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When September Comes Again

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Manhattan School for Children

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WHEN SEPTEMBER COMES AGAIN

elizabeth huffman

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When I think of my first year teaching, my stomach turns over. I need to breathe very carefully to suppress the feeling that I have to throw up. I don't know when this is going to go away.

My first year teaching was five years ago. I took a position, straight out of college, in second grade at a public school in a poor, isolated neighborhood in Brooklyn. On the surface, it was the perfect job. I grew up less than a mile from where I was teaching, and could live at home while I got on my feet. The school had been troubled and mismanaged in the past, but it was starting afresh with a new principal and new teachers. All of us were excited about beginning something important. I had always wanted to be a teacher, and I was bursting with the desire to get started.

By January, I was counting the days until I could leave. By the end of the year every administrator had been replaced, two teachers had left under terrible circumstances, and half of the staff was applying for new positions. On June 28th, on the last day of school, the staff sat in the stifling cafeteria for a final meeting. The principal announced that despite the plummeting test scores and violence, the school would not come under review by the New York State Board of Regents' Schools Under Registration Review (SURR). No one applauded.

In New York City, a third of new teachers leave the classroom after three years. I refused to be a statistic during my first year teaching. While I have now made it past that all important, three-year line, in my heart I believe I qualify as one of the quitters. I left my first school after one year to teach in a better one. Two years later, I left the classroom and went back to Bank Street Graduate School full-time. After only three years of teaching, I was burned out and needed a break. I wasn't sure if I would return to the profession I had dreamed about since I was eleven years old. In part I went back to being a student to give myself one last chance to learn how to teach. As a Bank Street student I taught in order to fulfill the fieldwork requirements of my program, and tutored others in order to pay the bills. I consider it a minor miracle that I went back

into the classroom full-time last year, and that I now love my job and my school. Teaching in New York is not an easy road. After traveling on it, I don't wonder why so many teachers leave. I wonder, why do so many stay?

In preparing to write this essay I pulled out my old planners and notebooks from my first year. I had not looked at them since the last day of school four years ago. That summer I had ruthlessly tried to rid myself of all reminders of my first year. I even threw away the beautiful notes that my students made for me. I made myself "get over it," and took a job at a well-run and highly regarded school on the Upper East Side. But sometimes, a moment from that first year, unbidden, would take over my mind, and I would have to focus, and breathe very carefully.

I don't think of that year as my first year teaching; I think of it as the year I was a bad teacher. I haven't forgiven myself for it. I don't know when I will, or if I should. I have met several other teachers who share this secret. We laugh callously at ourselves and at our mistakes, but we don't let them go. Perhaps we're afraid we'll repeat them, or worse, forget our own fallibility. I need to believe that I didn't completely ruin the lives of those in my charge, but I will never forget just how hard I needed to work.

Now as I read over my own words from my first year teaching, I begin to cry. I have forgotten nothing from that year, nothing except my own eloquence in describing what was happening to me. (I had forgotten that a captain keeps a log even in a sinking ship.) Although it is not a pleasant afternoon, I realize now that re-reading my own words has helped me understand why I became, and why I am still, a teacher.

September 2, 1998*

First day in Room 229. I'm trying to envision my new room, but the orange walls and rectangular shape stifle me into desk up front, chairs in rows. It's hard to see it any other way. Especially since some of the other classrooms are set up that way.

I met some of the other new teachers. All of us are so under-prepared!

September 3

My classroom is starting to look like a real one. Actually, it's kind of cute, with a little block area, a snuggle book area, tape cording off what will be a rug, the library kind of looking like a real library. The shelves have the appearance of being organized. There is paper on some of the walls and boards. My desk is there. It's a skeleton, the details have yet to be filled in. Oh I have so much work!

*[*Note: All names and identifying characteristics of the school, the teachers, and the students have been changed.]*

Yet I am so happy. It's fulfilling to be doing this work—it is only when I get home that exhaustion and self-doubt seep in and take over. It doesn't seem possible that school will begin next week. Hardly any of the classrooms are set up and ready. It's been long days for us.

September 7

I'm not nervous, which is weird. Maybe I'm in denial. Maybe I actually think I'm prepared! Ha! I can't wait to meet these kids. I want to have faces and names in my head. Feels lonely in my beautiful classroom without them. I hope this comes off—it seems like we are pushing the limits in terms of readiness.

September 8, The Night Before...

Suddenly I don't feel ready at all! Its 10:20 p.m., and I've been doing all sorts of random little chores, buying flowers and snacks, and making bathroom-out cards and welcome signs for the door. Wow!

