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The Ongoing Process of Becoming a Teacher: Essential Training Begins at Age Six

Jennifer J. Montgomery

When examining the origins of classroom practice by high school teachers, investigators must consider how much weight to accord to a teacher's childhood and young-adulthood experiences in all areas of life, including all levels of that teacher's own schooling. This study investigates the impact of those experiences by presenting the author's self-reported core teaching characteristics and then examining the life and educational experiences that resulted in those classroom traits. The writer concludes that foundational classroom qualities result primarily from personal educational experiences, which should be recognized and analyzed during teachers' self-evaluation and during their continual efforts at achieving professional growth.

When Hillary Clinton chose the African tribal proverb "It takes a village to raise a child" as the core idea of her book about effectively nurturing children, some pundits spewed righteous indignation that she should dare extend the shaping of a child beyond the parents' own hands. I vividly recall being mystified at that backlash: Of course it takes a village to raise a child, for better or for worse. I am proof of that, and my teaching is, as well.

Even today as a middle-aged adult eight years into my high-school teaching career, I easily recognize certain early experiences that stand out as epiphanous in terms of the teacher I would become. My core classroom qualities—making meaning, emphasizing excellence, preserving dignity, and so on—all owe their existence to my North Dakota village and to the array of experiences it offered throughout my growing up, a process which continues to this day.

Making Meaning

I admit it: I struggle to refrain from rolling my eyes at pithy teacher devotionals and classroom posters that exhort students to pursue boundless dreams and ever ascending achievements. Those fortune-cookie phrases may look good on glossy posters of sunsets and sailing ships, but they lack the behavioral road maps that promote genuine student achievement. I prefer instead to teach students to embrace reality and their power to shape it, skills that enable the discarding of empty tasks in favor of

focusing on worthwhile ones that lead to substantive achievement.

Not surprisingly, many of the life lessons that have informed this aspect of my teaching come from my farming parents, who were excellent teachers of life. They both frequently employed the "learn by doing" method and they often used contrast to make abstract characteristics more concrete. In so doing, they established a very strong and basic channel for communication.

I will never forget the time my father tried to explain to me the difference between sweet corn and field corn. I was skeptical. He explained that field corn was tough and dry and very different. I wasn't convinced, since in my mind that described overripe sweet corn. Before he came in from the farm that night, he had taken the time to pick an ear of field corn from another farmer's field several miles away. He showed me its physical differences and then cooked it on the spot so I could try it: No doubt, it was tough and dry and very different, just as he had said.

By experience and instinct, my farmer father used a teaching method that transformed my knowledge of the differences between those two types of corn. Comparing the two side by side showed that there was no comparison, so to speak. Moreover, the learning did not stop there: We talked at length then about his childhood—field corn was the only corn his family grew, so they ate it regularly—and he talked about being a boy in the 1920s and 1930s.

Both my parents taught like that: They often set things side by side in order to emphasize the traits of one or the other, and they would naturally extend discussion when they perceived interest. To this day, I never learn so well as when I have a concrete frame of reference that employs contrast and comparison. I remind myself of that when I teach, and I try each day to offer those contrasts to my students to enhance and cement their understanding in a way that for them is as real as the side-by-side comparison of sweet corn and field corn was for me.

Another unforgettable exercise in making meaning also came at the hands—or more precisely the feet—of my father, a workaholic farmer with too few hours in the day. I was six or seven years old—young enough still to believe that my father could fix anything. He had a lot of things on the farm just for us kids and one of those things was chickens. I was exceedingly anxious to see and hold the first chicks, and I checked every hour to see whether any had hatched. My impatience grew so powerful that I secretly took an egg and broke it on the back steps of the hen house. To my intense dismay, inside lay a nearly ready chick, now writhing and dying in the dust. I felt awful, guilty, and mean. Still, I continued to await anxiously the chicks, and when the first hatched, I was thrilled.

