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Connecting

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Connecting

Authors

Helen Walker, Grace Feuerverger, Gesa E. Kirsch, Betsy Newmeyer, Anita Voelker, Allison Brimmer, Debbie Axelrod, Margo Wilson, Catherine M. Nelson, and Liang Zhao

CONNECTING

Growing Up

Helen Walker, “Connecting” Editor

“Grow up!” the dad says to his whiny daughter after her chewing gum drops in the dirt, she tries to brush it off, and he throws it in the wastebasket. “Grow up,” we say to ourselves when we get tired of our own sniveling and private pity parties, and we finally recognize how stuck we are.

Some think, I being one, that our number-one gig in this lifetime is to grow up. And teaching is a great day job, since it keeps us plugged into our real vocation. Any age of student seems to work. Kindergarteners up to grad students all create their own collective magic potion and even the stick to stir it—if we are agile enough to catch hold of it!—as they bubble and froth in the cauldron that is a classroom. The teacher narratives in this year’s “Connecting” section illustrate this notion wonderfully.

To grow up, it takes lots of practice and therefore, the ability to recognize opportunity. Not to mention, dedication to the cause. Teachers have a ton of opportunities. Every day in a classroom brings us opportunity to practice reaching out for that higher self that the spiritual gurus of all religions say each of us has access to.

We can work on not feeling sorry for ourselves (that’s what babies do when they get hurt). We can keep our eyes peeled for a more grown-up solution than the one we used the last time, with the same problem. We can practice asking a new and harder question quite soon after we get a long-awaited, decent answer to the last question we asked.

Of course, whining never looked so good as when opportunities to grow up hit us head on—as they do every day while teaching. Fortunately for our growth, teaching doesn’t afford much time for whining.

To grow up, we have to listen to our teachers—and yes, that includes listening to our own “inner teacher” as well as those teachers who are the mentors that find us. We have to listen openly and vulnerably to really *bear*, so we don’t miss the lessons that the voice of silence can teach us. Then we must *see* the up direction (especially hard when this kind of “up” isn’t spatial). And then we have to get moving, even when inertia is so hard to overcome.

To complicate this, our teachers are very often our own students. How humbling is that?

The wonderfully written stories below prove that, as hard as growing up is, teachers are doing it—and our students are constantly showing us the way.

Be inspired.



Mandy

Grace Feuerverger*

There are many children who touched me deeply during my school teaching years. But one student shines out in my memory with a special light. Mandy was in a Grade Five class that I taught half a lifetime ago. When she walked into my classroom on that first day of the school year, I somehow knew that she was meant to teach me something very important.

The school was near a Children's Aid Society home, and some of my students actually lived there. In some cases, the abuses they had suffered in their family homes had been so severe that they had to be removed. But instead of being comforted by living in their new quarters, these children were stigmatized by their non-institutionalized peers. I quickly learned that there were three unspoken strata of child society in my class. At the top were those who lived with their biological parent or parents, which did not necessarily mean that all was well for them. Then there were the foster kids—they, at least, were in a family. The lowest were those in "Children's Aid." But to me, Mandy, recently placed in Children's Aid after being shuffled through foster homes for years, was a princess. A Native Indian princess whose parents had succumbed to alcoholism and drugs. Over time, Mandy became a "muse" for me.

Mandy was bright and generous, though very fragile. She once told me that if only she had behaved a little better her parents would surely have kept her. However, the version in her file said:

Ten year old child, very cooperative. Brutally beaten by father at age eight. Ribs broken, lacerations, serious bruising. Hospitalized for six weeks. Unsuccessful stays in homes. Placed in care.

Some weeks into the new year, Mandy invited me to be her guest for dinner at the Children's Aid Home. I accepted and saw in her eyes a look of pride. It was only a small gesture of compassion, but I found out later that no other teacher had ever visited a child in the Home. Later, other invitations came. I always went and shared lovely times with the children there. I related strongly to their suffering. What is compassion, after all, if not, as Rachel Naomi Remen writes in *The Heart of Learning*:

the experience that all suffering is like our suffering, and all joy is like our joy. When we know ourselves to be connected to all others, acting compassionately is simply the natural thing to do. True compassion requires us to attend to our own humanity, to come to a deep acceptance of our own life as it is (34).

