

“She Was Great, but ...”: Examining Preservice Recollections of Favorite and Most Effective Teachers

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Abstract

Given the powerful influence of past school experiences on the ways in which future teachers decide to teach, it is important to help preservice teachers more deliberately and critically explore the implications of those influences. This study grew out of an assignment in which 38 secondary education majors were asked to describe high school teachers they remember as being their favorite teachers and their most effective teachers. There was some overlap between the categories, but more often than not teachers who were considered “favorites” during high school were now seen as having ‘defaulted on their responsibility to educate and supervise, to open minds and challenge ... students.’ Although the responses yielded 35 different characteristics of effective teachers, three were dominant: their passion or enthusiasm for both teaching and the subject matter, their concern for the learning of all students, and their knowledge of subject matter.

It is fairly well known that the conceptions of what it means to be a teacher held by preservice teachers are well established long before they enter formal teacher education programs (Hollingsworth, 1993; Holt-Reynolds, 92, Lortie, 1975; Pajares, 1992; Resnick, 1989; Ross, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Skamp & Mueller, 2001). Moreover, those beliefs have been shown to be highly resistant to change during professional preparation (Kennedy, 1997; Murphy, Delli, & Edwards, 2004; Zeichner & Tabachnik, 1981). If the beliefs promoted a dynamic view of what it means to become a teacher, they might not be problematic. However, more often than not, Howard (1987) suggested that preservice teacher beliefs reflect two dominant theories: “If it works for other teachers, use it,” and “if it works, keep it” (p. 59). It is not unusual for teachers to view their job as an extended form of parenting and rely more on instinct, experience, conversation with colleagues, and trial-and-error than on formalized procedures to learn their craft (Banks, 1991; Clark, 1988; Goodlad, 1984; Lortie, 1975; Nias, 1989; Paine, 1990).

None of this is to say that the beliefs and assumptions in question are immutable or that teacher education is completely without influence. While existing concepts are unlikely to undergo radical change, there is reason to believe that they can expand in meaning (Check, 1999; Mills & Satterthwait, 2000; Ng, Nicholas, & Williams, 2010; Skamp & Mueller, 2001). Some preparation programs manage to nurture that sort of belief change. They do so by challenging candidates as early as possible to explore their own dispositions through a variety of tools by which they can outline why they want to be teachers and what images of effective teaching they hold (Mills & Satterthwait, 2000; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002; Slate, Capraro, & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Willie, 1985; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001). They make a deliberate and ongoing effort to confront candidates with

their own beliefs “in the context of research, promising practice, psychological theories, and philosophical beliefs that underpin professional goals and practices” (Minor, et al., 2002, p. 117).

This study describes one such effort to promote critical reflection in a small group of secondary education majors. The purpose of the assignment was to confront the preservice teachers with their own, perhaps subconscious, notions of what makes an effective high school teacher, based on their prior education. Then they would explore how those notions might influence their own future teaching. After reading the responses, I decided to categorize and synthesize the descriptions to create portraits of effective and ineffective teachers that might help future teachers shape their teaching identities and practices.

Method of Investigation

The research was conducted in a Midwestern public university with one of the largest teacher education programs in the country. The student writing out of which this inquiry grew was assigned as one of the requirements in an introductory education course entitled, Current Issues in Secondary Education. The class consisted of 38 secondary education majors, 6 of whom declined to provide consent to use their essays. The students were asked to answer the following questions in no more than five double-spaced pages.

1. Who do you recall as your favorite teacher and why?
2. Who do you recall as your most effective teacher and why?

The assignment was introduced with a brief explanation in which the students were asked to limit their selections to high school teachers and told that the favorite and most effective teacher could be the same person or two different people. They were also told they could include more than one person in each category if they were conflicted about their choices. No definitions were suggested for either “favorite” or “effective.” The participants were free to think about them in whatever ways seemed appropriate. The favorite/effective dichotomy was used as a forced choice that might challenge simplistic ideas about making the classroom fun, having close relationships with students, and teacher versus student needs.