I also sensed intuitively that my redemption lay in my new role as protector of these tiny creatures, and so when I saw that one tiny yellow chick was injured and was being pecked by the others, I rescued it from the masses. Carrying the chick in my bunched-up shirt hem, I searched the farm for my father, whom I found fixing machinery next to the diesel tanks. I called to him under the digger and he crawled out to see what lay in my extended hands—a fluffy little chick spotted with blood on one wing. He would fix it, surely.

Without hesitation or discussion, he took the chick from my hands, and without further comment, he set it on the ground and crushed its fluffy little head with the heel of his dusty brown Wolverine boot. I don't remember if he said anything to me—if he did, it wasn't about the chick—and he went back to work on the digger. I just stood there for awhile,

mind—and probably mouth—agape. So much for redemption.

I smile about that as an adult because I know now my father was hard at work fixing what he could. We just were operating in entirely different contexts. My making of meaning was entirely remote from him as his was from me. In retrospect, that is no surprise, but it remains a constant reminder to me of the need to listen carefully, both to what is said and what isn't, when I am interacting with students whose lives due to age and experience are equally remote from mine.

This was further driven home to me during my college years, or more precisely during my study for my second degree, which was in secondary education. I had fallen into a job as an instructor for Grand Forks' homeless education programs for adults and children. Though I was technically the teacher, I was in fact a student every day. I saw firsthand the impact of poverty; drug use and abuse; alcoholism; mental illness; physical, verbal, and sexual abuse; family strife; and social disenfranchisement. Homelessness, hustling, and perpetual emotional drifting were just a few of the desperate destinations of adulthood that lurked for young people who didn't get hooked into school and their community, or who didn't connect with their families or other mentoring adults.

I shall remember for a very long time the conversations I had with these desperate and long-derailed men and women about their school experiences, both socially and academically. Time after time, these hard-edged outcasts broke down in tears at the talk of school and how or why they didn't finish. Substantive and lasting change for them seemed unlikely as adults, but one couldn't help but wonder at the missed opportunities for them as children.

As much as anything, that guides my efforts at making meaning for disconnected students in my high school classroom. I remember the things those homeless adults said about what was going on outside and inside their lives as children, and I remind myself frequently that teaching my current students about Julius Caesar or formal essay style surely is not the only, or even the most important,

thing I have to offer them as they struggle to find their place in the world.

Expecting Excellence

Another key lesson learned early and well was the great importance of requiring excellence when teaching something of value. The best example of this came from my elementary art teacher, Mrs. L., a woman of quiet style trapped all day in an art classroom with antsy and inexperienced farm kids, whom she taught with a dedication that was admirable to me even then.

I wasn't very good at art and I lacked the interest that would have motivated me to improve. She was oblivious to that, however, as evidenced by my clay ordeal, which began with Mrs. L. directing a room of 25 nine-year-olds to fashion little pots out of artists' clay. I couldn't complain: It was fun, free-form, and easy; I could kill an hour doing that. Wrong. I did indeed have the freedom to make my little ashtray/change-holder any way I chose, but I soon learned that I didn't have the freedom to do it poorly.

Each of us was to fashion a pot and then give it to her for firing. I messed around with the clay for a little bit, pressed it into a bowl shape, rolled some worm-like strips for handles, pressed them on the sides, and pronounced my learning done. Ready to move on to chitchat and such, I presented it to her for firing. I'll never forget her response: She looked at it, said it was a start, and said she was sure I'd like to try again. With those words, she crumpled my effort back into the original lump of clay. I was stunned—no teacher in my life had ever rejected anything outright and with so little cushioning of the blow.

"Why should she care?" I wondered. I clearly wasn't much of an artist, and I wasn't going to be, which bothered me not at all. She did care, though, presumably for the simple fact that if something was worth doing, it was worth doing well. She crumpled two more pots before she finally accepted one—in the next class period, no less. Still, I remember with great clarity and pleasure the sense of accomplishment I felt when she finally accepted my

pot for firing. When we painted them later, I took great care in choosing colors and my design. It was still a lumpy little pea-green pot with worm handles, but it was mine and I had given it my full attention and effort, which in the end felt very good.