* Grace Feuerverger is Professor at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. Her research interests focus on theoretical and practical issues of cultural and linguistic diversity, immigrant and refugee education, as well as conflict resolution and peacemaking in international settings. Her recent books include *Oasis of Dreams: Teaching and Learning Peace in a Jewish-Palestinian Village in Israel* and *Teaching, Learning and Other Miracles*.

Our classroom became a space where Mandy could become an artisan of her own healing. Sometimes, she reached out to others in astonishing ways. She helped the ones who needed attention in the reading circles. Sometimes, however, she lashed out cruelly at someone and then became withdrawn and filled with rage. Other times, she felt remorse. Mandy's presence cast a large spell in my classroom. I witnessed the holiness of her struggle to escape from the wreckage of her lived experience. How was she able to possess, let alone communicate, any faith in humanity? And yet she did do this. Perhaps it helped her to know that I saw who she really was: a wounded child trying to figure out a way to rebuild and reconstruct a burnt out existence. She was an expert at being abandoned, and yet she tried hard not to abandon others. From where did she receive the strength and will to do so?

I think she must have known, on some level, that I was a comrade-in-arms. Many of the other children had also seen the "enemy" from up close. They became what Tobin Hart calls "Sacred Mirrors." When I shared with them some stories of my own childhood, which had been eaten away by the rottenness of war, my students listened. If there was one lesson I wanted to share with them, it was this: in spite of violence, there will still be love in the hiding places. The trick is to find it.

One day Mandy offered me one of the greatest gifts of my professional and personal life. Here is what happened. A racial slur had been uttered by one of the teachers toward a student in a classroom next to mine, and I had overheard it. I was beside myself with sadness. This teacher was often at me about the "clannishness," "stubbornness," and "stinginess" of the Jews and loved to taunt me subtly. I was a new teacher, and she had been there forever and felt that she needed to dominate everyone. Trying to stand up to her was like taking on Goliath. I was expected to keep my mouth shut. It would be my word against hers. I had endured her anti-Semitic and racist "jokes" in the staff room and saw how many teachers laughed with her while some, like me, stayed silent.

Schools are not necessarily safe places. We have to fight to make them so. But at that time, I was afraid—a child of people who had been cruelly treated. I had no voice and no song. And I did not yet have my permanent teaching certificate.

Then something that I regarded as truly abominable happened. In May, this same teacher decided to bar a child from the end-of-year track meet because of some minor offence. This was cruel and unusual punishment, and it seemed to me that it had more to do with the color of his skin than with anything else. Some of the other teachers were upset too, but the principal was a weak man who was in fact under the thumb of this teacher and very close to retirement. The students who belonged to this boy's team were upset because he was a star player. Mandy was also on that team.

I decided to open up a discussion with my class about this injustice since the details had leaked out anyway. The safest thing would have been to ignore it, but unexpectedly, I found myself talking about tolerance, inclusiveness, and respect for diversity in a multicultural society (long before it was fashionable to do so). The sense of relief that swept over the children and me was like a fresh breeze in a heat storm. And then Mandy spoke out with words that arrived like a thunderclap: "Express yourself, Mrs. Feuerverger. You have a right to." She may as well have been Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments in hand.

There was silence, the kind of silence which speaks the truth. The children began

to nod their heads. The clarity in Mandy's defiance was astonishing to me. We had been living on the inside of a local tyranny, and she had blown the whistle. I knew in that instant that I had to live up to Mandy's words.

I walked through the small corridor of light which she had opened, and I kept plowing through it until the decision was reversed, and that boy was allowed to participate in the track meet. For the first time in my life I discovered a "still small voice" in a place deep within me. It had the kind of quietness that, once heard, can smash all forms of tyranny. I understood the power of a spiritual response to effect change deep in the heart. Mandy's words held out a vision of transformation, and I marveled that these words had come from what appeared to be powerlessness, and yet had the authority to transcend all of us and to offer us this blessed gift.

I have been trying to live up to her words ever since. How had she known so exactly just what I needed to hear at that moment? How fortunate I am that Mandy shared her indignation, her soulful call for equality. Dear Mandy, I hope that you have survived, and that you have found love in your life. You deserve it. I will never forget you. Perhaps one day you will come back and tell me about all that has happened to you. In the meantime, you are safe in the warm embrace of my memory.

