

Teaching High School Kids

If you want to teach high school students, what I learned over 36 years of teaching may be helpful. That is all. I have learned something about the craft, often painfully and through much stumbling, but the list and my commentary are not meant to be anything other than my attempt to think about what worked for me in one place over time. I have known too many good teachers who operated on other wavelengths to think that I have universally applicable solutions to problems.

I am writing to high school teachers who are fortunate enough to work in a building where order and safety are the norm, not the exception. A good teacher who works in a lawless school has more to teach me than the other way around.

I write this while watching public education and the teaching profession fall deeper into a troubled state. At least in Pennsylvania, the economic model that has been used to sustain public schools seems unsustainable -- property taxes are seen by large sections of the public as becoming too heavy a burden to bear. Rising income inequality has fostered a sense of resentment towards teachers who are perceived by many as spoiled recipients of good salaries, benefits and pensions. A radical free-market ideology adopted by many on the political right is spearheading a drive to destroy any institution supported by public funds (with the exception of some law enforcement agencies and the armed forces). I believe that public schools are central to retaining the ideals of our egalitarian democratic model. I believe in my heart that if we lose them, we move much closer to rule by plutocracy and to a tragic loss of freedoms and public vitality. Finally, I believe that the work done by good teachers and administrators remains central to our country's economic and political renewal.

How I came to this -- an introduction:

My earliest memory of stories is of sitting on my Aunt Elsie's lap and looking at Tyrannosaurus Rex, jaws agape, hurtling toward some poor leaf eating lizard. When I would tire of the Jurassic, she would switch books, bring out **The Catholic Book of Martyrs**, and reading breathlessly, she would tell me of saints who suffered pain and death for their faith. My maiden Aunt Elsie, a big-boned Irish woman, taught me how to read stories, and my father taught me how to listen to their rhythms.

My father served as a Pennsylvania State Policeman for 35 years. He told cop stories at the dinner table and with his buddies when they visited. I can conjure images of car chases on the dark, back roads near Lebanon, and of a shadowy warehouse where 2 armed bank robbers were holed up. I remember names -- Trooper "two-gun" McGurk, a huge Pennsylvania Dutchman feared by the hard guys with whom my father and he dealt; thankful and wealthy Mr. Landis who, during the Depression, left sandwiches for weary troopers in bird houses near his farm.

At least once a week I think of my father and my Aunt Elsie in terms of how their passions fused to help me form mine. I tell stories in class almost every day -- to illustrate

an idea, to connect kids' lives to books outside their experience, to give them the permission they may need to open their lives to others and thus to begin to tell their own stories. When I fell in love with stories, I set myself to fall in love with teaching. I think that we must stay awake to stories and to the singular voices of the kids who tell them to us.

It took time to discover what my father and my aunt had given me. I was an uninterested high school student, on the fringes of trouble, smart-mouthed. My love of books kept me engaged and brought me a like-circle of friends. Then I discovered that my big mouth could sometimes draw people to me. I was comfortable in front of crowds. I could talk to strangers. It occurred to me that I might be able to make a living by combining my book-love with my ability to speak. Of course, I was not thinking of teaching since it seemed to me that only the deeply odd ever got themselves trapped in that life. The exception was Mr. Dobrosky, my senior religion teacher, who possessed a quality we respected. He was slightly built, painfully shy outside the classroom, soft-spoken within, hunched over, sallow-skinned, but when he spoke about the Greeks, or about Existentialism, or on the idea of tragedy, his intensity riveted us. Here was a man who could grip us for 50 minutes a day with his mild voice and his spinning words, and his creation of an exciting, intellectual world. Now I believe he set a seed within me.

In the first semester of my freshman year of college, my best friend told me to "stop reading useless stuff" and he threw me a copy of the Harper's magazine issue that contained Norman Mailer's entire book **The Prisoner of Sex**. I read it in one great gulp and that afternoon switched my major to English, Secondary Education. Mailer's argument against what he saw as a totalitarian and dishonest feminism was interesting, but it was Mailer's muscular language, and his inimitable voice that sent me to my advisor that afternoon. With Mailer as my spur, I imagined acres of books in possession of beautiful language. I wanted to read those books and then tell others about them. Therefore, simplistically, I thought I would teach. Thirty six years later I look back gratefully on my naïveté. Knowing something then about the complexity of teaching would have intimidated me. I was blessed with a blindness that allowed the daily beauty of this work to open to me slowly.

That beauty has never been more sharply etched into my experience than when I have taught at-risk kids -- the angry ones, the ones made crooked by others, the kids who didn't get it, the sweetest ones, the most trusting ones, the hard cases, the tough guys, the drug-addled. They *taught* me. Every day they demanded my best. Every day they made clear my failures. Every day they provoked in me the need to find new ways to try and reach them. Every day they trusted me to come back and still like and respect them and not give up on them.

My High School has given me years of excitement in the classroom and the gym, on the stage and in the stadium. I have taught 22 years of wonderful AP classes that made almost every period a pure delight. I have worked along side many gifted and brilliant men and women. I loved this work because it promised these riches in some form each day. The highlights never stopped.

About 25 years ago I taught a young man named Joe in a Basic English senior class. Joe was a big, shy, shaggy, stumbling kid whose sweetness lay in his innate kindness and in his desire not to spend a life as a cashier at the local Quickie Mart. He had all the problems with writing and speaking skills one might expect from someone who had skated through high school on the basis of his smile and his work ethic.

However, he loved Health class where he discovered physiology and was fortunate enough to be taught by a good man (in this case, one of the best men I have ever known) who worked as the school's athletic trainer, and who recognized in Joe a gift for talking to athletes and for hard work. Joe became his assistant trainer. He encouraged him to take college boards, to apply to a local school that offered a degree in athletic training, and not to accept failure. Today Joe has his degree and is helping kids at a Berks County high school.

A solitary, uncertain young man, encouraged by a good teacher, changed his life through education. He became someone other than his original, narrow destiny would have allowed.

This is what I have learned in my bones in 36 years. Curriculums, testing, rubrics, outcomes, final projects -- the whole tidal wash of contemporary education, are only effective if they serve children through the hands, eyes, brains and hearts of humane, talented teachers, and good teachers teach not the child sitting in front of them, but who that child may become. We are at our best when we humbly remember that each one of these children who greet us each morning contains immaculate possibilities. One, three, ten years from our last sight of them, they can shimmer into women and men who do wonderful things no one could have foreseen. They can become someone like Joe.

Our job is to help children hone their skills and imaginations to a point where they can see their connection to a world wider than their towns, wider than the limitations that may have been imposed upon them. If we can do this, we can assist them in their best journey, the one where they travel away from dependence on circumstance and toward a self-reliance of which they can be proud.

These two quotations speak to my essential philosophy of teaching.

Everybody counts or nobody counts.

Harry Bosch (as created by Michael Connelly)

Michael Connelly is a mystery writer. His character of Harry Bosch, a homicide detective in LA, believes that every life taken away by a murderer is one that is beyond value, and thus his code must be to make amends for that life through apprehending the murderer; in this way he seeks to create at least an existential measure of justice.

Every student counts. Every kid matters, especially those who are the most difficult, the most challenging to your peace of mind (even those you do not like, the mean ones, the arrogant, deserve your best attempt to punch through their uglier personas to something

better underneath – leaps of faith are critical to doing good work). This belief is at heart a religious conviction – the child enters your classroom and becomes your responsibility to teach and to protect. We take lives onto our shoulders. We have a limited power based in our school circumstances and in our fallible selves to persuade groups of kids to change – to open up to a wider, more interesting world, to step away from their alienation, to become kinder individuals, to learn how to write, speak, calculate, make sense of formulas, understand other languages, step into other realms of being, read great books deeply. With that power comes the responsibility to do our best not to leave any behind. Some will drop away through our failures and theirs, but we have to try, always, and never give in to cheap cynicism or boredom.

Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.

Samuel Beckett

I do not believe that Beckett's quote is meant to recommend or evoke despair but the opposite, to foster a sustained hope based on realism.

Almost every day I left school I was aware of classes or exchanges with students or colleagues where I could have been more competent or adept or discerning or direct in my actions.

Every class is a performance, 5 or 6 times a day, 180 times a year, for which we are paid not to entertain but to persuade upwards of 30 kids per period to do something they may not wish to do. Failure is built into the fabric of the job. Either we learn how to fail or the daily round of disappointments will overwhelm us.

Beckett speaks to a fact of day-to-day life, but, I think, does so with great understanding of our forever fallible, screwed up selves. He does not imply that we should give up effort because we fail. Instead, he offers the hope of persistence, the strength of perseverance, the comic awareness of our natures. Our salvation as teachers lies in our understanding that we will fail more often than we succeed, but at the same time that we must never give up.

Take *Delight*

In chapter nine of **Moby Dick**, Father Mapple climbs into the pulpit and delivers his astonishing sermon on Jonah and the whale and salvation. The second to last paragraph is built on the peroration of the word *delight* as in “*Delight* is to him...” Melville uses the word ten times to have Mapple drive home the rewards of belief in and devotion to God. If you love literature, read even the last paragraph aloud and it will give you *delight*, the critical virtue one must possess to love teaching.

As teachers we often speak of “liking kids.” The term serves as a shorthand way of communicating our desire for the job as in “I like that kid” or a questioning appraisal of another as in “Does he like kids?” If we “like” them, I think we are really speaking of

delight, a far more descriptive word we can use to describe our devotion to and joy in the job.

We *delight* in our students' careless joy, their puppyish enthusiasms for the innocent and breezy enthusiasms of the moment, for their often breathless desire to do good, for their mischievousness, for their discoveries of a passion, for their examples of surprising courage, for their wonderful youth all brimming with an indefatigable promise.

Please, please, take *delight* in your students; it is the secret to a long career. It is the secret to your own replenishment.

Stoicism, flexibility, empathetic detachment, humility, curiosity, integrity, a consistent work ethic, intelligence: these are the critical qualities for any teacher.

Stoicism: When something goes wrong, suck it up (I am not referencing any kind of gross injustice; they must always be fought). Figure out what went wrong. Seek the advice of good, experienced teachers and/or administrators. Fix it as best you can within the confines of what is possible. Then move on. Too many other duties and concerns are always in the offing. Above all else, do not whine, do not bitch, and do not waste others' time with your empty whimpering. Be a mensch.

Flexibility is the capacity to adapt quickly and optimistically to the rush of changes that make up the daily and yearly experience of any teacher. Pay attention to this old truism – you cannot control many of the changes that overtake you, but you can control your reaction. Stay positive. Go to your good teacher friend, commiserate, and then together solve the newest problem. Go home, smile, and remember that you have a job that lets you work with kids most of the time. That is a blessing.

I began to notice a certain brittleness in my attitude toward teaching at the end of my 35th year. This brittleness takes the form of an increase in impatience, especially with adults (it did not affect my approach to my kids), and to patterns of bullshit in the flow of school rules, routines, same-old-same-old plans, etc. That told me that it was time to begin thinking seriously of retiring.

I have seen brittleness lead to cynicism and cynicism is the living zombie death of someone who still walks around in the guise of a teacher. You have to be hopeful to do this job well. You have to have a certain quality of faith that things can and will improve.

Empathetic Detachment: Some kids' stories, and at times, the overwhelming pain of their lives will break your heart, but you cannot continue to teach if day after day you are emotionally overcome.

You cannot do good work if you become too close to your students' pain. You will not be able to focus or function. Paradoxically, your empathy is essential as is your impersonal detachment from their deep hurt.

As I wrote elsewhere, you cannot control the broad circumstances of their lives or their actions or the consequences of those actions. Except under extreme circumstances, all you can do is attempt to persuade your students to make good choices. You can comfort them, and you can organize others to work in their best interests, and you can become an advocate for them, but you cannot protect them from misfortune.

Every day you have to teach many other students who also depend upon your skills and kindness. Therefore, you must step away. Let go. Robert Jordan in Hemingway's **For Whom the Bell Tolls** says that "each one does what he can." Do what you can, and remember that you have to do it for student after student, month after month after year. You must keep a good portion of your heart in reserve.

Humility: upon reading this, please reflect on this fact -- whoever you are as a teacher and wherever you teach, there are tens of thousands (hundreds of thousands?) who teach in similar classrooms in similar schools all over the nation. Do not allow yourself to become egotistical about your talents. Have you noticed that no matter how good they once were, the names of teachers fade? A wonderful teacher and the best coach I ever saw ran into me one afternoon. He had some business to do in the HS. He had retired 4 years previously. He said "I used to be a legend here. Now no one knows who I am." The same will be true of you and me. We do our work, and then we make room for others. That is as it should be. "Each one does what he can."

Curiosity: Keep your mind alive. Find a way to continually ask questions about...everything -- surgical procedures, how to tie a fly for trout fishing, New York City's anti-terrorist squad, how neurons work in the brain, why R.E. Lee gave the order for Pickett's charge at Gettysburg, the intelligence of crows. You get the idea. If you stop being curious, your teaching will suffer. Eventually, you will become one of those zombie cynics whose name kids dread ever seeing on their schedules.

Integrity: I do not think integrity is a shiny badge proclaiming our virtue, one never blemished, but only pure and virginal. It is a struggle to figure out where the lines are that separate what is the worst case from what is best for kids, from what is best for your Department, from what is best for the community of teachers to which you belong You get the picture. Integrity is hard won and learned by degrees. It is often patched up and dinged.

Eventually, I think you must learn these essentials: If you give your word to someone, keep it. Do not seek to appease those in power. Tell the truth as best you can without being cruel. Always keep the welfare of kids uppermost in your list of priorities as you ponder each important decision. Avoid lying. Avoid gossiping. Protect the weak. Protect kids. Work to stop an injustice. Avoid being a martyr. Do not complain.

Work very hard. If you want to be very good you must work seven days a week -- four nights (Monday through Thursday), and 6 to 10 hours on the weekend. There is no shortcut. It is a waste of your energy to try and find one. There is no way around that fact -- no secret bullet, no magic, no educational guru or fad with another answer. If you want

your kids to learn, you have to work harder than them. Teaching is a labor intensive business. If you do not commit yourself to work hard, you will be mediocre...at best.

Be responsible for your duties. Remember, you are serving kids, not making tires or pushing paper. Work hard for them and because it is the right thing to do. Talent is wonderful but hard work hones it.

You have to find as many ways as possible of maximizing your intellectual gifts. You have to get smarter as you get older. Learn from your mistakes, indulge your curiosity in everything, and find good teachers and watch them, ask them questions, carefully note the basis of their successes. Read. Read. Read. Take good grad classes. Read.

Rule #1

You are responsible, as much as chance and personal knowledge allows, to help keep your students safe.

In the most common scenario you are likely to encounter, that means taking care of students who come to you to tell you their stories. If a student approaches you, one who is obviously upset, ask him or her this question first: Are you physically safe? Or, if the situation requires it: Is your friend physically safe?

If you receive an answer of No to either of those questions, then you are bound by law and moral decency to take that student to a counselor or a principal and see to it that he or she is protected.