The assignment was limited to recollections of high school teachers for three reasons. First, the recollections would be more recent. Second, the nature of the teacher-student relationship is very different in elementary school. In that setting a child might have only one teacher besides a few “special” teachers in any given grade. As a result, the emotional connections can be more powerful. Moreover, it would be difficult to recall and make honest comparisons between what was needed as a five-year old and as an eleven-year old. And if elementary school was added into the possible choices, the participants would have had to compare what they remember as being a highly effective third grade class and a senior level advanced mathematics class. A third reason was that the nature and role of the curriculum, extra-curricular activities, social life, and student expectations at the two levels is so different as to make comparisons difficult.

The students had one week to write the essays so that they would have time to reflect on their choices. Since the participants were no more than six years out of high school and early in their college career, they might not have given much deliberate thought or conscious expression to the long-term impact of high school teachers.

After removing the identifying information, each essay was read with the help of two undergraduate research assistants. The analysis of data included simply tallying the characteristics of each category and ranking the characteristics in order of the number of occurrences. We then met to negotiate what we agreed upon as major themes and/or counter themes in the responses. The most common discrepancies involved discussing whether one term was synonymous with another. For example, to what extent did a phrase like “genuine interest in student success” mean the same thing as “genuinely cared about students”? The results were separated into quantitative and narrative summaries. Given the small sample size and the wide range of subject areas involved, it was decided that any statistical treatment of the numerical data would not be meaningful or shed any additional light on the results. Therefore, that data was simply tallied and summarized to provide a general profile of each category.

Table 1
Favorite and Effective Teachers by Subject Area

Subject	Favorite	Effective	Both
French	3		
Spanish			2
English	2	4	4
Journalism	1		
Science	2		
Biology	1		3
Chemistry	1		1
Physics	1	1	
Earth Science			1
Math		1	3
Algebra			1
Calculus			1
Geometry			1
History	2		9
Civics/Political Science			2
International Relations			1
Sociology			1
Geography			1
Technology/Computer	2		
Basketball Coach			1
Physical Education			2
Band Director	1		1
Shop			1
None mentioned	2		

Teachers described were also coaches – 4

†Teacher from an AP/Honors class – 6

Results

In nearly every case, students were able to identify one teacher as their favorite or most effective teacher. Only two participants wrote that they had more than one favorite teacher. Three could not choose just one most effective teacher. In five more cases, participants included more than one person as both their favorite and most effective teachers. Given the number of teachers students have throughout their high school careers, it was not surprising that some could not choose just one teacher as being highly effective or their favorite. Perhaps it is more telling, or even disappointing, that so few students were not able to choose more than one most effective teacher. However, it would be dangerous to make judgments about the quality of teachers since the instructions implied a forced choice and participants were not asked to discuss their other teachers or why they did not choose a particular teacher.

One factor that complicated the use of more specific comparisons between disciplines and the type of courses taught is the way courses and subject areas were referred to by the students and, most likely, by their schools. When the participants talked about English teachers, they used only the category "English." There was no indication of the title of the class that might have divided English into its component areas. In contrast, except for three cases where reference was made only to the social studies or science teacher, anyone who wrote about a teacher in the physical or biological sciences or the social studies always referred to those teachers by their specialties.

One final consideration in reading the more detailed analysis of the responses is that a few students in the classes involved in the study had attended the same high schools. However, there was no way of knowing the extent to which the teacher described in one student's essay might have been mentioned in another essay or if another student who had that same teacher would have agreed with the author's assessment. Based on discussions in class, though, this was probably not a significant factor since only four students mentioned that they had attended the same high school, and those were two different schools.

What's Going On in the Social Studies?

When the results were sorted according to subject areas, it was the social studies that appeared to produce the best-loved and most effective teachers (16 of the 60 teachers named in the sample). English and mathematics produced 11 teachers each. More specifically, history alone accounted for 9 teachers who were considered both favorite and most effective teachers. Another 2 history teachers fell into the "favorite" alone category. Acknowledging the limitations of such a small sample, the comparatively large number of teachers identified from history is interesting for two reasons. First, the minimum graduation requirements in this state suggest only two credits of U.S. history and government as opposed to four years in the language arts, three years of mathematics, and two years of science. So, at least in the case of the students in this project, it seems likely that students would encounter far more teachers in a greater variety of courses in any of those areas. Another factor that makes these social studies teachers stand out is that numerous studies have found that those courses associated with the social studies tend to be among the least favorite in both the elementary and secondary curriculum (e.g., Francis, 2000; Loewen, 1995; Zhao & Hoge, 2005).