From Past to Present

One fall term not very long ago, I shared the story of Mandy for the first time with the students in my graduate course, "Multicultural Perspectives in Teacher Development: A Reflective Seminar." I have been a university professor at OISE of the University of Toronto for almost two decades. In the midst of the "Goodbyes" and "Happy Holidays," the students turned in their final essays. The following week, I was at home packing for a holiday trip and began to collect the essays to take along, when a note fell out:

Dear Grace,

I remember in one of your class discussions this term you were telling us a story about a little girl who was abused and neglected as a child. You finished off the story by saying how much it affected you. The last thing you said before you opened it up for comments was, "This child really gave me insights on understanding that the students in our classrooms come from many difficult situations, and that although their family environments may not be safe, they may need only one teacher to make a difference in their lives. The last thing you said was 'I feel that I will meet this student again.'

And you did! For that child's circumstances resemble my own Thank you for allowing me to write this final paper. This is the first time in my life that I felt comfortable and at ease. Your teachings and power have helped me speak and write from the soul. This is what I call 'The Power of Teaching.' You are the first teacher in my life to give me the energy to remember. You have given me the opportunity to reflect on my past. It has made me appreciate who I have become today. Best of luck.

I stopped packing, sat down at my desk, and read her final paper. The paper was a bittersweet testimony to her inner strength in the midst of violence in her own childhood home. Afterwards I looked out of my window at the cold December twilight and

wondered at the complexity of human emotions and the soulful forces which are present (though often hidden) in classrooms all over the world.

A thought struck me: that one can recover one's voice—that one can be healed—only by becoming vulnerable again. Such miracles happen in classrooms where teachers understand that the sources of knowing are in their midst: in our students. I am reminded of Tom Barone's words:

Each student is, like the rest of us, a person in the midst of writing and re-writing his or her own life story. Each is comparable to an artist in the middle of a creative process that moves toward a resolution that is not pre-formulated, but gradually emergent. The end of the story of each living human being is yet to be encountered (126-127).

Barone goes on to quote the literary critic Frank Kermode, who describes how we all rely upon the stories of others for guidance in writing our own.

I wrote this email message to my student that wintry evening as the light outside disappeared:

Dear ***,

I am packing for a holiday trip and wasn't going to read your essays until I returned, so I guess I was just lucky that your essay was on top of the pile on my desk. I have just finished reading it and am sitting here in gratitude. You have given me a precious gift for the holidays with this paper. I feel truly privileged that you chose to share your professional/ personal story with me. And I want you to know that by what you have written, you have given me back a piece of my professional/ personal life. Thank you for your courage, my dear. I am in awe.

With all my best wishes for the holiday season, Grace.



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A Teaching Success or Failure?

Gesa E. Kirsch*

It is the end of the semester, and I send a very ordinary reminder email to David, a returning student majoring in business: “Please be sure to turn in your final portfolio at my office by Friday. It was good to have you in class.”

In response, I receive a most unusual reply:

This [class] was very important to me also. However, I regret that. I planned to focus my next two years to guarantee that I would have a comfortable future and never more have to go through things that happened to me in the past, but you made me feel like sixteen again and a dreamer. NO GOOD.

What do you say to a student who falls in love with writing again, who rediscovers his creative, artistic side? David is thirty, an immigrant from Brazil. His English isn’t fluent, but his spirit and insights come through clearly. David loves to write, and his essays move his peers and inspire his writing tutors. What do you say to a student who works a 60-hour week at a factory to pay tuition at a small private university?

David has set very clear goals—to succeed in business and live a comfortable life. He works day and night. In fact, he works the night shift at the factory because it pays more. In his essays, he describes the surreal world of starting his day just before midnight and ending it in the early morning hours. He describes how buildings go up as if by magic, how streets and bridges are being repaired, as if by invisible hands.

As a teacher, how do I respond to a talented, thoughtful writer like David, someone who writes moving stories about leaving one country for another, about starting with one hundred and twelve dollars in his pockets when he gets off the plane in New York City? A writer who describes his struggle to learn English, make new friends, find a new home on a new continent? A writer who reveals the regrets he carries in his heart and the hopes he holds out for the future?

