There is,” he tells us, “in a school, something undefined, which is almost entirely independent of the master's control, something absolutely unknown to the science of pedagogy, and which constitutes notwithstanding the very foundation of success in teaching -- it is the spirit

of the school. The master has indeed a negative influence upon it, for unless he abstains from certain things, he may destroy it. This spirit increases in proportion as the master allows the pupils to think for themselves, and with the number of pupils, and it decreases in proportion as the lessons and hours are lengthened. It communicates itself from child to child and to the teacher himself, and shows itself in the sound of the voice, in looks, in gestures, in rivalries -- something very palpable, necessary and precious, and which consequently every master ought to cherish. It is a spirit of ardour which is as necessary to intellectual nourishment as the saliva is to digestion. It cannot be artificially produced, but it springs into life of itself. It is the teacher's duty to find some useful object for this spirit to spend itself upon, and not to try to quench it. You ask one boy a question, but another wishes to answer it. He bends towards you and looks at you with all his might. He can hardly keep back the words. Ask him, and he will answer with passion, and what he says will be fixed forever on his memory. But if you keep him in that state of tension for half an hour without letting him overflow, he will let it out in pinching his neighbour.”
~ Ernest Howard Crosby in “Tolstoy as a Schoolmaster”

Men are Like Rivers

"One of the most widespread superstitions is that every man has his own special, definite qualities; that a man is kind, cruel, wise, stupid, energetic, apathetic, etc. Men are not like that . . . Men are like rivers; the water is the same in each, and alike in all; but every river is narrow here, is more rapid there, here slower, there broader, now clear, now cold, now dull, now warm. It is the same with men. Every man carries in himself the germs of every human quality and sometimes one manifests itself, sometimes another, and the man often becomes unlike himself—while still remaining the same man.”

~ Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, 1899