Good News for the Guys

Men were identified as being the favorite or most effective teacher (12 favorite, 9 effective) more than women (6 favorite, 5 effective). This was especially true when the students identified one person as both their favorite and most effective teacher (21 men, 9 women). It would be difficult to draw any implications from those numbers, given the small sample and the fact that other similar research does not provide any clear pattern in terms of the relationship of gender to perceived effectiveness (Brookhart, 1992; Fitzsimmons, 2002). In fact, one of the stronger studies to look at that factor showed that more than 80% of the students studied said that gender is not a factor at all in determining effectiveness (Young, Whitley, & Helton, 1998).

Qualities of Effective and Favorite Teachers

By necessity, a teacher had to be located in a subject area, but the students' accompanying narratives gave no indication that subject matter had anything to do with the teachers' effectiveness or likeability. The qualities described here, as in most other research on students' perceptions of their teachers, point to the qualities the person brings to the discipline and not anything inherent in the discipline. To an extent that I have seldom found in educational research, there is remarkable consistency related to the factors that students identify as qualities that make an effective teacher. Across decades, large and small studies, age and development of the respondents, whether choosing from a preconstructed list or providing open-ended responses, and even international borders, three qualities dominated any "top five" list you could create from the data: the teacher's passion or enthusiasm, their concern for the learning of all students, and their knowledge of subject matter (Arnon & Reichel, 2007; Brookhart, 1992; Check, 1999; Fitzsimmons, 2002; Kunter, et al., 2008; Long & Hoy, 2006; Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, & James, 2002; Mowrer-Reynolds, 2008; Musgrove & Taylor, 1972; Strickland & Page, 1991; Strickland, Page & Page, 2001; Thibodeau & Hillman, 2003; Turley, 1994; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie, & Minor, 2001; Young, Whitley, & Helton, 1998). This study was no different.

The Most Effective Teachers

Given the open-endedness of the assignment, the definitions of effective teaching that emerged were nuanced and varied. For some, the definition was based on pragmatic, long-term outcomes.

To me an effective teacher means that the lessons he or she taught to the students made a difference to them and helped them improve with their mental, verbal, and social capabilities. (Student 26)

I understand sentimental memories and reminiscent thoughts cloud my judgment, but still I believe if a student could leave their school and look back fondly on it then ... those teachers did their job. (Student 16)

Others suggested a simple formula based in the moment, involving exciting and engaging students.

I think that an effective teacher is a teacher that comes to class every day excited to teach and does their best to get every student involved in the class. (Student 15)

I would say it [the definition of an effective teacher] is a person that relates concepts through students' perspectives. (Student 21)

Still others reflected the belief that effective teaching is more than personality or pedagogical technique. Instead, it involves a complex interaction of factors that is sometimes serendipitous but more often a result of deliberate, hard work on the part of both student and teacher.

Sometimes, effective teaching occurs because the right teacher came into a student's academic career at the right time, opening that student's eyes to a particular discipline or subject. On the other hand, when an educator toils to embody the ideals and characteristics of what he or she believes is best in education, effective teaching often occurs. (Student 4)

In the end, I have learned that one can learn from most experiences; it only matters what one chooses to do with this knowledge to improve his or herself. (Student 32)

I believe that teachers play half the role of making a student's high school experience positive, and students are responsible for the other half. I think that too often students blame teachers as the reason they don't like school when it is not entirely the teacher's fault. What you put into something is what you get out of it. (Student 21)

I noticed a correlation between those who did well in school and those who like the teachers. It raises the question as to whether it is the teacher who is responsible for the student's overall view of the school and education; or whether disliking school from the start automatically places the teacher in a negative light. (Student 6)

The students in this study used 35 different characteristics to describe their most effective teachers. Five of those were mentioned by at least 13 students. The most frequently mentioned characteristic was that the teacher had high expectations for students. This was significant in that it is the one item that did not typically appear among the top three to five characteristics in the research cited above. I also found this to be worth considering among the most important implications of the project since the students who supplied these descriptions represented a typical cross-section of secondary education majors from varying educational backgrounds. Still, I do not consider this an affirmation of simplistic (and even illogical) educational reform ideas that argue for higher standards as a solution to dropout problems. The appreciation for high expectations among these students has to be seen in context of the other qualities they describe. These are not mediocre, uninspired teachers implementing an imposed set of standards.