Is this a teaching success or a teaching failure? Do I encourage David to pursue his newly found passion? Clearly, he has discovered the writer within, and that feels like a teaching success. But I have also thrown him into a world of turmoil. David has a decade of struggle behind him. Does he need any more of that? Obviously this is not my decision to make, nor is it a simple either/ or choice between a world of artistic struggle or a comfortable life. But I can’t get those two strangely juxtaposed sentences out of my mind: “This [class] was very important to me also. However, I regret that.”

Once in a great while, I think I have achieved some simple clarity for myself. Like I thought I had figured out my goal for my students. I was sure I wanted them to use my class to find their “writer within,” and that, with this discovery, they would enjoy a life of

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creativity, insight, and reflection. And now here I sit at my desk, mulling over where I have been, and where I want to go when I teach again next semester. What do the Davids—and the Sarahs, and so on—really need from me? What does teaching successfully really mean?



My RIF'd Life

Betsy Newmeyer*

Everyone, from the parents to the principal, assured me my job would be returned to me before the summer's end. "Just politics," they said. So I reluctantly filled out my unemployment paperwork, and I waited.

Truth be told, by the end of my seventh year I was getting burned out. I had taught five different grades (first, fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth) at three schools in two vastly different districts. Coping with yet another unfamiliar grade level, more apathetic teachers unwilling to collaborate, and frazzled principals so worried about test scores and budgets that they micromanage their staff . . . well, let's just say it was beginning to take its toll on my health and my sanity. While others frantically scrambled to find another job, teaching or otherwise, I decided to wait it out and take advantage of my forced sabbatical.

The first five weeks of summer were great. It was a summer break like any other, minus the steady paycheck. I relaxed. We took day trips. We enjoyed a fantastic family vacation at the beach. All was well . . . for a while.

By the sixth week, the kids were bored, the house was trashed, and everything and everyone was tightrope walking on my last nerve. I envied my husband who cheerfully left the house each morning for his thus-far-recession-proof job. I cursed the daycare for being closed all summer and dearly wished kindergarten would start early. I took solace in my computer and had every intention of writing copious amounts of dramatic storylines and dialogue, but instead found Facebook, Pogo, and trolling the internet far more interesting than the characters I'd laboriously created.

In August, two days before school started, I finally got a call . . . for a long-term subbing position. Not the call I'd been waiting for, but after spending ten weeks at home with my two adorable young children, I was eager to make my great escape. I accepted the position.

Let me tell you, subbing is often a horrible job I wish upon no one. Few people can lovingly walk into some else's classroom and take over for a day, a week, or longer, with virtually no support or appreciation. I almost envied the child who sat underneath a table mooing while kicking the other kids. Quite frankly, I'd been wanting to do that from the moment I stepped into the class. By the end of my month, the kids had come to tolerate me

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but fervently awaited their teacher's return. I was more than ready to turn in my keys and had come to the conclusion that I was not meant to teach first grade. Subbing takes a special person. I am not *that* special, regardless of what my parents have told me over the years.

As my subbing job wound down, I received two phone calls from the district. One offered me a temporary, part time position with no benefits, teaching reading intervention to fourth and fifth graders. It was a hotly debated position, one that our union told us to avoid like the plague. But of course it's easy to tell someone to turn down a paying job when you still have one. The other job I was offered involved teaching two home-hospital students, one a second grader and the other an eighth grader. Since my unemployment checks had stopped but our bills had not, I gladly accepted the positions. They weren't much and were a far cry from the full-time-classroom-of-my-own position I wanted, but at least it would put food on the table.

With nary a day to recover from subbing, I went back to work. I will say this: working part time does have its perks. While all the other teachers are stressing out over assessments, report cards, and parent conferences, I get to go home every day at 11:00 and have a leisurely lunch in front of my television.

I have spare time galore . . . well sort of. Any spare time I had has been replaced with picking up my son from kindergarten, running back and forth to baseball practice, and a myriad of other errands that I apparently had been neglecting for years. However, I have taken up hula dancing again and am attempting to write my next novel.