Unless you have training as a counselor, do not attempt to handle these cases yourself. If you do so, you are potentially putting the student and yourself in harm's way.

On administrators

Good administrators are gifts to a district. Good vice principals and principals and assistant superintendents and superintendants are in positions to make the lives of kids and parents and teachers not just marginally better but better by multiple powers of effect. Teachers wield micro power. These administrators can wield macro power. Imagine all of the information that passes through their hands on a daily basis, all of their contacts with the muckety-mucks of the district and the State, all of the decisions they must make that directly and immediately change the lives of thousands. That power, channeled by time, resources and circumstance, and then funneled through character, can shift the axis of a community.

If you are lucky, you will have some of these in your teaching life – fallible men and women with good hearts who also struggle equally hard every day to square the circle.

I have been lucky. The majority of administrators, both principals and central office staff, with whom I have worked have been deeply humane, funny, very bright, respectful of

others, hard working and competent. I will treasure one man especially, Bill Faulkner, principal of my HS for 17 years when I was in my most formative stages of learning my craft. His patient efforts over that time span helped lift us from a rural, underperforming HS into a solid academic institution.

In working with them, teachers have to make the same empathetic leaps that they make with kids. We cannot make decisions about administrators based on ideology. That is always stupid and almost always just plain misinformed. Those teachers I have known who have lockstep judged administrators based on their position have also been quick to judge and condemn kids and fellow teachers. Arrogance is not a trait that can be compartmentalized.

You can work with good administrators. Try following these simple rules and your relationships with them should be fruitful:

Do not surprise them with bad news. For example, your principal walks into a parent conference you asked her to attend because you are dealing with a volatile whack-job dad. You feel better knowing she is there to defuse confrontations and, if necessary, to defend your integrity and competence. Umm . . . , however, it had slipped your mind to tell your principal that you are way behind in your grading in the child's class and that you had written a question, as a comment, on one of her essays that asked *if she had brain damage because what she had written was so dimwitted that only someone who had had a serious fall on her head could have written it.* **That** ___ constitutes___ a___ surprise. You deserve the ass-kicking that will inevitably come your way. Mess with the bull, you get the horns.

Do not betray them. Let's say that they have treated you well and kids and other teachers with respect and kindness. You owe them loyalty. They have a bad day or make a bad decision or they have a bad week – none of that makes them villains. Forgiveness and empathy go both ways. If you think you could handle the situations more competently, jump in, offer suggestions, offer a hand, but do not sneer.

Do your job. Administrators do not like anybody who is a pain-in-the-ass (*pain-in-the-ass* can become a consistent condition of character, sort-of-like an illness. Its symptoms are avalanches of complaints, incompetence, a bludgeoning, relentless personality and "Trouble with a capital T", always and forever "right here in River City". Avoid this condition as if it were the Egyptian plague). Therefore, work hard in your job, go to your duties and meetings, use common sense in your dealings with parents and kids and other teachers, smile, be pleasant, occasionally ask how your bosses are doing, tell them the truth, and work with them as part of a team. If you suspect that you have acquired the *disease*, do not despair. There is hope. Disappear into your job. As best you can, work out your problems yourself. Go quietly into each good day. Over time, you can resurrect a reputation, sooner than you imagine.

Bad administrators are a wholly different species. Just as good administrators can do much good, these people have the power to inflict grievous harm on individuals, on their schools, and on the reputation of a district.

The worst break down into three categories: the first -- tyrannical, dishonest incompetents who, bunkered in their small, dark offices send out their commands through e-mail or through disgruntled vice-principals (as unhappy with their boss as we are, maybe more so) and wield power capriciously and sometimes brutally. They generally lash out without thinking; they often operate out of fear. They are capable of deep dishonesty and unmindful of personally affronting others. If they are male, female staff should be on guard. Behind their pinched faces they think only of how they can protect their own small thrones. Those individuals must be opposed. There is no choice. Working ethically and as a staff, do what is necessary. Respond to bullying collectively. Go public collectively. Few districts want to be brought before the public bar in this kind of situation. Generally, they will take the necessary steps to remove the person. If that does not occur, then you have to go to the community through coffee-klatches, newspaper articles, etc. If the administrator has been hostile and a bully with teachers, you can be assured that he has also made enemies with his attitude in the larger population. Remember though, act collectively -- no cowboy John Wayne heroics.

The second type are those who are a mixture of arrogance and competence. They can be intimidating. They are often bright. They are smart enough to build alliances with the powerful – superintendents, board members, etc. However, they have the social skills of thin-skinned hermits. They generally see every disagreement as an attack and therefore every dissent must be crushed. They wear out their welcome quickly; they ruin alliances with teachers that may have been helpful to them.

Under their brand of leadership, their staffs operate in an alternate reality. They close their doors and retreat into their classes. They talk among themselves of the day of liberation. They subvert whatever they can of their leader's directives. They endure.

When these kinds of principals move on, they leave a shell-shocked staff in their wake.

The third kind are the decent human beings who are woefully, haplessly, incompetent. It is as if Chico Marx has taken over the leadership of your building. They do not have dark hearts, but they will screw up vital areas of building management so badly that they will be gone sooner than the other two.

On being a department chair

We are neither fish nor fowl, teacher alone nor mini-me administrator. We work in a grey zone. That works to our advantage. We do not have the power to supervise teachers, and thus we are not caught in the cross-fire that sometimes damages relationships between teachers and bosses. We often serve as liaisons between principals and our fellow teachers. We can carry messages from principals that they may not wish to speak aloud in the presence of witnesses. We can deliver a message to principals in private that we could

never speak aloud in front of others. We have to be trustworthy. You will only be effective in this position over time if most of those from all parts of the district population – parents, other administrators and other teachers trust you.

Department Chairs have more of a voice than other teachers but have to be wise in how they use it. Having the time and access to be able to persuade someone with real power is an invaluable asset, but you have to combine that access with personal qualities of discretion, honesty and a feel for when to argue and when to hold your tongue.

However, never allow an administrator to place you in a position where you have to deliver a reprimand to a fellow teacher. You are not a supervisor. Doing this specific task has the potential to alienate your entire department. When I had much less experience, I did just this, and it blew up all around me. Administrators must deliver such news themselves.

You need to be able to work within a budget, make dollars stretch, create teacher schedules without alienating your department or taking unfair advantage of your responsibility to do so. You will have to attend many, many meetings, some of which will be so dull as to cause you to bark at the moon, but some of those get-togethers will be vital to kids and your members' interests. Therefore, you must attend them all.

You will have to find a way to keep the ideal of students staking first claim to our loyalties at the forefront of your decision making. It will not be easy. There will be all kinds of conflicting claims as to what is right. Use your common sense, act ethically, and when in doubt, wait. The number of problems that solve themselves without your active intervention may surprise you.

Keep this in mind about your department colleagues (and other members of your staff): unless they are so incompetent and personally awful and thus utterly beyond saving, each one brings something good to his or her students. One may sponsor a play, another coach, another spend long hours tutoring kids after school, another serve ably in faculty governance, another have a way with the hard-to-teach kids, etc. "Each one does what he can." Be thankful for what they do well, and as much as you can, help them to improve.

Finally, this is a job that requires a keen 'emotional intelligence'. You have to be able to read your teachers and, to a point, be sympathetic to their troubles. They are as fallible as you, and some will have more troubles than you, and all of them walk into classrooms full of kids every day. You have to find ways to help their stay in those classrooms be as fruitful as can be, for the sake of those kids.