The other high-frequency responses fell right in line with previous research. Effective teachers were those who:

- Genuinely cared about the learning of all students (17 respondents)
- Knew their subjects well (14)
- Used a variety of actively engaging learning activities (13)
- Were passionate or enthusiastic (13)

There was probably greater consensus on these qualities than is indicated in this list. In analyzing each response, the qualities were transcribed directly so as to not read anything more into the words than was intended. If this were conducted as a larger study, follow-up interviews would likely have shown that qualities such as “compassionate” (mentioned three times) or “treated all students equally” (mentioned four times) could well have been more focused indicators of genuinely caring about the learning of all students. Similarly, “gave students responsibility” (mentioned twice) and “tried to open minds” (mentioned four times) were specific characteristics of a teacher with high expectations.

The notion of teacher passion or enthusiasm is especially important and will be explored further in the concluding discussion. It was not the most important characteristic in this particular list, but it has topped similar lists from the earliest research on the correlates of effective teaching (Barr, 1948; McCoard, 1944) to the more recent studies cited above. More comments related to the importance of a teacher who “makes teaching seem like the most important job in the world” (Student 16) than to any other single trait were included in the narrative remarks. These selections are representative of the students’ views.

Although he thought the teachers got the short end of the deal [in a recent strike settlement], he kept the same enthusiasm throughout the year. He showed he cared about his students and wasn’t there just to collect a paycheck. (Student 13)

Consequently, my favorite teachers were the ones that made class time upbeat and exciting, instead of boring and lethargic. (Student 4)

I do not believe it is possible for a teacher to fake enthusiasm...at least not for very long. They are going to see their students day in and day out for years; eventually their cover will be blown. (Student 6)

One person in particular captured what previous research has concluded. A passion for teaching, in general, is not nearly as powerful as when it is combined with a passion for the subject matter.

It wasn’t the fact alone that he was a fun teacher or the fact that he knew how to teach well.... It was his ability to tie these two concepts together to form a balanced approach to his teaching that provided a stimulating exciting lesson that had a lot of information and was sure to drive his points home to all of his students. (Student 8)

Favorite, but Not Terribly Effective

My expectation after giving the original assignment was that there would be a sharp distinction between favorite and most effective teachers. Maybe I had been more affected than I care to admit by television portrayals of “favorite” teachers in which all the coolest and well-liked teachers seemed to accomplish little in terms of academics, or by oft-heard anecdotes about how the toughest and least-liked teachers are the ones you come to appreciate only later in life. Surprisingly, only one student reflected that latter perspective.

No matter how frustrated the student would get, this teacher would be sure to get his point across.... The irony of this is that this teacher was not particularly well-liked, even disliked by many. This made his teaching even more effective because it went beyond personal feelings, which usually dominate any teenager's high school days. (Student 18)

There were many more examples of the well-liked but ineffective teacher.

When I look back on my high school years I, for the most part, was more interested in having fun than learning, and that's why my favorite teachers were the ones who didn't make us do much. I had one teacher that would let us watch cartoons every Friday for first period. Everybody in the school talked about how cool his class was. The reasons for me choosing the teachers that I did as being my favorite are simple: they were lazy and so was I. I don't like saying my favorite teachers in high school were the worst teachers, but it's true. (Student 30)

I have much more respect and a current relationship with the two teachers that were effective rather than the ones I liked more in high school. I can only say that at the time I was high school I cared more about having a good time rather than learning the material.... (Student 10)

She [the teacher] blended right in with my friends, spouting out sarcasm, wearing adorable clothes, and not taking anything too seriously. Everyone loved her and felt that it was such a great break to go to her class, knowing that there would be time to kick back and chat about the latest fashion, a new boyfriend, or gossip about other people... She defaulted on her responsibility to educate and supervise, to open minds and challenge her students. (Student 20)

The teachers who were considered favorites at the time but not very effective shared many attributes with effective teachers, at least in terms of personality traits. They were student-centered, patient, seemed to genuinely care about students, funny, and even seemed to enjoy teaching. One of the key differences was that the ineffective but well-liked teachers appeared to be unable or unwilling to set boundaries between the personal and professional. They either did not want to or did not know how to translate student-centeredness into how their students were taught or what they learned. They had low expectations for students, treated class time as a social hour, were disorganized, and emphasized personal stories over subject matter. In extreme cases, they simply came across as lazy or apathetic. But even those qualities were appreciated by some students who—as one respondent admitted—were just as lazy and apathetic.