In my determination to not just survive but thrive during my RIF'd year, I've also decided to become a healthier person. I exercise 30 minutes each morning (well, most of the time), eat healthier foods like hummus, artichokes, and bell peppers, and have learned to make a killer omelet with less than 50 calories. My girl friends even thought it would be really fun to create a Biggest Loser game of it and lose weight together. Our initial goal was to drop twenty pounds by April 1st. April is here and so are most of those 20 pounds. Our new deadline is June 1st . . . of next year.

My RIF'd year is almost gone. While I may not have suddenly morphed into June Cleaver as my husband secretly wishes, I have managed to put my life and my teaching into perspective. Teaching is my career, but it is not my entire life and whole being. It's who I am, but I am also a mother, wife, dancer, writer, photographer, and musician. I'd begun to lose sight of what was truly important in my life. And sure, our bills are just as high as ever, but we have finally learned to start living within our means. We haven't touched our credit card in months, not even during the holiday season. I want to teach my children how to live a healthy, debt-free life so they can follow their passion(s) in life, regardless of how crazy it might seem. Most important, I want to teach them how to thrive when times are tough.

To my fellow RIF'd friends I say this: band together to support one another. You'll need it. Make a party of it. Above all else, take this hopefully once-in-a-life-time opportunity to explore and nurture the passions you have hidden inside yourself, what you might have been neglecting, and all else will work itself out in due time.



Will's Story

Anita Voelker*

Lice made a haunting contribution to my vocational development and my decision to become a teacher. I was in the Appalachian Mountains of western Maryland, completing a field experience in a three-room schoolhouse. Two teachers taught the first through fourth grades, and the principal taught the fifth and sixth grades. There were no secretaries, aides, or special teachers; the school had no art room, computers, cafeteria, or gymnasium. The school was unrefined, and I loved it. More so, I loved Will. A brown-eyed first grader, Will wore scuffed shoes much too large, which consequently slid up and down. His heels were chafed and red because he did not own socks. He did, however, have an impressive case of lice.

I was in charge of the listening station in the first and second grade classroom. The night before, I had set up the reel-to-reel tape recorder, expressively read one of my favorite stories, *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*, and cleverly added sound effects with the tools available in my dormitory room. At school the next day, the teacher entrusted me with choosing children to come to the station and use the headphones to hear the story and do an activity with me. Will's was the first name I called.

Quickly the teacher was at my side. "You can't pick Will. His lice will infect everyone else who uses the headphones."

Will was smiling at me as he proudly headed to where I was waiting. The teacher was unconvinced by my argument to allow Will to join me. She told Will to return to his seat. He was an outcast: uninvited, uncalled. At the end of the day, safe in my car, I cried the whole way down the mountain.

That night I poured out my angst for Will in a letter to my uncle, a dedicated Baltimore schoolteacher. Within a few days, I received his wise words. He gently told me that the Wills of the world are why I need to stay focused and teach, not just from my mind and heart, but also from my soul. To see children through my soul's eyes would be the work God called me to do. Inside the envelope, my dear Uncle Chester tucked a five-dollar bill and suggested I treat Will to a milkshake.

Today, I adore my work and am passionate about literacy and literature. Teaching gives me energy. But truthfully, my real mission is as a lookout for "Wills." Amidst all the voices and emotions clamoring in my head on that drive down the mountain, one clear thought pierced the din: the taped story, regardless of its elegance and sound effects, was *not* why I wanted to teach. I wanted a *relationship* with each and every Will. My college students do not have pervasive lice (thankfully), but many students who come to sit in my office are weighted down with issues or problems that keep them from living their lives fully and joyfully. I spend a lot of time listening to them, sometimes over coffee, tea, and, yes, occasionally over milkshakes.



* Anita Voelker teaches Children's Literature and literacy methods courses at Messiah College in Grantham, PA. Currently, she and two of her students are researching pod casting as a literacy practice. With the assistance of a lively group of urban 5th graders, they are creating pod casts for the Engle Gallery, a collection of original illustrations from children's literature.

Elitist White Lady Who Tries Too Hard (But Has Nice Taste in Shoes)

Allison Brimmer*

One August, I rushed to my mailbox to see what the students in my Advanced Cultural Studies course had to say about our intensive summer seminar. We had been discussing axes of privilege and power: race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. The course compelled self reflection—confronting our privileges, prejudices, and our participation in the systems that kept them intact. There had been recognition and resistance, connections and conflicts.

