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My interview by the author of a new book,  
“Conversations with Great Teachers.”

Bill Smoot published his *Conversations with Great Teachers* May 15th of this year (2010). Three years earlier Bill had called and asked if he could interview me for a book he was writing. He was referred to me by Scott Ostler, the syndicated sports writer for the San Francisco Chronicle who's become one of my biggest fans. Scott has written a couple of articles about me, most notably, “Jedi of the jumper could teach LeBron” in Oct. of 2003. (Google “scott ostler jedi” to read it, or look on my home page at <http://www.swish22.com>.)

So I accepted, of course, and Bill and I met at a Starbucks in San Jose for over an hour in August, '07. I later forgot about it, as most such projects never make it to the light of day, and then, suddenly this week, a book appears in our mail box. It's an extraordinary honor for me as I can see Bill is a remarkable writer.

Here are some links. **It's possible to read a portion (about 3 pages) of any of the 51 interviews. My interview is about two-thirds there, and I've transcribed the missing portion at the bottom of this document (with the writer's permission).**

Bill's website: <http://www.billsmoot.com/>

TO READ THE INTERVIEW:

Go to "<http://www.amazon.com/Conversations-Great-Teachers-Bill-Smoot/dp/0253354919>"

Then click on "Search inside this book"

Then search for "Tom Nordland"

Then click on "Page 133" link to see some of the interview with me. **At the bottom is the missing part.**

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**press release**

In the tradition of the late Studs Terkel's oral histories, Bill Smoot's *Conversations with Great Teachers* interviews teachers in all walks of life. There are classroom teachers and university professors, teachers in medical schools and culinary institutes and ballet schools. There are corporate and political mentors, teachers of plumbers and carpenters, acting teachers, coaches to twelve year-olds and major league infielders. There are even an exotic dance teacher and an instructor in alligator wrestling. Among those interviewed are the neurosurgeon who operated on Senator Kennedy, former Secretary of State George Shultz, major league manager Ron Washington, and Emil Jones, political mentor to Barack Obama.

At a time of building consensus that the most important ingredient in educational success is teacher quality, this book contributes to the discourse with vividly painted verbal pictures of fifty-one great American teachers. It offers insight into what great teachers have in common as well as how greatly they differ from another.

## bio

Bill Smoot grew up in Maysville, Kentucky. He graduated from Purdue University where he was editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, *The Purdue Exponent*. He received his PhD in philosophy from Northwestern University. He has taught a variety of subjects in the humanities for forty years at levels ranging from sixth grade to graduate school. He has published scholarly articles, essays, and short fiction in such periodicals as *Western Humanities Review*, *The Nation*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *The Literary Review*. He currently teaches at the Castilleja School in Palo Alto, California, and lives in Berkeley with his wife, Jenna Chan Smoot.

## how *Conversations with Great Teachers* came to be

"I was always a great fan of the oral histories of Studs Terkel, especially *Working*. Letting people tell their own stories in their own voices seemed a great foundation for understanding the world. From time to time I wished he would do a book with teachers. When I read that he was in declining health, I seemed to hear in my head my mother's voice: 'If you want anything done, do it yourself.'

"I decided to get my toes wet and did a couple of interviews. I thought it might be "interesting." It turned out to be much more--I was excited, compelled, moved. So I dove in and swam like a man on a mission. I realized there were also great teachers outside the classroom, so I branched out and interviewed teachers of firefighters, major league infielders, ballet dancers, brain surgeons, FBI agents, alligator wrestlers, and more.

"Now that the book is finished, it seems to me that it's a fascinating read. I feel I can say that without being immodest, because the credit goes to the fifty-one great teachers

who generously granted me interviews. I was merely the midwife, bringing into the reader's world their voices of insight and wisdom. It is also a reminder that, amid all of the concern, the anxiety, the talking and the writing about education, it's basically about the teacher, the student, and what passes between them."