I still have that little two-tone-green ashtray thing and I'll always remember Mrs. L. requiring more than I wanted to give. She never did make an artist of me—surely she never expected to—but she did implant a lesson that stayed with me forever after that, both in my life and my teaching: Things worth doing are worth doing well, the judgment of which is not on a public scale, but on a personal one. That has served me tremendously as a teacher as I wrestle with the challenge of making learning meaningful for students of vastly different interests, abilities, and life experiences clustered in the same English classroom.

Preserving Dignity

Another key lesson from my youth is the pre-eminent importance of helping young people preserve their dignity as they learn and grow. The experiences that resulted in that lesson frequently guide my thinking as I strive to manage and nurture young people in a way that achieves my need for an atmosphere of learning and civility while promoting independent thinking among my students.

Never was this more wrenchingly illustrated than one morning early in third grade. Mrs. H. ruled her room with a Stalin-style iron fist. In those days, shorts were not considered appropriate attire, even on the hottest days. "Diane," a painfully shy and esteemless little girl who from kindergarten was the class outcast, had the great misfortune of wearing a red-and-white-checked lace-edged matching shorts outfit—probably selected by her unsuspecting mother—to Mrs. H.'s class on a scorching September day the first week of third grade. Mrs. H. first thing that morning delivered a lesson that none of us would forget that year, much less that terrible day.

With a sneer, our teacher called this meek, often-taunted little girl to the front of the room and proceeded to force her to bend over the teacher's desk and to spank her hard on her buttocks in front

of us. After this spanking, Mrs. H. lectured this girl—and by association, all of us—on the inappropriateness of wearing shorts to school. We, the third-grade collective trapped in this terror, watched in horror, embarrassment, and fear, wrenchingly sorry for Diane but secretly and hugely relieved that it wasn't us enduring that public humiliation for the supposed crime of wearing shorts—and these were cute, modest, little-girl shorts—on a very hot day in third grade.

I didn't realize it at the time, but Mrs. H. surely wasn't paddling Diane, the weakest and meekest of all her students, just for wearing shorts. I believe she would have paddled her for something else to achieve the psychological paddling of us all. And her results were chillingly effective: We acted and reacted in fear that whole year, not wanting ever to step out of line, and not really knowing where that line was. "If I will paddle you for wearing shorts, I will paddle you for anything," Mrs. H. had silently shouted at us.

The result was a classroom of Stepford children treading very carefully so as not to draw attention. Predictably, discipline was never an issue for this teacher. I fume now when I think about how some evaluators of classroom quality would no doubt praise this type of teacher for a scene of such surface serenity. They would be fools, for that apparent calm was stolen at a stunningly expensive cost in terms of the dignity and security of wide-eyed eight-year-olds.

I remember once in Mrs. H.'s class being very happy after recess, so much so that I was unknowingly whistling quietly to myself as I worked. She boomed out in her voice of god, "Who is whistling?" I froze, realizing my unconscious but enormous error. She mistakenly assumed the culprit was my friend "Mike," a boy sitting right behind me. He hadn't been saying a word, but she ignored his denials and unleashed her wrath. I was so scared and intimidated that I didn't say anything in his defense.

To this day, I feel guilty for not taking responsibility in order to spare Mike. Though understandable given the atmosphere, it was such a craven act for me, who had been brought up better

than that, but that first week's paddling had chilled us all and I kept quiet at my friend's expense. Back then, all I knew was that I feared Mrs. H. and wanted her not to be angry with me. Twenty-plus years later, I know now that she was evil in her methods and had no right having contact with children. Not surprisingly, that bitter lesson has greatly shaped my own approach to dispensing discipline while protecting students' dignity.

I contrast Mrs. H. with the approach of my parents. That same year, my father saw me in a moment of carelessness nearly obliterated by a fully loaded semi-trailer hauling cattle, and he disciplined me not at all. I was riding a little yellow Honda mini-50 motorcycle along a tree-lined country road, and in the pleasure of the moment, I forgot to stop and look for cars as I reached a gravel-road intersection where visibility of cross traffic was entirely screened by the trees. I was going to meet up with my father and brothers at a water-well across the intersection, and I just breezed through the crossing. In the second that I heard the truck's deafening honk and turned my head, all I saw was grill, and I was sure I was dead.