I was at school for thirteen hours, moving books, doing errands, meeting parents and a couple of kids. Shy parents seem enthusiastic and friendly. I'm so tired, and so wired at the same time. Thank God they have gym tomorrow, at least they will exercise themselves out! I only received their names, my class list, at 3:00 p.m.. Who are these strangers entering a year—maybe more—with me? I can't wait to meet them!

September 8, First Day of School

My classroom is organized chaos.

September 10

Phillip, a new first-grade teacher who was having trouble managing his class, was fired on Friday. The children will have a substitute until they find another teacher for them. All of us new teachers are terrified of the same thing happening to us.

The new teachers started going to a behavior management class. The professor is surprised by the severity of some of the behaviors that we describe to her: fighting, kicking, crying, screaming, crawling on the floor, yelling.

September 25, It's Only the 10th Day of School—How Can That be?

Preparing for tomorrow. Hopefully my preps are still somewhat intact. They have been changed every day since the first day of school. I am supposed to have a meeting fifth period. I feel bad I lost my temper today—and it didn't work. I just hope I can keep Jessica, Samuel, and Ralph in control tomorrow. During Ralph's first day in my class

after being switched in, he didn't sit down once, and walked around the room putting "kick me" signs on the other kids' backs. It was all I could do to keep the other children from pummeling him.

September 27, New Teacher's Seminar, Saturday Morning.

(All of the new teachers in my district were required to take a six-week class which met Saturdays from 8 a.m. to 12 noon. We heard lectures about how to read aloud, how to organize portfolios, in what order we should schedule our days. Many lecturers contradicted each other, but in general we were all so confused and overwhelmed it didn't matter. Several sessions were devoted to reading and discussing the new reading and writing standards that New York State had just published. These discussions included instructions on how the standards should be labeled on your monthly bulletin boards.)

This class always makes me feel inadequate. I've been searching for the word—sad, depressed, anxious, pressured. Standards! How can I think about Literacy Standards when I'm really at the very beginning, trying to catch up!

I woke up at the usual time this morning in the usual state—tense. I had to convince my body to keep sleeping. Finally I had to get up and start moving around. I'll drive myself insane by thinking too much. All the mistakes, all the things I don't know. All that I am afraid to ask about these kids.

October 14

Jessica, Maria, and Michaela, suspended for fighting.

October 20

(After the fight I was called into a meeting with the principal and Michaela's mother. The mother refused to speak to me, or even to make eye contact. She insisted that her daughter be removed from my class, immediately. The principal sat there, nodding. I didn't argue. After several frustrating power struggles with this child, I was ready to give her up. When the mother left, the principal turned to me and said, "What is going on in your class?" I burst into tears.)

Michaela is leaving my class. Had awful meeting with Mom this morning.

I seem to be losing time in my day—it's getting shorter and shorter.

October 22

Had a really good day, except that Dean Gillian was assigned to "help" me. His words of advice: "Even out the window shades. It's distracting the kids to have them uneven like that."

November 26

Normalcy. Things are going well. Well, normal here doesn't pass anywhere else. Called Antonia's mother to make an appointment for parent conference. She was high. I could barely understand her, and she kept yelling at Antonia. Horrifying conversation. Isn't it funny the things I have become used to—the violence, the bullets, the unstable lives, and livelihoods? Why don't these things keep me up at night? I love my children so much.

December 24

The new fifth grade teacher was suspended this week. She won't be back. She slammed a door on a student's arm, breaking it. She claimed it was an accident, but everyone who has heard her complaining about her class suspects that it wasn't, quite.

James told me, "My mom is upstate. She's sick and went there to get better." Translation: she's in jail. I write these "shocker" statements not to impress, but to fulfill a need to put into concrete terms the reality that my children deal with. I go home to a beautiful, comfortable house, while my children return to cramped, sometimes loveless homes.

Now it's Christmas Eve, and I'm slowly bringing my own family and life and mind back into the front of my heart and brain, and let recede the seventeen children who live inside and around me nearly every day.

January 7, At a Writing Workshop

(This day's seminar was conducted by a teacher from Long Island. She talked about how she likes to decorate her classroom in primary colors and keep a vase of fresh flowers on the table. Every week it is a different child's turn to bring them in. She showed slides. In them, well-dressed white children recline on large plush couches with red, yellow, and blue cushions. I wanted to scream. The only nice chair I had in my classroom had recently been defaced by an angry child, who wrote, "I hate Charlene G," in indelible green marker. What was I doing, I thought, a white teacher in this school full of angry black children?)

I feel like our voices aren't heard. Like our children's voices are silenced and shuttered. My black and brown, impoverished children's voices and needs are silently screaming for their own seminar.

