

### Pay Attention

I taught literature and writing. The subject matter of novels, plays and poetry, sentence structure, clarity of expression and logical argument were always the fundamentals of my high school curriculums as they evolved.

No matter what you teach, we share this: day after day we work patiently to sharpen the thinking of teenagers and the application of their skills.

This also happens.

For five days a week over roughly ten months young men and women file, slouch, stumble and roll into your room. Laughing, silent, scowling, tired, chattering.

Alone, in a couple, in a posse, like a wave, straggling.

Sniffing, coughing, red-faced, eyes glazed or downcast or red.

Fierce, slumped over, clumping, flitting, hopping.

Lonely, in love, in love with love, weeping, joyous, numb, trying to hide, trying on another mask.

Now, step away from your subject matter.

Pay attention to them, to each him and her. Trust your intuition. If you see a child who seems distressed, act, but God, please, do not descend like some demented angel, hovering and overbearing, gibbering and cooing. Such *angels* give compassion a bad name. Whatever comfort you provide has to be about the kid, not about you. Be discreet. Try to avoid drawing attention to him or her. Remember teenagers' natural self-consciousness. Do you remember what that felt like? They prefer not to have attention paid so obviously even as they yearn for someone, some adult, to be able to notice their misery, to *see* it, and thus to make their suffering more real than it had been when it had only been trapped within their own mind's echo chamber.

You cannot undo their tragic circumstances or guarantee them a match with a mate or a friend. You cannot straighten out a whacked parent. You cannot heal them of disabilities.

You do have an institution and the law behind you. You can set certain wheels in motion that may create a protective shield for them or provide them with access to a trained therapist.

You can listen to them and tell them the truth. You can encourage them. You can do this – not give up on them.

Most importantly, you can make every effort each day to give witness to them, to look carefully at their faces, to use your knowledge of body language and facial expressions to read them. When you see distress and despair and sickness, extend a hand. A small, instinctively kind action by you, the action of a moment, can carry such weight, such gravitas that you can change lives. You may never know the effect of your brief consideration, but that is not important. You stepped toward an unhappy child, not away. "Each one does what he can."