Somehow, I gunned the throttle and the trucker slammed on his breaks, undoubtedly snapping the legs of many cattle. By inches, I escaped sudden violent death, and my father had seen it all from thirty yards away. My mind instantly reeled with thoughts that he would surely kill me for having disregarded his repeated orders to stop at all intersections. He never said an angry word about that, whether because he couldn't through his own terror or because he realized I had had the safety lesson of all time. Clearly, the lesson had been learned, no further emphasis required. I remember that when I am striving to discipline with dignity: Deal with the problem, and then let it go.

Even with those experiences, my response as a teacher in training had yet to be tested. That came in the form of a girl named "Beth," who played on the youth softball team I coached during summer breaks from college. She drove me nuts. I had always gotten along very well with young people, both as peers and as they became my students. Beth, however, was incredibly independent, an appealing

trait in most people, but an ugly one in her. She was sullen, sarcastic, lazy, and mean; and she was thoroughly pampered by her parents, who were thrilled to have a girl among their several sons.

In the first year of my coaching, Beth was one of the younger players, and I found her unpleasant, whiny, and resistant to instruction but chose not to make an issue of her conduct. After a couple years had passed and she was a veteran, she became insufferable in terms of attitude and carriage, her worst quality being the demeaning interactions she pursued with the younger, weaker girls. That was wholly unacceptable to my priority of providing healthy, sane competition. Beth took a sadistic pleasure in freezing out the weaker girls, however, and I began to call her on it; but I had let her go too long in this pattern of ugly behavior.

Her resistance to my direction was festering in me and I had had enough. However, I made the huge mistake of confronting her very publicly. During a game in front of her family and friends, she derided the right fielder, a little girl who was scared to death just being on the field. I could tell what was happening, and I acted without thinking. I called time-out from the bench, and I subbed another player for Beth. I didn't say anything that anyone but Beth could hear, but my act of subbing out a good player in the middle of an inning made my dissatisfaction clear to everyone, and it made her much-deserved dressing-down very public. Her response was to stalk off and sit in her brother's car and honk the horn continuously for the rest of the game.

The irony was that Beth very much deserved disciplinary action and she deserved not to be playing, but my mistakes were threefold: I reacted in anger; I didn't deal with the problem directly when I saw it developing over time; and I had saved up all her transgressions so that when the confrontation finally came, I was pulling out incidents that were weeks, even months, old. That was so unfair of me and made my discipline ineffective and overreaching.

Very soon after the event, I realized I should have pulled her out at the inning break, I should have dealt with each problem as it arose rather than

banking them all, and I should have employed proactive measures as soon as I saw those behaviors emerging. Even though she very much deserved discipline, she didn't deserve public discipline, which humiliated her. That was a tremendous lesson for me as a pre-professional teacher; and though Beth paid the price for my immaturity and lack of experience, my students today reap the benefits of that mistake.

Nurturing Individuality and Passion

Another essential characteristic of effective classroom practice, especially as it pertains to motivation and rapport, is acknowledging students' individuality and nurturing their gifts and passions. I am exceedingly fortunate to have had many such teachers and adults in my own life. My parents, for example, supported without derision my intense interest in *Star Trek* from seventh grade through high school, and I had many teachers who enjoyed discussing with me my other great passion of childhood: Tommy Kramer and the Minnesota Vikings.

My ninth-grade history teacher, who kidded me continually about Tommy and the Vikes, even helped me arrange a trip to see the Vikings play in the last game ever at Metropolitan Stadium, a site now desecrated by Camp Snoopy and the Mall of America. Being the child of farming parents, vacations were unheard of and the farthest I had ever gone with my family were the rare 130-mile trips to Fargo and Minot. Mr. R., though, encouraged me to make this Viking trip happen and he gave me all the information and connections I needed. He made the impossible seem simple, and in fact it was. To a great degree, I credit him for making psychologically possible the considerable national and international travel I have undertaken since that first trip to Minneapolis. I also give him a great deal of credit for impressing upon me the impact a teacher who takes a personalized interest can have upon a student—and a teacher to be.