On teachers

Roger Breidinger should be remembered. In my first year, he was already a veteran with 12 years experience teaching social studies. I have never watched a better teacher in action. I think the secret question at the heart of our craft is this: how do we persuade adolescents to do what we want them to do when they do not want to do it? Roger was

the master at getting kids to do ... anything. He had the patience of a goldsmith. Always calm, he would reason with students, cajole them, make requests of them, whisper to, smile, and make funny faces at them until they, smiling, did as he had asked. He possessed the most remarkable skills of persuasion.

Early on I shared cafeteria duty with him, and I studied him in his dealings with many, many kids in a quasi-chaotic environment. See this: three hundred teenagers packed into a dingy 100 yard long rectangle. Tables jammed to capacity. The potential for conflicts everywhere. Three or four of us wandering, standing guard, signing passes, hawk-eying for the potential signs of a fist-fight, food-fight, eruption. Rookie me, looking as if I were 12 year's old and should be out calling for Lassie and not under the predatory eyes of seniors and my colleague's measuring gaze, had to wade into that chaos.

Roger moved among them with ease. He paused often, touching a shoulder lightly here, laughing with a table there, always moving, never a stationary presence, always looking to disrupt a problem before it blossomed, never being predictable in his movements, representing a sense of calm and order through his attentiveness and smile. He missed nothing. He defused fights before they could start. He asked kids to clean up in such a funny, polite way that their hackles never rose, and they laughed with him as they both helped carry their trash to the cans.

I heard stories about his classroom. The time he allowed one class to decorate a Christmas tree...upside down...hanging from the ceiling. The games he played that left his students in absolute command of facts, times, and figures from whatever realm of history they were studying.

His class was a rite of passage for our HS students for 31 years.

He was a big man, and he once confessed shamefully to slapping a student across the mouth in the early 60's when such tactics were accepted, but he then became a man of such extraordinary kindness and decency that you sometimes came away from a conversation with him feeling as if your faith in all human beings had been restored.

Roger, along with Bill Faulkner, a principal, and Stan Miller, Ron Pearson and Ev Lawrence, Sheila Bennetch-Hardin and Joe Edwards are other teachers who should be remembered somewhere by grateful adults. These individuals became the models I looked to to help create my own school personas.

Find teachers at your school who embody qualities of excellence. Speak to them. Ask them *how* and *why* and *when* and *under what circumstances* and *what then* and every type of question you can imagine. Do not let them shuffle off in silence. They will want to talk to you. Save their institutional knowledge by making it part of your evolving classroom selves.

And then, also, observe the bad ones. You will know who they are quickly enough. Every school has its guerilla communication network where teachers tell the truth to those they trust. Observe what makes bad teachers bad and resolve not to copy their qualities.

The bad ones are remarkably few in number, but they do enormous damage to kids and to the reputation of all teachers in a specific community. The profession has to find a way to move them out of their classrooms quickly (a lot sooner than one year as a recent proposal suggested).

Teaching is a labor intensive job. Doing it well at the high school level requires one-on-one conferencing, sensitivity, not to 120 kids, but to 120 individuals, hours and hours of work at home and a steady growth in technical efficiency and flexibility. Those demands can wear down a person's work ethic. When that happens, when the work ethic begins to go, that is when a teacher's skills begin to decline. That is when mediocrity becomes the new norm in that person's classroom. If a district wants to make a great leap forward in ensuring that its children are receiving the best education, it should sit its smart people down and take on this problem.

Collectively, teachers can be too prideful and provincial in their view of themselves. The insulation of our classrooms can lead us to a blinkered point-of-view. There are hundreds of occupations whose participants work as hard as or harder than us. As often as possible we should get outside of our schools and speak to our neighbors about their lives, their jobs, their routines and their stresses. We are not saints and nor do we deserve special dispensations. We have to earn respect for our occupation. No occupation should believe itself entitled.

Teachers can be the worst of audiences, they can nit-pick with the best, they can whine and be cynical, but along with cops, they are the best of people with whom to spend a career. They are among the funniest creatures on the planet. Who else spends so much time in daily, intimate contact with the human comedy? They are generous, tough-minded, empathetic, direct and profane and polite, and when the fire is racing everywhere in one's life, they are loyal. Good teachers make you believe that we might actually have a future as a species. With the exception of family, many teachers I have known have been the best source of grace and wisdom; they have brought their strength of character and brilliance to bear upon their students. They made (and still make) their kids better persons for having taught them.

Love what you do.

By love I mean devotion. By love I mean that we must give a good portion of ourselves to working with kids. I do not think someone can teach kids at his or her best without a certain zeal or sense of sacrifice or passion or a desire to improve.

You will have bad days. You will have to exercise self-discipline some mornings to get out of bed, to sit down some nights and grade essays, to make parent phone calls, to sit through one more interminable meeting. As with any job, you will be required to do things that you do not want to do.

However, our great advantage, the trump card of our profession, is that we get to work with kids who are perpetual fountains of youth.

I think good teachers stay a little younger than their counterparts in other occupations because we spend a good part of our day laughing, kidding, being amazed by and living in the collective consciousnesses of 15 to 18 year olds whose vibrancy and energy can temporarily repeal how our own age feels. This opportunity is a privilege and a delight.

Elementary teachers have it right – teach the student your material. Do not teach your material to students. The child comes first.

Years ago a wise elementary school principal told me that secondary teachers should learn one essential lesson from elementary teachers: teach the child your material. Do not teach your material to the child.

The first approach emphasizes the student as a human being. The second approach embraces the primacy of the content.

The first approach assumes a flexibility of instruction – find ways to try to break through to every student.

The second approach tends towards the inhuman tyranny of facts, concepts, formulas, etc. Human weakness and mistakes are made subordinate to the subject.

No misunderstandings here – I am not encouraging a weak-kneed style that allows for laziness. Kids must work hard. They must be held accountable for the results of fair assessments. They must be encouraged to struggle to understand and achieve.

But they are also kids and therefore struggling with a wealth of anxieties. Their hearts are often in turmoil. Do you remember what you were like as a 16 year old? Keep those memories fresh in your mind whenever you are making decisions for them. Remember this as well – how thankful you were when a teacher offered you moments of kindness and consideration. Do the same.

Compassion is not weakness.

There is one rule which should be inviolable – a student’s health, whether physical or emotional, comes first.

Never break that rule.

When the worst does happen, when a student dies, then your job, as much as it lies within the ethical confines of teaching, is to help keep the rest of your kids safe, and to purposely, clearly and often remind them that every one of their lives is valuable beyond any reckoning. Tell them the truth, always, but temper your telling with sensitivity. Try to read their hearts in their faces. What T. S. Eliot said is accurate – we can only bear so much reality at a time.

Your class is not the most important 45 minutes in your students’ lives.

My identity deeply depended upon my occupation as a teacher, and thus upon how I performed in my 5 classes a day. A bad day’s work in my classes led to an evening spent trying to figure out what had gone wrong and how I might correct it the next day.

Essentially, during the school year, my job was my life, and aside from the health and safety of those I loved, my most important daily event.

It does not work this way for kids. Nor should it. They juggle 6 or 7 classes a day, worries about friends and parents, a job (more than likely), and other extra-curricular pursuits. Their hormones are white-hot. In a sense, they are all a little mad. Do you remember what this felt like? Your class is but one fragment in their schedule. That fact should humble us and make us try harder to make it memorable and perhaps even a moment of light in their day.

Arrange your classroom so that you can control the space and so that you can be close enough to students to create a sense of community and intimacy.

This is a community you are creating out of an assortment of kids who have been scheduled into your room. Every class presents a singular face, a singular chemistry. You have to make it whole.