When things got intense, we retreated into defensiveness. Whether we had white skin color privilege, or male privilege, or heterosexual privilege, we were uncomfortable watching the messages conveyed in popular culture that had previously gone right over our heads. Films that at first glance were so empowering managed to reify stereotypes instead. TV shows and ad campaigns reinforced what they purported to reject. DOVE's "real woman" campaign showed models who were not stick-thin, though DOVE was clearly peddling cellulite-defying lotions and creams. Light bulbs were popping everywhere. Students reported feeling supported as well as challenged to reconsider their prejudices, and the truth that they, in one way or another, participated in systems of inequality.

So when I read the evaluations that identified me as "an elitist white lady who tries too hard (but has nice taste in shoes)," I was disappointed. Okay, crestfallen. Of course I try hard! That's why I became good at creating environments and assignments that help students engage in genuine self-reflection. After all, students write on their evaluations that the course changes their lives! And then they say that I am elitist *and* have good taste in shoes.

It is true that I continue to model the ways that money can buy approval, shoes and all. And I have a more than healthy need for others to like me. Luckily, the writer of that evaluation saw through some of that. She reminded me to self reflect more—easy to avoid when I am the one in charge, wielding the grade book and also wanting to be liked. She reminded me that I must always remind myself to identify my interpersonal indulgences and privileges, and the way I deploy them in my classroom.

One of my favorite professors in college had a sparse office: mostly white walls. Across from him at his desk, an 8 x 10 frame hung next to me at eye level. The slightly crumpled white paper inside read "Course Evaluation." Beneath it, penciled in chicken scratch, a student had written, "Todd Lieber is a fucking asshole." Todd Lieber was an outstanding professor. Nevertheless . . .

I did not know how to interpret that evaluation on the wall, back then. I think I do know now, though.

Our evaluations can be funny, not necessarily helpful at all, and they can also be

* Assistant Professor at Nova Southeastern University, Allison Brimmer teaches writing and cultural studies courses. Her research interests include anti-racist, feminist pedagogy and coalition building as academic work. Allison is a founding member of NSU's branch of the American Association of University Women and the South Florida Diversity Alliance.

instructive. Whatever they are, they stick with us, and we do what we can to make sense of them, whether it be by hanging them up on the wall or, even, writing about them six years later.



Dear Professor Walker

Debbie Axelrod*

I currently work as a substitute teacher in San Diego County. This year I have most often worked as an assistant teacher with special needs children. This job required a significant shift in my consciousness regarding my approach to dealing with disruptive behavior.

Last month I worked full time with moderately and severely challenged children at a modest public school in Escondido. I had yet to experience a child whose emotional challenges included the use of assaultive language and having that language leveled at me. I must admit I was taken aback and did not know how to respond. Beyond feeling shocked and angry, I tried to compose myself in a way that included compassion and a professionally grounded comprehension. I recognized that special needs children are designated as such because of physical and/or emotional deficits, yet when I was confronted by an eight-year-old in such an in-your-face manner, it required much effort to restrain my initial impulse to express punitive outrage.

In many more situations with the children that initially evoked conflicted feelings of confusion, annoyance, sorrow, and concern, I learned not to judge, in large part due to the wonderful influence of “Mr. E.” Judging a child or her behavior was not useful and only led to further trauma. I came to understand that providing alternative behaviors for the children works to diffuse a potentially volatile situation. I learned that the quicker and more often I could model compassionate, non-judgmental choices, the more I would engender trust and respect, and could therefore more positively impact the life of each child whom I encountered.

In the weeks I worked at Miller Elementary, Mr E’s patience and grace seemingly knew no bounds. In every difficult situation, he quietly spoke with the child, reviewed the parameters of acceptable behavior, and thereby created safety and returned sanity to the classroom. Even when physical restraint or removal of the child became necessary, Mr. E maintained calm control.

As with all children—but most particularly with special needs children—I frequently wonder what the future holds for each because the world will not abide out-of-control, rude, aggressive behavior. Too often special needs children are the victims of abuse, extreme poverty or neglect. Their home lives are chaotic and unpredictable. The time these children spend with us in our classrooms can be the only time they have an equitable,

* *Debbie Axelrod was recently accepted into the Special Ed Credential Program at San Diego State University. She is a single parent of a beautiful fifteen-year-old daughter whose goal is to become a doctor.*

non-threatening environment in which fairness, tolerance, and relative harmony prevails.