Where the Lines Blurred

Despite the sometimes harsh indictments of former favorites, more often than not effective teachers were also favorite teachers. Those teachers were not like the soulless Dickensian Gradgrind, whom students might later grudgingly appreciate for their cold, rational logic or because they later developed an ability in Latin. To the contrary, at least 14 of the 35 characteristics describing their effective teachers are directly related to the teacher's personality and relationship to students. One finding that transcends race, ethnicity, culture, and time is that teachers who are remembered as most effective are those who combine compassion and concern for their students with subject matter knowledge and inspired pedagogical content knowledge (Ayers, 1995; Bettencourt, Gillett, Gall, & Hull, 1983; Delpit,

2006; Intrator, 2006; Noddings, 2003; Peacock; 2006; Willis, 1995). The ability to bring humane and genuine student-centeredness to the classroom seems to be the final ingredient in the alchemic transformation that turns knowledge and enthusiasm into powerful and memorable pedagogy.

We may know our subjects and perfect our techniques for teaching them, without recognizing, for our mastery to make a difference to our students, we must also summon from within certain qualities of personality that have little to do with subject matter or theories of instruction (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p. 3).

The challenge then for future teachers and those of us who prepare them for the classroom is to discover—or create—the philosopher’s stone that will set that transformation into motion.

Preparing Hybrid Teachers

What this study and those cited seem to call for is more emphasis on future teachers’ ability to ponder who they are as people and professionals, on their profession, and on the affective needs of their students. Unfortunately, with increasing calls for a narrowly focused accountability, teacher education programs appear to be increasing their emphasis on the technical-rational aspects of teaching and assessment. In fact, much of current teacher education might even work against the nurturing of those qualities. The typical separation of subject area coursework, the bulk of which usually precedes most pedagogical coursework and is seldom meaningfully connected to it even if courses are taken concurrently, does little to promote real pedagogical content knowledge. Excessive credit hour and field experience requirements, more likely than not, leaves little time for participating in active engagement in discipline applications in the field, at conferences, in research efforts, and so on. Yet, if the characteristics identified here are as important as the research says they are, it is imperative to give more attention to promoting the awareness and cultivating of those characteristics in future secondary teachers.

Promoting and Probing Self-Awareness

Underlying any attempt to use recollections of effective past teachers is their ability to summon and articulate those perceptions. But even articulation is not enough. Preservice teachers must also be able to interrogate those perceptions and integrate them into an increasingly complex teaching personality. More specifically, the research implies at least four ways in which future teachers might be able to increase their self-knowledge and continue learning from the best of their past teachers.

Attending to the personal dynamic. First, a truly reflective teacher education program will help teachers “summon from within certain qualities of personality that have little to do with subject matter or theories of instruction” (Banner & Cannon, 1997, p. 3). Perhaps most people who want to teach have some innate desire to form a relationship with students. However, in secondary education that desire can often take the back seat to a subject matter emphasis that downplays student-centeredness, or it can be distorted by misguided understandings of student-centeredness that translate simply into a desire to be cool or “in touch.” The task of teacher educators is to define and develop the sort of vitality that creates emotional closeness in the classroom. Fitzsimmons’s (2002) work suggests that this important trait includes the ability to know people, even after the most casual meetings, the ability to create powerful visual images for students, and the ability to craft powerful yet subtle questions. However,

the somewhat ephemeral nature of this trait warrants more research to determine the extent to which these abilities can indeed be developed in any teacher. Perhaps the best we can do is to identify and nurture them in the candidates who already possess them.