The geography of your classroom matters. It requires a thoughtful analysis based on your classroom personas (you have more than one), your classroom management skills, your strength and flexibility of voice, and your primary definition of a teacher's role (for example, mine was performer, direct guide and driver).

I set up my classroom so that I was at the physical crossroads of students' eyes and so that a performance space opened up. Imagine an amphitheater; I stood at stage center, mid-front.

I was a dedicated believer in this maxim: Students must look at me to have a chance of learning (or whoever is performing/speaking – very often it was one of their classmates). If I can see their eyes, I can make a judgment as to whether they are focused, understanding, daydreaming. Of course, my judgment about their focus might be wrong. Kids are adept at disguising their attention and appearing sincerely interested when they are far far away...but, I have at least given myself a better chance to keep their attention just based on an arrangement of desks.

Order in the classroom is the first prerequisite for learning to be able to occur. Rude and disordered classrooms destroy everything – any chance of teaching well, any chance of kids learning what you are designated to teach, kids' respect for you and finally your peace of mind. If you have been in a class that is out-of-control as a student, your vision of Hell is being in the position of teacher.

Therefore, you must dominate that room, you must be the benevolent King or Queen, you must be Kong. You must do this without appearing petty, insecure, ferocious, mean, or on a power-trip. You cannot rule by detention or brawn (although size can matter) or sarcasm or intimidation. You must gain the permission of the ruled, of your kids. On day one they enter a room where all attention is to come to you. Before you say a word you have sent a message. They are not facing each other; they are facing you.

Do something every day that helps to build that sense of community.

Here is a yearly scenario:

One the first day of class, 30 kids walk into your room. Many know each other, but they immediately migrate to familiar faces. They chat, look around the room, check out who else is in the class, and look at you out of the corners of their eyes.

Do not chatter with them. Watch them. Let them see you watching them. Your silence will eventually work to draw their attention once class begins. Stand silently at the front and center of your room. Sweep your eyes over the class. Look at them. You should be the last to speak.

This is how you begin to build a community out of the disparate parts of cliques and loners who have now assembled and are sitting and staring at you and measuring you and making their first judgments of you.

Every successful class has to have a center. That should be you. Not a center in any ego-maniacal way, but a center of attention and authority as is necessary for the completion of the duties and tasks of this work.

Every day try to find a way to get them to respond as a group – either to listen to each other or to all complete theatrical style warm-ups (that you must have the confidence to lead).

Three examples:

For the first 7 to 10 days of class, my kids did a 30 second to one minute warm up together. I demonstrated. I role-played. I then encouraged them to do the same. They could hide in numbers. No one was looking at them alone. I became the fool, the puppet, the cheerleader. They began to laugh together. That is critical. The warm-up's continued off and on as needed to wake them up or focus them or prepare for the teaching of plays. Every Monday, I took five to ten minutes at the beginning of class to do *Weekend Stories*. Kids volunteered and told their stories of their own mishaps, foolishness, adventures, triumphs. Give them a space and time where they can speak of their lives and they will respond.

On some Fridays, I took the last three to five minutes to ask them to complete these clauses: Either “This stinks!” or “I Love....”

More students will learn more if they find your classroom a safe, welcoming place where their individual experience is valued, where they can laugh freely, where they are treated with respect and where they feel a part of something larger that is good.

A side note about comfort and treats:

Kids need comfort and treats: You need to give them. Buy bandaids -- *Spider Man*, colors, *Scooby Do*, something appropriately goofy and cool. Give them out when one of

your students is scratched or just because he or she will enjoy a *Batman* on the arm for the day.

Keep throat lozenges, Kleenex, York mints, Hershey's Kisses and cheap wind-up toys readily available. You will keep more kids in your room. You will have inexpensive tools and little pleasures that you can use to brighten days.

A side note about community:

I chose to live in the same community in which I taught because I believed it was important to be intimately familiar with the atmosphere, problems and delights that helped to shape the children I saw each day. Additionally, every time I saw students or parents out of school, I had the opportunity to forge one more connection that could help me to reach them later in my classroom. I was fortunate to have found this very good place in which to build a career.

Make your classroom a good place.

Order comes first, but order does not mean sterility. It means a sense of pleasant calm and enough peace to do work. You want a lively classroom. You want neither Antietam nor Pyongyang. Everybody loses then. So, ahead of all other considerations, assert your control over your room.

You should be the moral center of the class. Do not allow put-downs. Do not encourage them. Do not put kids down yourself. Your classroom is not your personal third-world country over which to exert your tiny real-world power. Avoid sarcasm. Do not allow gossip about other kids or teachers. Confront cruelty. Protect the weak. Confront bullies. Blanche Dubois' retort to Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* has always impressed me as the most critical part of a coherent ethical vision: *Some things are not forgivable. Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion and the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty.* This is a good place to begin. Why try to improve Tennessee Williams?

You want kids to want to come to your class. Smile often. Say thank you often. Do not be miserable. Be energetic. Like them. Tell them the truth. Make sure you are fair in all your dealings with them. Do not preach to them. Always remember that they are a captive audience. Do you remember those blowhards from your own classroom history that created so_much_fury in you? Do not become them. When the time comes, when you have enough confidence, ask them to hold you accountable. You can begin this process in small ways; if they believe that you have not been fair, ask them to tell you so. Better yet, ask them if a decision has been fair. You have blind spots. Sometimes you will not know the appearance or effect of a decision unless you ask their opinion.

There is no room for overweening pride in the classroom. I taught in approximately one of 10,000 high schools in the country. Someone else has now taken take my place. Seventeen years ago, the best teacher I have ever known collapsed in the main office of

the High School and died within a few days without having regained consciousness. Since then he has been forgotten by all except for a few faculty members. This was not a dismal finding for me. It simply reinforced my approach to my teaching -- work hard each day. Never forget that I was once a student and what that felt like. Treat students with respect. Try to turn around a harsh word with kindness. Listen before speaking. Keep my many faults in mind. Always remember that these years do not last. Value the daily progression of the days. Teach with passion.

I leave the profession both exhausted and exhilarated. I have left a part of myself in my room, with my students and in my school with my friends. My fondest hope is that in this way my life will have counted for something.

Become a part of the wider community of your school.

Coach, direct a play, sponsor a club, become involved in student government, go to games and the musical and the prom – ok, you cannot do all of these, but you can do something to let your students and their parents know that you care about them outside of the classroom. The benefits you accrue can be impressive – a stronger, deeper rapport with a wider range of kids, their appreciation that you came to see them perform or that you worked with them on a project, additional insights into their personalities and thus more insights into how to reach them and teach them. When you step outside of the comfortable confines of your room, your controlled world, you will also stretch your skills. You will become a stronger teacher in your world by engaging the larger one.

Learn how to speak fluently. Your voice is your primary instrument of authority and persuasion.

You can lull a class, snap them to alertness, calm them, make them laugh, make them smile, cause them to weep, lock them into your message, mesmerize them,..... and put them to sleep (your worst case scenario) with the tone, volume, pitch and lilt of your voice. Do not take this medium for granted.

Bring your voice to bear in any and all parts of your lessons. It is among your most critical tools and therefore treat it like the valuable instrument it is. Drink water during the day, all day, several times during a class. Keep your vocal cords moist. Do not strain it needlessly or too often.

Use it to call to attention, create drama, correct someone memorably, and break up disputes (better to break up fights with your bellow for kids to STOP than throwing your body into the mix). Use it to evoke an emotional response from your kids through a measured progression of sentences and a clarity of enunciation matched with a sense of the rhythm of the English language (pauses and silences are as and sometimes more effective in doing this).