January 8

There are so many thoughts in my head at once all the time. I have to write an essay about my life for my graduate school application. But I feel like my life is in the middle

of this incredible journey and I'm hurtling through space and time on this wild ride, and it won't be over 'til June. All I do each day is drive one mile. Incredible.

January 12

I'm so sick of these *&\$\$% ing kids. My classroom structure was not in place well enough for them to pick up where they left off after vacation, so now they are back to September these past few days. I'm drained even before I come into school.

I have to hold on so that I can make it through the next five months. Five months. But God what am I thinking?!

The guidance counselor told me today that there is nothing he can do for Jessica—who washed the floor with her clothes today—crawling around under desks. There's nothing to be done! Nothing! I can't accept this. I can't accept the rude way and demeaning manner with which we are treated!

But I am a strong person. And I have wanted to do this since I was a little girl. I will not give up. I know I should be singing more and yelling less. I have a chart now of how we are following the rules, and I put a sticker on it every period. I have to go over it constantly. But when I don't give someone a sticker for one period, they cry and scream and are a mess for the rest of the day. I have to focus on the positive. I have to keep this in my mind all the time. I distance myself from them physically, sometimes, because I can't take the lack of control and the chaos. I yell because I'm angry and frustrated. They know me... Maria says, "We're making Ms. H. crazy."

January 19

My vice-principal said to me today, "We just have to make it to June." I don't want to "just make it." I want to teach! But what am I teaching these kids? What do they really need?

January 23

Is it the rain making me feel like crying? Or is it the leaving feeling? I have decided to look for a job in another school. I had to make a choice between my career and my children. I will have other children. There will be others that I will love and believe in. But am I just "making it 'til June"? That is not how I want to define the next five months of my life.

January 31

So what is it like to teach in a failing school? A really, really, bad school? It is nothing like they say in the papers. It has not much to do with lack of supplies. I have a beauti-

ful classroom. It has to do with walking down a dark hallway every morning, holding a heavy bag in one hand and keys in the other, and not wanting to enter your classroom.

Every morning, I try to see the light streaming in through my windows. I hear the shouts of the men working below them, making our old building safer and more beautiful. Every morning, I take a breath and try to see my classroom as a place where beautiful things are happening. And I fail. Then I turn the lights on and put the date and the “Do Now” on the board, and find my game face to put on for the children waiting downstairs.

Working in a failing school makes you feel like a failure yourself. No matter that you love your children. No matter that they love you back. It’s the feeling that you’ve tried everything and it is still not working. They are not where they should be. You have been playing catch-up since September, and you are running out of time. The goals seem farther and farther away from your grasp. It is counting the days till June. It is celebrating that another month has finally gone by. It is praying that things cannot get worse. It is feeling alone—alone with seventeen children. Feeling attacked and unsupported by your administration. Fearful of telling them your needs, you make do in silence. A failing school is not about failing students. It is about failing communication, failing administration, lack of philosophy, lack of vision, the reactionary decisions. There is no forward motion in a failing school, only backpedaling, band-aiding problems, lying out of both sides of the mouth so that no one will find out what is really going on.

February 1

Five more months. Ninety days. God, I can’t wait for this year to be over.

March 3

What will I do after crying in front of my kids today? How can I explain to them that last fight I had to break up made me break down, that I don’t know if I have the strength to teach them anymore?

March 13

I just counted. There are fourteen weeks left.

April 1

We have a new command. Principal Walters is gone. The vice-principal has been put in charge of a junior high. Mrs. Fern, the woman they brought in as a consultant to Walters last month, is the principal now—this was announced the day before spring vacation. What timing! The vice-principal remains in her power-hungry and power-

starved position. Yesterday she yelled at me from across the schoolyard for picking up and hugging Jessica in the bright gorgeous sunlight. She had been suspended for a week. What can I do for this child except hug her?

May 16

Learned today that Principal Fern wants to give me a “U” rating and get rid of me. Funny since I’ve had no interaction with her, except that one negative experience of her yelling at me and pointing her finger in my face in front of my kids. It is the new vice-principal who is making my life difficult. (She has replaced the old one, the only person who had been in the school for more than a year, late last Friday night. No one knows what happened.)

June 1

The UFT has made a little deal with my school. I will leave quietly at the end of the year, and they will give me a passing rating. I stood next to her desk as the principal whited out the bad remarks she had written on my rating sheet. Just erased them. I don’t know what part of this I feel worse about, her lack of integrity for just erasing her opinion of my teaching, or mine for accepting this?