I contrast him with a couple other high school teachers. One was a long-term English substitute who wanted us to write often about personal

interests and viewpoints, but only about topics she deemed worthy. A strong and interested writer, I chafed tremendously under her restrictions. The irreparable damage to my respect for her came when she gave me a low B on what I believed to be a very well written and well argued essay about a core theme in *Star Trek*. Her comment on my paper was that the essay was well written, but that I should have picked a more significant topic.

To her, I was writing about a stupid TV show; to me, I was writing passionately about a TV show, but one with an incredible vision that espoused morality, equality, and celebration of the best in humanity. In adulthood, my passion for that show is long gone, but that passion was a great and powerful thing that motivated me to read extensively and think deeply about many issues in history, literature, and politics. For her to dismiss it as insignificant and unworthy was so inappropriate on her part. Even if my passion had been about Nancy Drew instead of *Star Trek*, passion has value and ought to be a corridor for communication between a teacher and a student.

Garrett Keiser in his book *No Place But Here* calls this the Scylla and Charybdis dilemma of teaching: Do we as English teachers require exclusively the things our adult perspectives tell us have the clearest intellectual value for our students? Or do we accept the tenth piece of writing about snowmobiling and celebrate the fact that that student is enthused about something and that enthusiasm makes him eager to learn—within those limits? No single answer works for every situation and for every student, but I do know from my experiences both as a student and a teacher that passion is a sacred thing and teachers are highly misguided if they choose to demean or ignore it rather than incorporate it into a student's learning experience.

I cannot help but think of my freshman English teacher, a man we students called "B.S. Bob." I loved reading and writing, but it was as if he were using a pedagogical two-by-four to knock that love right out of me. He battered us repeatedly with 25-page study guides on the minutiae of classics like *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Iliad*, and he tested us with endless, trivial, and misleading true/false and matching questions that focused on the peripheral

action of exceedingly minor characters. I loved English so much that I survived that year and recognized him for a buffoon, but he crushed the more fragile interests in language of many of my farm-kid classmates. I shudder when I think of the damage he inflicted year after year during his career as a teacher.

Mrs. W. also comes to mind. She was a frequent sub in our high school, and she was kind and well intentioned, though ill-suited for our age. Kids in small schools wear a lot of hats, and in addition to being a member of the school band in all its forms, I was the substitute conductor of the pep band on the occasional evenings the band teacher needed to be absent. This was due more to my common sense and leadership ability than any great musical talent, but I enjoyed the challenge very much. To a great degree, class rehearsals had bred such familiarity with the music that little conducting was required. The first time out, however, I made a big mistake. Our first twenty minutes went very smoothly, as did the playing of our own school fight song. However, a dark moment loomed. ...

The opposing team's fight song was simple and well known to us, and I wasn't concentrating on directing precisely. I gave a four-count start instead of a two-count start, and even though we all had played that song a million times, it was a cacophonous disaster because my bandmates actually followed my baton. I was very embarrassed momentarily—the gym was full, of course—but I stopped the band, we started over, and the originally mangled number then sounded quite good. The rest of the evening was uneventful, band-wise. I still remember, though, Mrs. W.'s comments to me days later when she subbed for one of my teachers: "That fight song was really embarrassing for the school. You really messed up. The band looked really bad."

Fortunately, I had adequate self-assurance and perspective. The opening of that song was embarrassing and it was a sloppy mistake, but much more significant were the recovery and perseverance of my bandmates and me, all on our own. We played adultless a few more times that year without incident. For whatever reason, she couldn't recognize the accomplishment in the recovery from

that ignominious moment, nor did she give credit to my willingness to take that risk again. Even as a teenager, I recognized that willingness as a strong trait in me, as did my band director. As a teacher myself, I try to uphold high standards of achievement and responsibility, but I also recognize the need for second chances and the opportunity to make things right. We learn by doing and by doing again if necessary. Any teachers or adults who fail to embrace that are doing a disservice to their roles as mentors and teachers.