You should be able to speak extemporaneously in complete sentences and paragraphs with a minimum of interrupters – *um* or *uhh* or *you know* or the demonic *like*. You do not want to sound uneducated. Practice speaking well. Close the door and go through parts of

your explanations and lecture points. Do so as smoothly as possible. Familiarity with your material can help you speak more fluently.

Make time to reflect upon your craft.

Teaching, especially over the last 10 years or so, has become an intense race between preparation for each day, grading, standardized testing events, answering e-mail, the 1001 other school tasks that must be addressed, your family responsibilities, eating and sleep. There is very little time during the school year to think deeply about your methods and approaches, let alone your ever evolving teaching philosophy. Conversations with friends can help once you get the bitching out of the way. Jot down ideas, insights, and inspirational moments when they occur to you. Open your smart phone and record your ideas. Nail them on a post-it. Write enigmatic notes on the board, off to the side, as you teach. Find ways to remember. Obviously, summer, once you have just let go of the place for a while, gives you the opportunity to consider your successes and failures from the previous year. Make an effort to change a ½ dozen of your large or small habits each year. Avoid complacency and rigid patterns of behavior. The worst choice you can make is to do nothing. It is not a long trip from that kind of stasis to year after year of stagnation, duller and duller classes and a rising tide of dissatisfaction and ennui in you.

Know your material.

You have to know your content deeply and broadly. No excuses. If you do not know something, find out. If a student asks you a question and you do not know the answer, tell the truth, tell him or her that you will find out and then do so. You must cultivate your curiosity.

Rule #2:

You have to make the imaginative leap to your students' point-of-view on everything that concerns them -- their understanding of romance, friendship, cliques, rebelliousness, risk-taking, anxieties, families, popular culture and on and on. You must reach back to your adolescence and try to remember what it felt like to be 15, 16, 17, 18 -- the wild flights of passion, the most dismal low-of-lows, the frisson of being part of a group of friends driving through the night to someplace exciting, the ache of unrequited love, the misery of boredom. The last leap is especially important.

Imagine your classroom and your lessons, each one, from their perspective. If you were of an age, would you want to sit through your lessons? Would you want to spend time in your room?

Be honest with yourself. You aren't allowed to mouth blind teacher-pieties about "not all learning can be exciting", or "Kids just have to learn to pay attention to boring stuff." Yes, we all have to find a way to read IRS instructions or research mortgage rates and the fine prints of loans. Most of us learn to do that because we must.

Our kids will do the same when they must. Our job is to try and find ways to keep them engaged in our classrooms most of the time that we have them. We have an obligation to try to reach them with our passion so as to inspire them to be passionate. I say this with no exaggeration -- our classrooms should be places where they fall in love with characters, books, equations, Lincoln, WWII, French, anatomy, film, music, pictures of all kinds, sculptures, the stage, making cheesecake, whatever we are responsible for teaching them.

We do not want desiccated lessons, useless worksheets, classrooms that are tombs. We must be ruthlessly honest in our evaluation of our performance -- would you bore yourself if you were a student in your room?

If the answer is yes, make the changes. If you aren't sure how to make those changes, seek out the best teachers in your school and ask them.

Whatever you do, do not do nothing. For as long as you teach, you must constantly strive to imagine our plans anew.

On technology

Teachers must find ways to use technology, not as a substitute for the stimulation of the classroom, but as a way to give the lessons and passions of the classroom greater depth and breadth. We really do not have a choice in this. The world is too big, it moves at greater speed every day, whole dimensions and universes of information are created every month -- we must find ways to siphon it, shape its presentation, and align it with our daily teaching. Move aggressively to make it a part of your classroom while you still have the ability to control its function in your room.

Think of it this way: you are Da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man* (the very cool drawing that shows a long haired man within the confines of a circle. I think Da Vinci used it to show proportion). You are the center of your students' experience in the classroom, but extending from you, on the parameters of the circle, imagine a wealth of other experiences your students might tap into to further move them -- you tube sites, bookmarked articles, songs, oral histories, blogs, an ethereal world of wonderful sights and sounds and ideas.

That is where I draw the line. I believe that our classrooms must remain deeply humane. The human connection between teacher and student is essential. We are not Borg. We are not a collective. We are not a hive wired into a grid that carries orders directly into our nervous systems. Education should never be the soulless transfer of bits of information from a micro-chip to a brain. In teaching I think there is very little inspiration to be found on a screen alone. Inspiration is muscular, personal, revelatory, intimate. It requires a teacher in front of kids, telling a story, communicating his or her passion osmotically to all those eyes and ears and brains.

On standardized testing

I get the political reasoning behind the omnipresence of standardized testing. I get the anxiety felt by parents and politicians and many school officials about the quality of our children's education and thus the necessity to find an equitable way to measure that quality across districts and counties and states. I understand how some of this anxiety is an authentic response to the growing fear that our kids may not be able to find good jobs upon graduation, that our schools cannot prepare them for the new economy, that as a people we sense a decline in our nation's overall skills and competence.

However, we are spending more and more instructional minutes preparing students to take these across-the-board tests that have little (so little!) to actually do with what is required to be a smart, flexible, interesting, well educated 18 year old human being. Go to any metropolitan news web-site and you will find that across state after state we are teaching students how to take tests while we cut art and music and drama and phys. ed. while we raise class sizes, while we cut teachers, while we cut book expenditures and while we delay fixes to infrastructure. More test prep. Hour after hour, day after day. What awful places we are so often making of our classrooms. Instead of inspiration and joy, dull drill and a bleeding away of motivation. Instead of wonder, a terrible boredom.

The tests play into the always false metaphor that too many people rely upon when thinking about money and education -- the school as factory. You know how this metaphor works -- the public places X dollars into a school district. At the end of 12 years that district should produce students who can do A , B and C as well as X , Y and Z . If the students cannot perform up to a standard set by the state, then the school district must be to blame. Close the factory down. Throw out the management. Fire the employees. Bring in new technicians who can produce better *widget-students*.

Such reasoning is finally reductive. Its global view proceeds along these lines: everything in education can be measured. Everything can be quantified. Everything that happens in a classroom can be captured in a monetary formula. Our craft as teachers can be reduced to an equation. Everything that goes on in kids' lives and inside those blessed, wacky, lovely heads, can be reduced to a series of zeroes and ones. What horseshit.

I do not know the answers to all the concerns enunciated in the first paragraph, but I have faith in the ability of smart teachers and parents and administrators to work together to come up with better solutions than massive, disruptive, dehumanizing testing.

Some very smart people (individuals like Diane Ravitch) are awakening to the possibility that omnipresent standardized testing, proclaimed by sloganeering politicians as the way to make sense of public schools, might just be a very bad idea for everyone concerned.

Teaching Writing

Writing is the most critical skill to teach in the humanities and therefore in English. No other tool used by the humanities requires more depth of thought, more attention to detail, more focus on the micro (the sentence) and the macro (the piece of writing as a whole).

Becoming a good writer trains the student mind (and the teacher's) to examine and work to master the nuances of grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, sentence rhythm, word choice, the power of verbs and nouns, etc. In addition, the better writer you become, the better reader you can become.

Repetition is the soul of learning how to write. Your students have to write often. My students wrote volumes (my AP Literature and Composition students averaged 23 to 25 essays a year and some years went well beyond those numbers. My College Prep kids, between 15 and 20, my standard students, 12 to 15). The more they write, the more comfortable they became with the act itself and the more they learn how to see into the structures of their sentences and paragraphs and essays.

Of course, you have to grade all this. You will have to work like a Stankhanovite so as to push them to improve. Writing instruction is labor intensive.