Active engagement in subject matter. Second, the role played by the combination of enthusiasm for subject matter and for the act of teaching itself cannot be taken for granted. However necessary methods courses and field experiences might be, it is important that we encourage future teachers to see their commitment to their discipline as more than a collection of “courses taken” that ends at graduation. Their future students want to see them passionately engaged in the richness of their subject area. They want to see that their teachers are curious, continuously learning, and involved in the application of their subject matter knowledge. The research presented above hints that an internship at an archeological dig, research lab, or local history archive might be as crucial to future teaching effectiveness as hours spent in a high school classroom. The most influential high school teachers were seen as kind and genuinely helpful. However, it was equally important that they convince students of their personal levels of subject interest by nurturing their own interest in discipline-related activities outside of class time (see also Csikszentmihaly, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993).

Defining effective teaching. Another characteristic that might be developed by a more systematic examination of influential teachers is especially needed as schools are pressured to move toward simplistic measures of accountability, decreased teacher autonomy, and “teacher-proof” curricula. Willie (1985) describes it as the desire and ability to assert themselves by assuming accountability for helping to characterize effective teaching. We are coming to see all too quickly that when a profession fails to do that, someone else will step in to do so with a definition that is all too inadequate. Unfortunately, our profession no longer has the luxury of claiming that good teaching is too ephemeral to define and measure. Our critics seem to have no difficulty in doing so.

An exercise like the one described here can also serve to bring into sharper focus just how powerful individual teachers can be in shaping the images of teaching and what those images might imply. Since this was a class activity first and a research project second, much of the in-class follow-up we did regarding this activity focused on just that issue. For example, one activity was to imagine themselves as one of their future students being asked to write about them in a similar assignment as a future teacher in an introductory education course. A number of students mentioned that although they had heard the almost cliché comments about a teacher’s influence lasting through eternity, they had not put it in personal perspective before now. This was especially true in relation to the particularly harsh judgments they had for the “favorite” teachers who had, in fact, betrayed their responsibility to teaching their students. Thinking in terms of the legacy they will create in each future class they teach made some of them think more seriously about defining their pedagogy in rigorous and holistic terms.

Examining the silences. Finally, most research on recollections and perceptions of influential teachers has logically focused only on what respondents say. Arnon and Reichel (2007), however, argue that it might be equally important to explore what they do not say. Those gaps might point out more clearly what we have not communicated in teacher education—or perhaps what we have communicated too clearly. Their conclusion was all the more powerful because it was the only work I came across in an extensive review of literature for this project that suggested we should be listening to what was *not* said.

Good teachers and their education are pictured by students of education in practical terms that do not express a desire for wide cultural horizons, for cultural change, for changes in society, or for critical ethical goals and their goals do not stem from a challenging educational perception. (p. 458)

The preservice teachers who participated in this project were no different than others in that there appeared to be “an absence of thought regarding areas outside the limited, concrete world of school and teaching” (Arnon & Reichel, 2007, p. 458). Two things are especially troubling about that limited perspective. First, while the teachers showed passion for teaching and the role of subject matter outside of the school day, these most influential teachers apparently showed no equivalent passion for the larger social conditions of young people. Moreover, if future teachers define effective teaching so narrowly, there is little hope that they will nurture the critical social observation necessary for real change in society or in the commodified ways in which young people are being taught and assessed.

Final Thoughts

If we take this line of research seriously, it is imperative that we move away from a technical-rational approach to teacher education in which methods courses and field experiences are conducted in isolation from the deeply held beliefs of the students. Early education courses should move away from “everything-you-need-to-know-about-public-schools-in-three-credit-hours-or-less” and one-page “philosophies” of education, and instead toward the serious and ongoing exploration of beliefs about teaching and teachers. The exploration should begin at the earliest point possible and continue by guiding preservice teachers through a continual, hermeneutical process of examining all that they see, read, and hear in the program through their own beliefs about good and bad teaching, about their own learning needs, and about their own sense of self-efficacy.

Future teachers need to take their own recollections of past teachers seriously, because their future students are watching them carefully. Society as a whole increasingly defines the school experience simply as job preparation. Students, however, integrate it into themselves in a much more meaningful way. We would do well to post Fitzsimmons’s (2002) eloquent summary of the power of influential teachers in all our syllabi.

... the dominant and most enduring memory was one of emotional introspection. This memory was more than a simple fond remembrance. It was enduring because it was an active constituent of their daily life. While it did not dominate their minute-to-minute thinking or charge their lives with dynamism, it was nonetheless a constant comfortable companion (p. 3).

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