I am inherently drawn to the all-encompassing nature of teaching children. Working with Mr. E served to strengthen and deepen my desire to work with children whose daily challenges require profound assistance. Alongside him, I discovered my identity, a temperament at ease and at peace with summoning up unconditional respect, kindness, acceptance, and gratitude.



Burnishing the Bruises

Margo Wilson*

I am sitting in my hotel room in Denver at the annual conference of the Association for Writers and Writing Programs. It is a beautiful day, and soon I will hear colleagues offer tips on how to teach writing, how to teach with enlightenment. I, too, am to speak on writing pedagogy, on how to touch souls. I am familiar with some of the traditional solutions for reviving one's spirits—religion, family, friends, sex, drugs, rock'n'roll, exercise, food, meditation, volunteer work, creative endeavors. Yet regardless of how much soul-polishing one does, how do we continue to maintain our equanimity, our balance, our sense of purpose and love when day after day, we leap like captive cats through so many ego-deflating hoops? How can we be both selfless and yet so focused on, in touch with, ourselves that we can be useful mentors to our students?

In the pack of papers I brought along to grade, I find this student poem:

Poetry Class

You have to get my pain,
Poetry class is such a drain.
We sit in circles like little kids,
And sit in uncomfortable chairs.
We are forced to write on the spot,
And share with the class our bad works of art.
The books we read are dry and dull.
Old men must have written them.
You would think this class would be sublime.
In fact, it is a waste of time.

—Christopher Raleigh (used with permission)

The poem is funny and sad. It hurts me that I haven't reached this student. It rankles that he not only didn't follow or understand the assignment (avoid rhyming; work on your meter), but also that he just doesn't like me. I'm not Mother Theresa. How do I brush this off and the many similar daily insults one faces as a teacher? They get under

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one's skin like a burning rash. I don't want that to happen. I want to be like the cool light of reason and love, a slow-burning flame.

"Turn the other cheek," Jesus would say.

I do, and there at a corner in my Pennsylvania borough, I see Marty (not his real name), just grooving to the sunshine on his way to a coffee house. He's not my brightest student, but he's one of my favorites. When we needed help publicizing our literary magazine earlier this spring, Marty dutifully posted fliers in every building on campus, in every bathroom. Everywhere I look on campus, there is a sign that Marty loves doing a thorough job. Everywhere I look, there is a sign of the hard work, and yes, love that my students put into our literary magazine.

There is love in hard work. By working at something we value, we demonstrate love. The act of teaching demonstrates love. We complain when love is spurned; we feel like jilted lovers, misunderstood. And yet we must get over it: move on, teach on.

My initial reaction to the poem was anger and dismay, coupled with ironic laughter that I, the purveyor of pedagogy, can't teach in this student's eyes. As I muse, though, I see how I can honor the student's dissatisfaction, yet honor myself at the same time by seeking his permission to publish his work in this essay.

So I ask him for his okay and, at the same time, tell him I felt hurt and angry about the poem, as well as amused. "It was a joke," he replies earnestly, seemingly surprised by my reaction. He quickly signs his name to the permission slip. We are talking to each other; that is good for both of us.

We are all related; all that we do is related. We learn through our working, our doing, our love for our doing and for each other. We learn through our talking. Last year, I wouldn't have thought about asking to publish my student's poem to alleviate the sting the poem created. Next year, I may think of an even better solution for handling scratches to my ego. I am learning that I need to remain open to the idea that sometimes when frustrated with teaching, a third path may reveal itself, somewhere that is my joy to discover and grow.



Jimmy

Catherine M. Nelson^{*8}

"Jimmy may have a hard time in class. His mom is dying."¹

I thank my administrator for the information and move on down the sidewalk. His teacher from last year sees me and says, "Oh. Do you know about Jimmy? His mom is dying." When Jimmy and I finally meet, I see a quiet student with a gentle spirit. He is struggling academically. I work with Jimmy as much as is possible in the classroom, but it

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is not enough as we move forward at our third grade academic pace. My principal tells me his mom's prognosis is not good; they are preparing for her death within the month. Jimmy starts to get into trouble on the playground. I talk with our assistant principal: "He needs to be held accountable." She mentions that his mom is dying. I leave the office frustrated. Jimmy's mom isn't the only one dying. We are losing the soul of a nine-year-old.