Correct every error. Use a yellow highlighter to mark patterns of errors. Cut, combine and revise sentences so that there are multiple models of how to do so on their essays. Show them how to cut to the power of their sentences, to those strong verbs and nouns that form the basic skeletal structure of most good sentences. Cut most adverbs.

Write voluminous comments. Address those comments by name several times in each essay you grade, i.e. – “Melissa, Look carefully at this sentence revision. Do you see what I did?” Make your response to their writing personal in nature. Let them feel your interest in them as individuals. Using their name helps to establish that. Draw pictures on their essay -- stick figures, faces, tanks, whatever, will give them a jolt that will help them remember. Your comments are another part of your year-long conversation with each child. Be encouraging. Offer ideas. Be a presence. Remember also that you are writing these sentences on their paper. Writing lasts. Be smart. Be careful. Be proper.

Take time in class, especially early in the year, to go over examples of revision and common errors on the board. Teach to their weaknesses.

Clarity is the most important quality of good writing. It trumps everything else. I had my kids memorize this: *Clarity is my baby, clarity is my honey, clarity is my sweett thaaannng.*” Use any kind of actorly, active trick to drive home its importance.

When they leave high school, they should be able to write solidly argued analyses of literature and interesting, well-shaped narrative essays.

If they are analyzing, they need to take a stand. They need to be able to write good thesis statements that arguably, clearly and completely describe to the reader what they wish to develop and prove in their essay.

Strip down their introductory paragraphs to the thesis. Period. That is it. What need do they have to write lead-in's? Train them to get to the point. Two examples – one simpler, one complex:

*In **Macbeth** Shakespeare suggests that the consequences of taking power and ruling by murder are destructive of the spirit and soul of the ruler.*

*In **Hamlet** Shakespeare investigates the idea of the outcast as someone both tormented by his or her isolation and invigorated by it. This paradox plays itself out in a pattern of engagement and withdrawal – the protagonists work consciously to connect with others in hopes of renewal or in seeking allies in their quests. Ultimately, they embrace their outcast status and thus create a new persona, one better able to cope with the demands of their antagonists.*

I taught a patterned thesis – the preposition 'in', title, author, strong verb, thesis. The pattern gives them one less facet of the sentence that they need to think about; it gives them a way to focus on the critical part of their thesis -- what they will seek to prove.

Once the student has his or her thesis statement, he has the core of the entire essay on his paper. The thesis is like a fist. Open up each finger in the fist as you go through each section of the thesis and explain it. Referencing the Macbeth example – who takes power? Macbeth. How? He murders Duncan with Lady Macbeth's encouragement and willing help. How does he rule? The process continues.

You can teach them to build chains-of-thought in creating their argument by emphasizing questions and answers and questions based on answers until you can draw conclusions.

As you follow more of the thesis, paragraph succeeds paragraph in the body of the essay. The thesis should track their essay organization in a linear manner.

They have to know how to create an argument and use evidence from the text to support the argument. Therefore, they need to be able to consciously build chains-of-thought. You need to teach them how to think in chains-of-thought: how to start simply and then branch outward into complexity. They need to understand the surface of what they want to say and then go deeper. They need continual practice in going through the question and answer process that is the center of chains-of-thought.

Obviously, your teaching of literature needs to model this kind of thinking again and again.

Give them model after model (you should write these) that breaks down how they can put paragraphs together so that sentence leads into sentence and paragraph leads into paragraph. If you do not know how to do this, go to a good teacher in your department and ask him or her how to do it. You have to know what you are doing.

This is an example of such an approach:

The first stanza from D.H.Lawrence's 1918 poem "The Piano":

*Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.*

Begin to ask questions.

The speaker is listening to a woman singing to him "in the dusk".
Why is the woman singing "to me" (presumably to Lawrence)?
Why does he set the memory "in the dusk"?
Why does the speaker set himself "under the piano"?
Why the emphasis on the sound of the piano?
Why is he "pressing the ... feet of [his] mother..."?
What does the addition of her smile bring to the feeling of the speaker?

Students should answer those questions using their common sense, their own experience, the evidence of the text, especially as to how the whole image of these 4 lines suggests layers of emotions and ideas.

As they answer the questions, they build body paragraphs:

By presenting the woman as singing to him, the speaker immediately creates a sense of intimacy and privacy. She sings to him, not anyone else; there is something special about him that generates such a devotion on the part of the singer as to concentrate only on him. Singing "in the dusk" further increases that sense of privacy. Darkness blocks out all other distraction, and dusk, the beginning of darkness, hints that we are only at the beginning of the speaker's experience.

The speaker is drawn back into his past by this song and by this setting. He sees himself as a child "sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings...." By imagining himself as a child in this setting, the speaker immediately connects the reader to ideas of innocence and comfort. There are at least three layers of comfort here: first, the child sits beneath the piano, secure, private, enclosed by the piano's sheltering bulk; second, he is wrapped around by "the boom of the tingling strings" – the music surrounds him with an overwhelming sound at the same time as it tingles him, as it gives him a "stinging sensation of excitement" (American Historical Dictionary, 1347); third, he "presses" or holds tightly the "feet of a mother", the source of his joy. Note that he references "a mother", not the. The poem expands with the addition of that one word to encompass us, all of us who remember childhood moments with mothers who provided us with solace and safety. To cap off the nostalgic sense, his mother "smiles as she sings".

This is 264 words and 2 paragraphs on one 4 line stanza. Most of your students can do this or something close to this, especially if you can find ways to help them be patient. They cannot just want to be finished – that habit is a great enemy of good writing.

Writing on demand takes all the skills of analytic writing and compresses them into a limited period of performance. Panic and impatience are worse choices under this testing circumstance than uncertainty. They have to not rush. They can write many pages of good prose in a few minutes once they have a direction. Whatever their method, spider-web, list, etc., ask your writers to always plan before they begin writing sentences. Tell them not to worry about cross outs or arrows or other kinds of graphic revisions. Writing is a process of discovery. Let them discover and correct and shape as necessary. Just tell them that you need to be able to read their work. It has to be legible and clearly organized on the page.

In narrative essays I asked students to write about their lives. They generally are better writers in this form than the analytic form. We seem to naturally feel how the idea of a story works and should proceed. Therefore, their grades are usually stronger for these essays.

If you begin with the assumption that we make discoveries about our topic as we write (this seems demonstrably true to me), then one way to present this kind of writing to your kids is as part of an on-going process of exploration. Assure them that you are not interested in having them bare their souls to you. Speak to them honestly about privacy and your boundaries on subject matter and language.

Their stories are as precious as yours. Robert Coles in **The Call of Stories** believed that stories are central to our understanding of our lives and how we fit into the lives of others. Therefore, allow them to tell their stories but then compel them to reflect upon the meaning(s) of what they have written. Push them toward discovery.

Grading: My students received an initial *Style Sheet* that described the governing rubric and the writing skills for which they would be held responsible. I found Dr. Jay Parini's book **The Art of Teaching** an invaluable resource in many areas of my evolving style but especially in putting together this rubric. If you have to read one book on how to teach, read this one. This is a portion of what I provided them.

Rubric:

An **A** = essays that possess clarity and freshness of thought, some originality and depth of thought about the subject; it is well-organized and well argued/described, virtually free of grammar, spelling and punctuation errors. These essays are a pleasure to read. The writer has achieved a distinctive voice.

A **B** = strong, well-organized essays that possess a decent standard of clarity and intellectual substance. It is good but not great. There may be sprinklings of mechanical errors, some clichés, etc.

A **C** = mediocre writing, sloppily organized and presented. Little or no original thought. Obvious, shallow arguments. Perhaps more than a sprinkling of mechanical errors.

