



# The best holder of guillotine paper in the class

## Words of thanks

The other night at our church we held a most remarkable evening. It was called ‘Teacher Appreciation Night’. Before you stop reading and start yelling, ‘Too American! Too tacky! Too emotional!’ let me say that for the hundred or so teachers from local schools who attended, it was a night to remember – for all the best reasons.

It’s true that as they entered the building some looked a little apprehensive – as if waiting for the fixed smile, firm handshake welcome and the inevitable, ‘Before we start, perhaps just a short word of prayer...’ What they actually got was a glass of good wine and the sight of our rather tatty church transformed into a classy restaurant. The food was incredible – the jazz group brilliant – and the only words they heard from the front were, ‘Thank you for all you have put into the lives of our children.’

I watched as teachers slowly unwound, laughed together and, with a variety of skill, danced the night away. And I stood on the door as they left. Everyone was smiling, everybody oozing gratitude. One woman said to me, ‘This has been one of the best nights of my life!’ And before you whisper under your breath, ‘She should get out more’, think again. Good food, good wine, great music and

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Rob initially trained as a teacher. But, after successfully completing his probationary year, he left the profession and retrained as a solicitor.

As a speaker, Rob has addressed over half a million people worldwide in seminars on family life. He is the author of ten books including *The Sixty Minute Father* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1997) and *The Sixty Minute Mother* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2000). His latest offering, *Teenagers! What Every Parent Has to Know* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2007), is available now from all good bookshops (priced £7.99).

## *Mr Thomas understood the sheer power of affirmation*

hosts whose only aim for the whole evening is to show their gratitude to you – you may well agree it doesn’t get much better than that.

## Memories of school

As I helped tidy up afterwards and take down from the walls the teacher-affirming quotes by Plato and assorted others, my mind went to two teachers who had changed my life.

I wasn’t very good at school. My home background wasn’t an academic one, and the grammar school in which I somehow ended up may as well as have been on Mars. I didn’t understand how to study, how to pass exams or even the importance of the simple things (such as if there are three questions on the examination paper and you answer the first two so brilliantly that you don’t have time to do the last one, then your chances of getting a good grade are low).

My parents tried to help as much as possible, but to be honest, it was another world to them as well. I still have the school report I took home at the end of the Easter term when I was fourteen. In it my form master had written: ‘He is making no use of what little ability he has.’

## Dewi Williams

But Dewi Williams, my English teacher, changed my life. When he read *Under Milk Wood* I felt as if Dylan Thomas himself was in my classroom. And

while the rest of the teachers were having sleepless nights about my obvious lack of talent in Chemistry, Physics and Maths, all Dewi cared about was how I could write better essays. He couldn't help himself; he was in love with literature.

Perhaps he should have been different with me. Perhaps other teachers said to him in the staff-room, 'Why don't you get that boy to care a bit more about quadratic equations and less about literature?' But if they did say it, he didn't listen. All he wanted to do was make me even better at the one thing in school I was good at. My books in other subjects were filled with crosses, underlinings and 'See me!' But my English books had ticks in the margin and comments such as, 'I like this!', 'This is very good', and on one occasion, 'Let's try to get this into print!' And then a strange thing began to happen. Through the years, as my confidence in that single area grew, I began to believe that I could achieve things elsewhere. Dewi was the greatest teacher I have ever known. He knew all along he wasn't just teaching me English. He was giving me an education – in myself.

*When opportunities for praise are thin on the ground, we have to look hard to find them – but find them we must*

### The power of praise

In my new book, *Teenagers! What Every Parent Has to Know*, I talk to parents about some lessons I learned from Dewi – including the potency of praise. When opportunities for praise are thin on the ground, we have to look hard to find them – but find them we must. Sometimes it's not a bad idea for parents to remind teenagers of times when they did well: 'I remember when you made us that meal – it was brilliant!' and 'Hey, remember when you made us laugh till we were sick?' Praise lifts all our heads and when the ear never hears it, the heart loses the will to go on trying.

When I want to give a great example of the impact that praise – however small – can have, I think of another of my teachers, this time one from my junior school. I've already said that I wasn't very good at school and was reluctant to take part in class activity. But when I was nine, Mr Thomas asked me to hold the paper as he used the guillotine in the art class. You had to keep it very steady. I did – and gave him a great edge. The next week he asked me to hold it again, and again the following week. Over the coming months I became

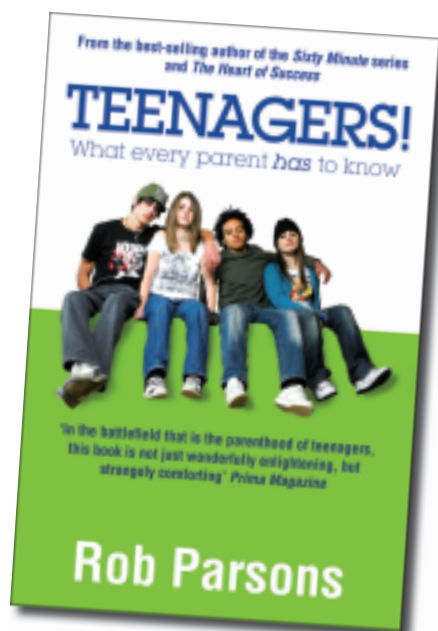
*Take a glass of wine and some canapés; choose a seat and glance through the menu*

his sole helper on the guillotine. One day, just as we finished, he surveyed a stack of neatly cut paper and then turned to the other children and said, 'Robert Parsons is the best holder of guillotine paper in the whole of the class.'

Since those days I have done some interesting things: I have been one of the senior partners in a legal practice, written ten books and lectured all across the world. But almost fifty years later, 'Robert Parsons is the best holder of guillotine paper in the whole of the class' is still firm in my mind. Why is that? Perhaps it's because when somebody encourages you, no matter how seemingly insignificant, your mind is opened to the wonderful possibility that there could be other things out there you could do. Mr Thomas was a brilliant teacher. He knew that although blame is necessary, you also have to search for opportunities, however small, to praise. Mr Thomas understood the sheer power of affirmation.

So, as I think back to some of the teachers who influenced my life, perhaps you – personally – will come in your mind with me to that Teacher Appreciation Night. Take a glass of wine and some canapés; choose a seat and glance through the menu. The jazz is about to begin – but before it does the master of ceremonies says, 'I just want to say one word.' And then he looks right at you: 'Thank you.'

■ Rob Parsons



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