As I think of the many teachers I had after leaving high school, I recognize that I was blessed in learning to appreciate individuality and passion. The lessons didn't stop at teachers, however. My friend "Dan" was a strong example as well, but in a different way. He and I were both English majors and so had a lot of classes together. We had similar tastes in most literature and film, and he had turned me on to stellar history classes. I was surprised then during a discussion in our survey class on American literature. The professor had assigned us the reading of several Theodore Roethke poems, most of which dealt with seeds germinating and plants growing. I was very critical and tossed out the token resistor comments about how these poems were pointless and simplistic and not worthy of inclusion in the canon.

Dan's face lit up, however, and he began to talk about how much he loved these poems and how amazing and accurate they were. I was surprised, especially given our previously similar tastes. He began talking about his experiences at his parents' greenhouse, and I began to see that he brought a whole new perspective to the poems because of his passion for growing things and his much better understanding of the profundity and mystery of that aspect of life.

I still didn't love those poems, but I gained a much greater sense of their value and the myriad perspectives people bring to living. I also achieved a lot more humility and respect for people's passions. As a teacher, when students engage me in discussions of fishing or rap music or *Star Wars*, none of which interest me very much, I try to give them my full attention and my respect for their

capacity to be passionate about their interests. And every once in a while I read Roethke's poetry again, just to see if I understand a little bit more of what makes Dan the person that he is. For that same reason, I attend my students' soccer and wrestling matches or their choir concerts. I also tune in to pro wrestling occasionally and watch some MTV and the WB, for as a teacher, seriously acknowledging students' interests and individuality is akin to having the combination to the vault in which rapport resides.

I was reminded of this again in June of last year. Two students I had had as sophomores three years earlier had graduated in May, and they both sent me notes of appreciation, one specifically mentioning our class's many rounds of *Star Trek* trivia and the other recalling the frequent classroom jokes and the conversations about current events. What they probably remember less well is that those diversions from content were fairly brief each day, and in fact they spent a lot of time reading, writing, and discussing literature.

I take that as a compliment, though, for they were two students who were not interested in lingering over language. My enthusiasm about their lives and interests, however, paved the way for them to reciprocate willingly and let me share my passion for English. When I see that happening—anti-English students being swept along to their academic gain and personal pleasure—I know something very important is happening in my classroom, and I mentally tip my hat to the many people—my village of parents, teachers, professors, friends—who modeled for me the incredible motivational power of a teaching mentor's interest, attention, and respect. Those were lessons well learned, and I use them enthusiastically every day that I am in contact with young people.

Embracing Empathy and Flexibility

My music education holds another defining moment in my recognition of excellent teaching, which includes the capacity to be both empathic and flexible. Specifically, it's represented by the contrasting styles of my early elementary music

teacher, Mrs. R., and my seventh-grade teacher, Miss C., who taught general music and junior high band. I have never in my life been able to carry a tune with other voices, but I was usually a diligent and solid instrumental musician, from flutophone and ukulele to various sizes of saxophones, which I played from fifth grade on.

Mrs. R. was wonderful with kids. She taught general music and organized all the programs and the elementary choirs. I must have let on once how intensely insecure I was about singing, and she must have realized that all I ever did was mouth the words. She knew also, though, that I had been taking piano lessons for a few years, and she encouraged me in that rather than putting me on the spot to sing. She even accommodated my singing phobia by selecting me frequently to accompany the songs with maracas and such.

She even went so far as to make me the choir's accompanist in fifth and sixth grade. She rearranged the music so as to simplify it, and she had me accompany the choir in programs and even in a highly involved Christmas musical, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. I'm sure my singing classmates would very much have preferred a polished accompanist, and I remember feeling so terrifically nervous and ill-chosen, but at the same time, I felt very proud that she had entrusted me with this big responsibility.

