

Apprenticeship

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HOW TO CITE:

Shaughnessy AF.
Apprenticeship. *Fam Med*.
2026;58(7):516–516.
doi: [10.22454/FamMed.2026.349530](https://doi.org/10.22454/FamMed.2026.349530)

FIRST PUBLISHED:

July 9, 2026

KEYWORDS:

Teaching, teacher
training, narration

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Medicine

“One ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and, if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.”

Penned by Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, this quote is on a thank-you card, framed and posted on the inner doorjamb of my office. Its cheap, plastic frame was the best I could afford when I received the card from a student in 1987, almost 40 years ago. She gave it to me on the last day of her rotation.

Maureen was quiet and serious, and we shared a few conversations during her rotation that my memory preserves as thoughtful, if inconsequential. I shared a few of my experiences and gave her feedback on her work. To my surprise, she wrote a long thank you to me for the experience. Although the details of her remarks have faded, the validation has stuck. I had something to offer someone.

I was new to teaching, returning after a couple years in practice. Though I was back at my alma mater, I no longer fit in. My 2 years away had changed me. I went from being a sponge for the dogma of the day to being a skeptic, a questioner. This transition to teaching was not an easy one for me. I felt like an imposter behind the “faculty” title with my relative inexperience. But Maureen seemed to think that I had something to offer. I kept her card to remind me of the glimmer of confidence I gained from her appreciation.

I haven’t read the inside of the card in many years. I can easily pop it out of the frame. But I don’t need to. The memory of that formative time in my development as a teacher is all I need. I rarely stop to look at the quote as I leave my office, but when I do, I remind myself to “speak a few reasonable words.”

Teaching is just that—a series of a few reasonable words, shared at the right time, holding the potential to inform, remind, or persuade learners. If the time is right, my teaching adds to their consciousness and perhaps also to the unconscious tapestry that makes them who they are becoming. Unlike Maureen’s thank-you card, the recipients of these reasonable words will likely never identify them as coming from me. Nor do they need to. That is the essence of teaching, the adding a colorful thread or two to that tapestry, embedded in its warp and weft and carried on forever into the future.

So, Maureen, wherever you are, thank you.