

The Crime of Prometheus: Teacher of the Year Speech for the Wisconsin State of Education Address, September 24, 2026 by Jon Etter, English Teacher, Wauwatosa East High School

I've been a high school English teacher for 30 years, so I believe I am required by state law to start any public speech I give by quoting some poetry.

In the poem "Prometheus," Lord Byron celebrates the mythic titan's theft of the divine flame to help humanity and laments his unending punishment for that act of charity. At one point, the speaker says to Prometheus, "Thy Godlike crime was to be Kind,/To render with thy precepts less/The sum of human wretchedness,/and strengthen Man with his own mind." I believe this quote, perhaps more than any other in literature, best expresses our duties as educators.

"Strengthening people with their own minds"—that's what we do. We instill in our students the knowledge and help them develop the skills they need to live good, full lives. And I'm not just talking about making them college and career ready, which too often is the sole focus in discussions of public education today. These are important, but so too is it important for young people to become active and informed citizens, engaged and empathetic community members, devout seekers of truth, passionate lovers of beauty, thoughtful individuals who will, as Henry David Thoreau urged us all to do, "live life deliberately."

This is what we do. We teach kids not what to think, but how to think, and we push them to think, and we create environments where they actually can think. In a world designed to keep us constantly distracted, constantly online, constantly isolated from one another—a world that is eroding our ability to focus, hurting our mental health, and fueling a loneliness epidemic—we as educators have a unique opportunity to create breakwaters and retaining walls to stop the waves of social media sewage and AI-generated hog slop constantly crashing on the shores of society. We have the power to tell our students, "Put away your phones, turn off your screens, read a book, look each other in the face and talk to an actual human being." If the rallying cry of the 60s was "Tune in, Turn on, Drop Out," I think today's should be something more like, "Log off, Turn off, Really Live." And we as educators can make that happen.

So all that's the second half of the quote. Now let's talk about the first.

"Thy Godlike crime was to be kind" and "render less the sum of human wretchedness." It doesn't matter how distraction-free our classrooms are if our students don't feel welcome in them, and the most well-designed lesson will not strengthen their minds if they feel wretched due to bullying, hunger, homelessness, neglect, or abuse. Like Prometheus, we must be kind and make sure that every single one of our students knows that we accept, that we respect, that we appreciate, and that we care about them. And we must do what we can to alleviate any suffering that they are forced to endure—provide them with a hot meal and a safe place to be, give them access to counseling and mental health resources, connect them to support services and programs, get them out of unhealthy or dangerous situations, and just simply show up every day and be a consistent, dependable presence in their lives, for some the only consistent, dependable presence in their lives.

Now, I would like to think that, unlike in Prometheus's case, spreading kindness and wisdom is not a crime, but as I listen to the rhetoric of some prominent figures in American society and read in the national news about book bans, attacks on academic freedom, and laws

and policies that deny the rights and identities of some of our students, usually those students most in need of our support, I fear it might be. But if it is a crime, it is a crime worthy of a titan, and one that all of us must commit if we are truly to consider ourselves educators. If times are so dark that ignorance is considered a virtue and empathy weakness, then it's up to us to be the torchbearers who banish the darkness and make sure that all of our children get their fair share of the divine flame.

©2026 Jonathan Lee Etter. The author/copyright holder hereby grants any and all readers, especially educators, permission to reprint and share the above speech for nonprofit, nonpolitical purposes. Reproduction done for profit or in aid of any political cause or candidate is strictly prohibited without express permission of the author, and the use of this text to train any and all AI programs is not nor will ever be allowed.