July 1, 1999

Last week, last day, last hour is over. The year is closed at last. I have packed everything away—organized and packaged. I threw away all the kids’ stuff—what could I do with it? I said goodbye to the room; I said goodbye to the kids—sort of? But I couldn’t get out of the building without Fern making one last dig. She put her arm around me and tried to “gently” suggest that maybe I just wasn’t cut out for a “tough school.” I guess she thinks I’ll be happier with the rich white kids. I guess I’ll find out, when September comes again.

There were moments of beauty and light in my first year classroom. I hold on to those memories tighter than any others. In the spring of that first year, we raised butterflies. It wasn’t any part of the curriculum, I just thought it would be fun. So, we watched the tiny black caterpillars that came in the mail squirm around in their jar. We waited like anxious mothers for them to emerge from their paper-brown cocoons. We whispered to each other so we wouldn’t scare the butterflies. Then one fine day, we all walked to the park and let them go.

While we waited for the butterflies to be born from their cocoons, I handed each of my students a slip of paper and told them to write what they wished to become. We put all the papers into a paper “cocoon,” and hid it on the top shelf. I told myself I

wouldn't look, but I couldn't help it, I read their wishes. Jessica, who lived with three violent older brothers, a mother suffering from mental illness, and a grandmother she called "mom" but who threatened on a weekly basis to break her fingers, neck, or arms, wrote, "I want to be a butterfly."

One day during this time, the assistant principal and the school counselor came into my room while the children were quietly coloring in paper caterpillars. They said, in shocked tones, "Why they're all working!" Things had become so bad in my classroom that people were surprised when things were going well, myself included. I had lost my confidence. I wanted to write on a slip of paper, "I want to be a teacher," and put it into a magical cocoon. Instead, I went back to school to learn to be a teacher.

Last year during my hiatus from full-time teaching, I student-taught with several experienced teachers. One in particular, a wonderful, thoughtful teacher, stands out. I observed her organization, her way of getting the kids to do what they needed to do, her humor, and her warmth. We planned together, then I taught, and we reflected on the lessons. We talked constantly about what was happening in the classroom. I found I already knew a lot about how to be a good teacher (more than I thought I did), but that I had also picked up some bad habits.

During my first year I felt I had been punished for simply not knowing what to do. No new teacher should feel so alone with her mistakes. I was not given good advice, and was, in fact, shouted at and humiliated when I made mistakes. If I had been confident that I would always receive the help and guidance that I needed, I might have learned to be honest and forthright. In my first school I became more afraid every day. I learned never to let my struggles show. I learned never to ask questions or admit mistakes. I became inflexible and negative, and shut out my creativity and humor. With this new mentor, I started to shed those habits and let the funny, interesting, and creative teacher I was emerge. I allowed myself to make mistakes, and instead of cringing or crying, I learned and got better.

One of my student-teaching placements was in Chinatown. The children had all recently arrived in America and knew very little English. I took on the project of trying to teach one little girl how written language worked. Ling, who was ten years old, had never learned to read or write in any language, and she was struggling more than the others with English. After several frustrating lessons I finally thought of using her name. We wrote "Ling," and then a list of words that rhymed with it: king, ring, sing. I made a story about each word and acted it out. The more she kept staring skeptically at me, the more stops I pulled out. I pointed at each word and asked her to read it. She really didn't want to play this game with me. I made all kinds of crazy faces and noises hoping she would feel less embarrassed if I was already acting like an idiot. Finally when

I pointed to “sing,” she sang, “Lalalala!” just like I had. We both laughed. She got it: s + ing = sing like an idiot.

I am now in my sixth year of teaching. I work in a school in which teachers and children are treated with kindness and respect. I am no longer afraid to admit that I can't do it all. I seek out the opinions and wisdom of my colleagues. I am confident of my teaching skills, and I know when to trust my instincts, but I also recognize when I need to find out more information.

Why am I still a teacher? To be honest, probably because I am stubborn. I had been pushed, but I refused to be pushed out. I had never imagined doing anything else with my life. The thought of working in an office, or at home as an editor or writer, fills me with dread and loneliness. I need the company of children. I need those moments when the world stops just long enough to allow a drop of enlightenment to fall on our heads. I need to sing like an idiot. I believe, in the end, that I was saved by my mentors. I was very close to leaving, to becoming a very different person than the one I had always dreamed of being. Then I became a student of kind and honest teachers who held up mirrors and said: look, a teacher is who you already are, despite your failures.

A wise teacher once told me that teaching is an act of hope. I believe that mentoring a new teacher is also an act of hope, multiplied by all the students she will love and inspire. Every year when September comes, I have that feeling again, that feeling of oh my goodness, can I really do this? Then I take a deep breath, look into my classroom, and breath out a “yes.”