I practiced endlessly and improved tremendously. Even so, I was a liability in the heat of the moment, but I don't believe she ever saw it like that. She never criticized my nervous mistakes; she only focused me positively on how to be better. She was my favorite teacher for a long time, and I respect her tremendously to this day for understanding the depth of my fear of singing and for finding an alternate way to include me in music without singling me out as handicapped.

I contrast this with the approach of one Miss C., whose name to this day makes me shudder. She taught junior high music and was forever harping, criticizing, and seeing plots to destroy her efforts among the denizens of the seventh grade. I was still in band and doing well on the saxophone, but my

fear of singing in front of people had only grown, junior high and all.

One day in music class, she arbitrarily assigned us to vocal sections. For some freakish and entirely inexplicable reason, she put me with the sopranos. Not only can I not sing, never in a thousand millennia would I be able to sing soprano. She then started going around the half circles in which we were seated and making people sing alone. I was terrified: Not only was I going to have to sing, but I was going to have to try to sing a soprano part.

Feeling like a trapped animal, I was fully prepared to engage my flight instinct and to walk out first, so risking the wrath of our strict and pompous principal. My initial solution, though, was to try to talk to her, first to tell her that I don't like to sing, and second, to ask at least to be with the altos. She immediately became cross. She announced abruptly that if I didn't sing I would get an F-I who had had nothing but A's—and she said the only reason I wanted to be with the altos was to sit by my friend, Jane.

I was on the edge of a nervous breakdown, seventh-grade style, and she could not have cared less, she who had never made any effort whatsoever to get to know me or to recognize that I was cooperative and diligent in most all things. As it turned out, she never got past the altos for those evil solo moments, so my ridiculous placement was actually a boon, but I hated and feared that class the entire year, and that after my transcendent experience with Mrs. R.

As stressful as Miss C.'s class was at the time, I value it now. I know very well that it has made me a more empathic listener to students. As I work with students to arrange modifications or solve class problems, I remember with great appreciation the extent to which Mrs. R. went to ensure my inclusion in her class and to encourage the talents and interests that I brought with me, even though they didn't perfectly match the talents she generally taught.

Fortunately, the Miss C.-types in my life have been rare. In fact, I have had the great fortune of encountering many fine professors, a now-retired English professor, R.B., being one of the best. He provided for me a great example of empathic

listening and deep contemplative attention to literature and various interpretations of it. I was watching a videotape of my conduction of a high school English class recently, and he came immediately to mind. I hadn't realized how many of his teaching traits I had assimilated. In fact, I realized that stylistically I had become an amalgamation of my three or four favorite professors.

When I was a college student, Professor B.'s style struck me immediately. I remember clearly his first class meetings for an introductory humanities course. There were a lot of uncomfortable silences in which we freshmen were waiting for his direction and pronouncements—he was the teacher, after all. He sensed our unease, and he simply told us he was very comfortable with silence. That fact became very clear, and we became comfortable with silences, too. But these were special silences, contemplative silences that allowed for reflection on what had been said or what we next wanted to say. I learned to love that method, and I also valued how comfortable he was with open-endedness in the interpretation of literature. His flexibility and respect for developing intellects made us as students much more willing to risk independence and to risk being wrong because the text was truly open to interpretation in his class, with the key caveat of supporting interpretation with textual evidence.

Loving the Work

Ironically, none of the former qualities is enough unless a teacher loves the work. When I was in junior high, Mr. P. was my math and science teacher. He had been teaching in our district for years by then, and he was nearly a legend in terms of his talent and rapport. He was smart and funny and he knew how to teach well and thoroughly. I often liked him a lot. The problem was that, like Mr. Lipschitz on *Boston Public*, Mr. P. had burned his candle down to a nub, and he was beginning to have as many bad days as good in terms of being enthusiastic, cheerful, and anxious to teach, all essential traits when dealing with students of any kind.