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### The last 1/3rd of my interview:

(cont'd)

For example, I can teach a twelve-year-old to coach a violinist -- by simply asking questions. Let's imagine you're a world-class violinist but you're having trouble with your vibrato. Something isn't quite right. So you come to me as a coach. Here's how I would coach you. I say, "What's the problem?" And you say, "My vibrato isn't quite there like it used to be." And I say, "What's vibrato?" And you say, "It's that movement of the finger that doesn't change the tone but gives you a kind of coloration." I might say, or even the twelve-year old could say, "Play me a piece, and on a scale of one to ten, tell me how good your vibrato was." So the violinist would play and then say, "That was about a four." I don't know what a four means, but he does. So I'd say, "Play it again." He might say, "That was about a six that time." I say, OK, do it again." He does and says, "Wow, that was about a nine. That was almost perfect." Then, "That was a four again." So he would teach himself what was wrong and what needed to be fixed. The violinist might say, "You're a great coach. Here's a hundred bucks."

***So if we were on the basketball court, and I were a twelve-year-old, or a college freshman, or even an NBA professional, where would you start? Would you just have me shoot and then ask, "How does that feel?"***

I would *not* say, "How does it feel?" Because the answer could be "Great." [Laughs.] A lot of coaches say that -- "How did that feel?" And the player can give any phony answer. The perfect question to ask as a coach is *what?* If you say, "What happened?" then the person gets into the awareness mode and is open to learning all kinds of things. What you want is for people to discover what happened and what works and how to get there on their own. Self-Discovery. Self-exploration. What I teach is self-coaching. The ultimate goal is that they can coach themselves.

***When you teach, do you articulate the four principles for your students or do you wait until they discover them on their own?***

I don't want to tell them what to do. So I might say, "How do you stand?" And once they're aware, then I might say, "Try a little more open stance. Is alignment easier that way? Does it feel more natural? So it's a little bit of leading, but mostly it's discovery. So mostly you want to create an environment, not say, "I know something that you don't know."

Another thing that's important is being non-judgmental. We all judge our students and our coaches and ourselves. My best teachers never judged me. It was always, "What happened?" and "What was the effect?"

***What if you say, "What happened?" and they don't know?***

The temptation is to tell them, but that sabotages the learning. So you keep at it until they start to feel something. Find something that they can be aware of. Maybe something specific -- how high was the hand on that shot? But you have to avoid telling. You have to keep working with awareness, and the more you see, the more the focus of awareness can be directed. That's how knowing a sport well helps. I go down and shoot outdoors a lot. I'm always working on distinctions, and I get new insights sometimes. I just love it.

What sabotages learning is to give answers. Sometimes it makes teachers feel important to say, "Your hand was not aligned with the basket." In my coaching, I've made the mistake over the years of saying too much. What you want to do is say very little and make everything experiential. If you're talking about alignment, have them try a few shots, and then you ask, "Was the hand aligned with the eye? Now do it on purpose off line." If you can get them to be aware of their own alignment, then learning happens. Awareness is the master skill. In performance, the master skill is concentration. But in learning, the master skill is awareness.

Sometimes I have kids shoot back and forth and tell their partner what their alignment was. The shooter speaks first. Was the ball aligned with the eye or the nose or the shoulder? They have to say or show what their alignment was. Then the partner says, "Oh, yeah?" Then they try again, becoming aware of what their alignment is. The awareness teaches them. Feedback has to come first from the performer, then the observer. They start to awaken. I've had some great success having them give feedback. The shooter's experience is the main teacher.

If your main intention is to increase awareness, you can't mess it up. Awareness is how we learn. If you're telling them what they should do, or judging or criticizing, then definitely you can screw it up.

If the student is aware, and developing awareness, then you're doing your job. Just get out of the way. If you're masterful at a skill (a physical skill, in my example), then you have the chance to see better where to highlight and spotlight the most significant areas for learning.

I've been trained to realize and know that the student is the genius in this learning stuff, not me and my good ideas. Once you know that, it colors everything you say and do. Coaching becomes easier -- student focused instead of coach focused. It makes a lesson sort of a "holy encounter."

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