



*In this 2012 article, John Beck ruminated on the reasons why teaching had turned into a "holy calling" for him.*

Preparing for the final day of teaching a business strategy course to my MBA students this year, I stopped—for what may have been the first time in my career—to really consider if there was any value in my class. Not only for my students, but also for me.

Over the last twenty years of teaching at all levels of higher education—undergraduate, graduate, and executive education—I have found that I prefer teaching master's degree students. Executive education pays well and there is no requirement to grade papers or assignments; most of the great instructors I know prefer teaching at this level. Undergrads bring with them excitement and unbridled energy; they are on their own for the first time in their lives and so eager to learn.

But working with master's students—especially those that already have a little career experience—who are in their late 20s or early 30s, is a labor of love for me.

Anyone who is very close to me would be surprised to hear that. They would know that I'm moody, grumpy, and irritable before I have to teach a class. I get irrationally nervous for someone who has taught for as long as I have. But when I am done with the teaching, there is no greater feeling in the world for me.

When I do my job well in the classroom, the value I think I provide to my students is more than just getting them through their degree program and giving them some management tools. When I am at my best, I hope that my students get from me a way of making decisions and communicating their ideas, and if I'm really good, a final push to make the next generation of humans better than the last.

That is a grandiose statement; a statement that I'd never even considered to be a motivator until just a few weeks ago when I finally, for the first time, analyzed what I've been doing for all these years. We humans teach our next generations not only to do what we already can do, but we also encourage

and expect those younger than us to come up with things that we've never thought of.

Many animals on earth learn important survival skills from the rest of their species. Monkeys learn from each other how to use a stick as a tool—and generation after generation of monkeys use that stick in about the same way. They never get all that creative—never figure out, for instance, that the stick could be a basic building block of a house.

We, on the other hand, have more and more expertise and skills with each generation of humans. That means pouring more basic knowledge into the brains of every class of entering first graders. It is one reason that formal education is so stressful for teachers and students. We are trying to communicate so much. We want to give all of our knowledge so that people just a little younger than us can improve on that before they pass on their knowledge to people younger than them.

Most of my MBA students are in the last year of formal education that they will ever have. As a business school professor, my job is to prepare "managers" whose roles, in the very near future, will be to train a younger group of professionals. My students are also at an age where they are starting or contemplating starting families—another chance for them to impart their knowledge to a next generation. So when I'm doing my job at its best, my messages are not just about business and strategic management, they are about life.

I'm one of the lucky ones who get to pass the baton to the next generation. I have to make sure that I give them all the most important things that I've ever learned in my life—then I tell them to be better and smarter than I ever hoped to be. Anytime I run into a former student, I can tell you they are delivering on that challenge beautifully.

For the first time in my career, I understand why I'm so nervous and irritable every time I walk into a

classroom. In my own small way—in the only way I personally will ever be able to comprehend it—I am feeling the burden of preparing the next generation of humans to be more humane and

better individuals. It is an awesome responsibility. But it is also why I'm a teacher.