The ultimate example of this science teacher's need to retire will remain in my mind forever. It was the late 1970s and North Dakota was perfectly positioned for prime viewing of a full solar eclipse, a rare occurrence and an exceedingly rare teachable moment for isolated students in central North Dakota. I personally was so excited. I had been reading for weeks about the eclipse, its causes, how to view it safely, and so on. Mr. P. had been talking about it often in science class, too. At the scheduled time of the eclipse, I was going to be in his math class, but he had said all along that we would go watch the eclipse out on the playground.

When the day finally came, he was in a foul mood and he decided that we were not going to go out. Instead, we would stay in and do math homework. I was stunned, truly stunned. I objected strongly, and eventually he angrily said I could do what I wanted. With a bitter taste in my mouth on this glorious and much-anticipated day, I went outside and watched an amazing eclipse with most of the rest of the school while he and many of my classmates remained in the building. It became so very clear to me then that even though he had many fine qualities as a teacher and person, he was past ready to retire—and he should have. He was a great teacher for a long time, but he was barely a good teacher at the end. I remind myself of that as I go into the classroom each day and as I look ahead to directions my career may take. My fellow teachers and I need desperately to remember the importance of enthusiasm and joy for teaching, and when that ends we need to walk away lest we prohibit the experiencing of metaphorical eclipses in the many young minds we martial.

To my great gain, my educational life has been filled with many more experiences with teachers and professors who love their work rather than the opposite. As important as the conveying of their subject matter, equally important to me was the attitude and the ardor they brought to the act of teaching and learning. This was never better illustrated to me than by Dr. A., a brilliant history professor. During his office hours, he would frequently wear a sweater, but when he came to class, he always donned a suit jacket. The first day

of my first class with him will stand out in my mind always. As soon as the bell rang, he began a lecture about conduct in his class: No hats, no pop, no tardiness—ever. He talked so reverently that day and others about the place in our lives that learning deserves and the respect it ought to be accorded.

I audited one of his history classes once. He was reluctant to approve because students usually disregarded any serious study for audited work. I insisted that I would give the course the attention it was due, and so he relented. Out of respect for him, I kept up with the class, but one day skipped it to complete another course's graded work. I remember sneaking off the city bus at the Memorial Union stop, fearing all the time that he might spot me. As I was slinking up to the entrance of the Union, I heard a call from the distance: "Miss Montgomery... Miss Montgomery. ..." Busted.

Dr. A. had seen me from a block or so away and pedaled his bicycle over to me to relate what I had missed that day in his class. Out of courtesy, surely, he didn't chastise or even inquire as to the cause of my absence, but his seeking me out from afar commanded my full attention, both for that moment and for the remainder of that audited history class.

Dr. A. and the others were great teachers all, and are representative of a much bigger pool. They taught important knowledge in their fields with intelligence, skill, and enthusiasm, but perhaps even more importantly, they instilled in me a deep respect for learning as a life imperative and as an end in itself. To the degree I accomplish that daily goal with my own students in my own classroom, I mentally thank them for their original lesson and their love of the work.

Conclusion

As I look back on these experiences, both in the distant and recent past, I see more and more the sources and inspirations for my current classroom practice. I cannot help but think about our traditional techniques of teacher training at the university level. So many ideas and areas vie for the time and attention of teachers in training that a cohesive message and method may be difficult to

form for teacher education courses. But perhaps a more accurate perspective is that the truly cohesive messages and intuitive understandings about interacting successfully with students have, in fact, been forming for years. We add layer after layer of pieces of our environment until a shape begins to form and harden, even as more and more layers accumulate over time.

I can only wonder at the consequences of an accumulation of negative experiences rather than my largely positive ones. Perhaps that is what results in teachers like "B.S. Bob" or the tyrannical and cruel Mrs. H. More than that, I'm curious now to learn about the influences that shaped the teaching and the natures of the people who have best taught me. I imagine that they have recollections similar to mine, in lesson if not in plot, for surely who and what we as teachers personify in our classrooms is not about "being" as much as it is about "becoming," from age six or even earlier until the day we turn in our keys. And to the people who rail against the vision of a village raising a child, I offer my talents as a teacher as proof of the collective power of a caring community broadly defined.

References

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