I voice my concerns to a colleague: "When he is in high school and can't read, is the excuse still going to be, 'Well, his mom died.'? When he beats the crap out of someone on the sidewalk because he didn't like the way they were looking at him, will his excuse be, 'Well, my mom died.'? How are we helping Jimmy by excusing his behavior? I am deeply sorry his mom is dying. We are not helping him deal with death. We're helping him die too."

We have no school counselor. Jimmy tries in class, and I try to connect with him. Some days I see in his eyes the recognition of care; other days he is in his own world.

The phone call has come. Someone is on the way to take Jimmy home, and we need to find him on the playground. "Oh God!" my heart screams. I ask to be the one to tell him. Jimmy is standing alone by the low brick wall. He knows, but I tell him anyway. My hand on his shoulder is left in mid-air as he takes off running toward the office. He is gone.

Two months later, the principal and vice-principal tell me Jimmy will be back in class that morning. They aren't sure if he has been at another school and are pretty sure he has not received counseling since his mother's death. I am at a loss for words.

I see the students on the playground and spot Jimmy. He has the same alert, searching eyes, and we make eye contact. He runs over to me. "Hi, Jimmy, it's good to see you." I give him a hug, and he stands rigid.

Jimmy continues to work at his academic pace in the classroom, still gets in trouble on the playground. I speak with his grandma. She tells me of other situations happening at home.

Jimmy is placed in fourth grade. I really didn't see how retention would be in his best interest. His fourth grade teacher tries to work with him, but finds the same frustrations with the system I had struggled with. Jimmy moves to another school in the middle of the year.

My colleague, the fourth grade teacher, is in the grocery store. A young boy runs up to her with a huge smile on his face, gives her a hug. She is startled at first, then recognizes the child. Jimmy talks, and laughs often in his conversation. Just as soon as he is there, he is gone.

When she tells that story, I smile. Maybe, just maybe, time is helping Jimmy. Maybe others have helped him find his gentle spirit again. Maybe he is that quiet, thrilled, excited child again. Run, Jimmy. Run with the wind.



Lead by Example

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I teach foundation courses in a teacher education program. I teach teachers, as some people put it. School teachers at the K-12 level have the responsibility to help their students

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with character development. To be able to assist their students, teachers must develop their own character because they need to lead by example. As a professor in a school of education, I need to help my teacher candidates with their character development, so I must work on my own.

To this end, I started an experiment three semesters ago. I began consciously working on my morals, values, and character traits. I have been using a Confucian text as a guide, *Standards for Being a Good Student and Child*. In addition, Benjamin Franklin's daily self-examination has been a second source of inspiration. What follows is a discussion of some highlights of what I have been working on. I emphasize my efforts and struggle, not my accomplishments.

Respect. I have been trying to come to class 5 to 10 minutes before class starts. I ask my students to be punctual, and I do it myself. I also try to use both hands to pass papers back to students and to receive papers from them. I try to respect student opinion in class discussion.

Sincerity. One definition of sincerity in the Confucian tradition is to put in 100% of one's effort. When I tend to slack off in my preparation or grading, I ask myself this question: am I putting in 100% of my effort?

Universal Love. According to Confucian standards, I should love all my students. The challenge for me has been those students with some issues: some repeatedly come late to class, some work on their cell phones in class, and others show signs of dishonesty. I am doing better than before; I am mindful of what I *should* do, which prevents reactive behaviors on my side.

Sexual Ethic. I try to think of my female students as my daughters, and I want to look at them as I would look at my daughter.

When I have a free moment, I reflect on things that have happened during the day. If I have violated any rules, I think about how I should act in the future. As I look at my experiment, I can see some changes over the semesters, and it seems like the better I behave, the better my students behave.



Works Cited

Confucius. *Di Zi Gui, Standards for Being an Good Student and Child*. Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia: Pure Land Learning College Assoc., Inc., 2002.