The only way I can reflect on the best teacher I ever had is to pluralize the question. I can’t choose one. Reflecting back on them is a way of reflecting on my identity and on what I take my duty as a teacher to be. Ranking these people would be like ranking critical aspects of my persona and value system – something disrespectful of the intricate nexus of commitments that makes me who I am. I am afraid I need to go through a list.

Let me begin with Mr. Danzig (I don’t think I ever knew his first name), who was the Director of the school at Moshulu Jewish Center where I was prepared for my bar-mitzvah and taught a bit of biblical history. Mr. Danzig was competent and careful in the classroom but his way of teaching was not inspirational. It is who he was, rather than what he taught or how he taught, that stays with me. His dignity and his commitment to both his students and his subject matter were new in my experience. I could not have been more than ten but I clearly remember the powerful impression he left on me. It was evident that he was doing something he believed in. There was never a sense of his having someplace else he needed to be. I particularly remember a sense of his solidity and persistence – his continuing effort to create a meaningful experience for us despite the obstacles. There were too many of us, large numbers of reluctant after-school students, boys who clearly would rather be somewhere else, and who had already used up their supply of disciplined attention in what most of us regarded as our much more important regular classroom day. Our classrooms were far inferior to what we had in the public schools. There was very limited support from the congregation. We were clearly hell-bent on assimilation. Nevertheless, I can still recapture the excitement with which he told us about once walking across Palestine when he was a young man. I remember thinking about his account of that walk when I would see him – for many years thereafter – walking down my street as he left the subway station to go on to the Temple. I remember something remarkably trustworthy about him. He was always the man he ought to be. His dignity, his humanity, and his commitment were integral to who he was. It was more than fifty years ago, but my admiration for his unswerving devotion stays with me. It was not his particular commitments to the Hebrew language, Jewish tradition,
or Zionism that stayed with me. It was the dignity and compassion with which he acted on those commitments.

I never had a clear sense of who my sixth grade teacher, Robert Petlock was personally. It was not his character that impressed me but the effectiveness of what he had learned to do as a teacher. He was the first teacher I had encountered who gave me a real opportunity to do self-directed work and who taught me the joys of collective effort. There was a day that particularly stands out when a fellow student and I were allowed to go down to the school basement and dig out some old glass slides which we washed clean and then prepared for a class presentation on the history of medicine. We had earlier found drawings of Hippocrates, Galen, William Harvey, and other luminaries in the history of medicine, proceeded to paint likenesses of them onto the slides, and wrote some accompanying text. We were entirely on our own and on a deadline – having a commitment to present our work to our class that afternoon. The sense of autonomous accomplishment was thrilling.

Dorothy Leon, who taught high school English to me at DeWitt Clinton High School in the Bronx comes to mind for a different reason. She was the first person to let me in on the power of poetry to genuinely engage me. she read Wilfred Owen to us in a sophomore English class and moved us – partially because reading Owen so clearly moved her. She had everyone’s attention, and the room was altogether quiet except for her reading. It wasn’t the kind of thing I had experienced in a classroom before. She made it possible for us to respect the power of language in a new way and I think I was not alone in knowing that something important had happened at that moment. I remember very little more about her, but that one class was my most important high school experience.

My introductory economics teacher in college, Dorothy Lampden, was from Montana. Everything about her was very different from the New York Jewish immigrant milieu I grew up in. She spoke slowly and quietly. She was never informal – always dignified and professional. There was something persistently understated about the way she presented both herself and her subject matter – but one gradually came to see that she cared a great deal about students like me – particularly, I think, about helping us to find our way into the American tradition she valued and embodied. I associate that tradition with John Dewey who she admired, with the democratic commitments embodied in her quiet feminism, and with the conservative enlightenment commitments of her college, Carleton in Minnesota. Taking Carleton’s most famous graduate, Thorstein Veblen, seriously, which we did in her classes, and simultaneously being asked to subscribe to Business Week and take it seriously, which we also did, was an introduction to an