In these troubling and economically and politically difficult times in our society you may ask the question, Why should I teach? Funds are being reduced or cut from every program and teaching positions are being eliminated in all California schools. It is truly a stressful time to be a teacher.

However, more than ever it is important to provide our students with exemplary teachers who truly care for the welfare and well being of each child. We need highly trained and motivated teachers who can make an effective and meaningful difference in the lives of our students. We need teachers who can support and encourage parents to be advocates for their children. These are times for teachers to step up and take a more assertive role in educating our children.

As an example of how we as teachers do make a difference in the lives of our students I share the following scenario. Not too long ago, I received a letter from the parents of a former student. They wrote to inform me that their son Jimmy had passed away from an illness that was not treatable. Jimmy was aware that he was dying and took the initiative to write his own eulogy. Within the context of his writing he mentioned me as someone who he remembered in a favorable way. Jimmy was in my class for several years. He was a good student with a great sense of humor. He was friendly and well liked by his fellow classmates. I was very pleased, even honored that Jimmy remembered me as someone influential in his life.

Teachers can and they often do without ever really knowing make a huge difference in a child’s life. This is something that as a beginning teacher you need to understand and take this reality with a great deal of responsibility. I remember several of my teachers who had an awesome and positive influence on my life. Ms. Oliver, my fourth and fifth grade teacher was an incredible woman. I remember her as being kind and nurturing, as one would expect a teacher to be; however, what I remember most was that on special occasions Ms. Oliver would play the organ and the entire class would sing-a-long. She turned me on to American history by bringing in fantastic artifacts that represented early American life. She opened up the fascinating world of learning about different people and places. These are both subjects that continue to fascinate me to this day.

Ms. Rae struggled with me through junior high school. My parents made many trips to her office to discuss why I was not working to my “true potential”. When I graduated from college I sent Ms. Rae a bouquet of flowers to say thank you for teaching me to persevere. She taught me the importance of developing attributes like determination and having personal integrity. Attributes, which have continued to be important to me throughout my life.

Mr. Link, my high school science teacher, who wore a patch over his left eye, opened up the world of science to me. I was excited to learn how things worked and the wonders of the natural world. I took every science class he offered as electives. He loved what he taught and passed on his passion for knowledge and the world of science to all his students.

During graduate school my advisor helped to open up new insights of understanding. As an adult I had never been so empowered and excited about exploring new areas of thought. To this day I look forward...
to stimulating discussions with her. She was my mentor and is now a very close friend and colleague.

Each of us has the unique opportunity to help young people grow and learn in positive ways. As a teacher, you have the power to touch many lives in a significant way that can have positive results which last for a lifetime. You have the trusted responsibility to guide, support, and nurture children during their formative years. As each of you has this opportunity to interact with children on a daily bases it seems important to stop and reflect upon those people and situations that had a profound and lasting influence in your life. Remembering the qualities of those individuals who helped to shape your life in positive ways may provide a guide for how you need to interact with your students.

Your greatest contribution in life may be to have a role in making a positive and meaningful difference in the life of a child. And that is the answer to the question, Why should I teach?

If not you,  
Who will make a difference  
In the life of our children?  
Teaching is an awesome responsibility.  
Be proud of your decision to teach.  

Barry I. Ziff