A **D** = weak writing on every level – organizationally, ideas/arguments/descriptions, mechanically, etc.

An **F** = a disaster on every level that indicates a lack of effort to think, be clear or even care about one's work. Plagiarism and cheating will always earn an F.

Shadings within an A, B, C, and so on – an 85 or a 74 or a 94 etc., were based upon my impressions of where within that A, B, C, etc. the essay belonged. For example, is it a strong B or a weak B as measured by the narrative description of that letter within the rubric?

Students received this additional narrative description of good writing:

Sound essay organization: The argument progresses through logical, detailed assertions that make use of supporting examples from the text. Sentence flows into sentence and paragraph flows into paragraph. Strong transitions create a sense of essay unity.

Clarity: Precise, error free language arranged in sentences that are interesting, show variety and contain no ambiguity of meaning. **Clarity of expression trumps every other standard of quality writing.**

Depth of Thought: Explore your ideas thoughtfully *and at length*. Avoid repetition.

Originality of Thought: Writing that shows insights peculiar to the writer and which concentrates on connections he or she has made.

Eloquence: A mature, aesthetically pleasing style combined with originality and depth of thought, and clarity and precision in organization.

I asked students to avoid lapses in diction, syntax and organization. Consistent grammar, spelling and punctuation errors could destroy their essay. I emphasized the need for them to work at their writing. They have to care about what they put down on paper. They had to understand that once it left their hands, no further explanation concerning what they meant or how they meant to say it was possible.

I asked them to avoid writing in generalities and thus inadequately explaining their ideas. Especially avoid the word “**different**”; it is often a sure-fire giveaway that the student does not have an idea in his head.

Finally they needed to avoid wandering from the precise parameters of the assignments. Rarely let them ramble.

All those essays: Years ago I took a grad course at Montana State University, *Literature and the Wilderness* (the best grad course I ever took). As part of the course we climbed a high peak in the Bear Tooth Wilderness, one of several we climbed during the month+ I was in Montana. Never having been in the Rockies before and thus never having climbed 10,000+ foot mountains, I did not understand the landscape anomaly known as ‘false peaks’. Climbing higher and higher, saddleback to saddleback, you lose sight of the peak itself. It is often hidden by other rises. Thus you begin to see false summits, and just

when you think you will be able to rest and gaze out into all those other mountains, that peak turns into yet another saddleback. You have more terrain to struggle over, more talus and scrambling and rock faces to attack. Thus I learned to think only of the journey and not its end. I learned that the journey is the joy, the ascent, the whole point. Resting atop the mountain is a reward but not the deeper joy of the experience.

The same holds true of all those essays you grade in a year. Forget about finishing the section or stack. Work steadily. Immerse yourself in the experience. As *Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi* describes it, immerse yourself in the *flow* of the job. Work in the purely present. Few tasks in teaching have the power to so focus your attention as grading essays. Few tasks so focused my attention as working my way up a cliff face at 10,000 feet. There was no past or future, just the wonderful, wonderful *now*. Sentence by sentence, essay by essay, you can rest away from other anxieties. The child's paragraphs and ideas receive all of your attention; to a point, you "can rest in the grace" of the moment. Essay by essay, you treat yourself and the child's work to a pure form of the present. Lovely.

Teaching literature

Stories, in the lengthier, more sophisticated sense, are at the center of how to approach literature with your students.

Kids love stories. You may have classes filled with students who do not read, who will boast of not having read anything except Spark Notes, ever, but they will devour a story well told. They love stories' narrative magnetism, their imagery, and their connectedness to their own lives and imaginations. You can use stories that you tell to set up the stories you wish them to read. For example, you're beginning the novel **Fallen Angels** by Walter dean Myers with a ninth grade class. They were born decades after the end of the Vietnam War. They know nothing of it except some black and white news footage and a few hours in social studies class. You, however, probably know some vets of that war, prime sources of what it felt like to be on the ground in that place, in that time. You have read (I hope) **The Things They Carried** or **Matterhorn** or **Fields of Fire** or **We Were Soldiers Once and Young** and have seen any of the well-made video histories of that conflict. You have the interest and motivation and the curiosity to tell stories about Vietnam that will register as authentic with your classes. Authenticity is the critical quality for kids. They will want to know if the stories are true. You have done the research. You have crafted the stories. You should be able to answer yes and then use those images and sense of drama you have implanted into them as a segue to **Fallen Angels**. You will have begun to take them into the patrols, the stink, the fatigue, the bouts of terror and courage, the *realness* of the experience. You will have primed their imaginations to see.

On a brief side note – tell your stories to your classes. Not as time-wasters, not as tangents, not as exercises in bullshit, but as a way for them to come to know you. You will ask them to write narrative essays which will contain stories from their lives. Reciprocate. Be judicious in your choice of stories. Be wise in their choice. Make sure

they teach something of value – how to laugh at yourself, how you too were once a blind man in some of your choices, how to rise up from defeat, how to fight against cruelty, what loss feels like, how to value the great joy of the body in movement.

We need to teach our students to think deeply and broadly about the books and plays and poems we present to them.

We need to show how those pieces connect to their lives.

Those two goals are essential. Every other goal pales in comparison.

We want our students to have the skills necessary to see into and past the language of literature and therefore into its foundations, into the springs that keep it fresh for us. We have to show them how to move into the language and the story and the characters. One way to do this is to “make it flesh.” In other words, make the language concrete. Step into the image. Take it out of the abstract. While doing so, connect it to their lives. You can achieve this through role-playing, stories, demonstrations, drawings – any vehicle that helps you make the work real to the class. You must model this again and again and again.

The most intense part of this kind of work almost always involved a question and answer session with me. I want them to be able to think through challenges logically and methodically and thus build chains of cause and effect analysis. For example, if we are working on poetry, I will select an image from a poem we have read and push them to 'step inside' the image. They do so by first seeing the image clearly, by imagining it as a part of their own experience. When we do poetry, I want them to see and feel first.

A case in point -- T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" opens with "Let us go then, you and I, / when the evening is spread out against the sky / like a patient etherized upon the table..." They read the lines aloud. They try to literally 'see' such a sky, such an end of the day, and then they try to connect to the speaker's emotional response to the sky. I ask them what we can learn about the psychological make-up of Prufrock from such a response? Then we push into the image. Who is going? Why "us?" What does that first person plural pronoun automatically do to our experience of Prufrock's condition? Why a "patient?" What do we know about patients, both denotatively and connotatively? What may be happening to this "patient?" What do we know about "etherized?" As a class we try to put the whole image together and synthesize their sight and emotion and analysis and thus produce conclusions. Throughout all of this I am moving around the classroom, in back of students, leaning on their desks, concentrating on one, addressing many, working the class so that they must constantly refocus, so that they cannot remain passive.

Another example: Hamlet begins his first soliloquy with these lines: “O that this too too sullied flesh should melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew....” Now help them build chains-of-thought.

Get up in front of your class. Spread your arms. Tell your kids to follow the verbs (always the first way into Shakespeare's unfamiliar language). Ask your kids to visualize your

flesh melting off your bones. How does it melt? It drips and flops and slops. Where does it go? Onto the floor. What does it look like? Goo. What happens next? It becomes liquid. Now see this image – a column of bones is left with no flesh to hold it together. What happens? The bones collapse. Then what? It thaws. What does that look like? It becomes liquid. Next? It resolves itself into a dew. Which means? It evaporates. What have you just described? The evaporation cycle. Now, draw a conclusion. Hamlet wishes to...disappear. He wants to die...no...he wants to be obliterated; he wants the purest essence of nothingness. The pain he feels because of the death of his father and his despicable uncle's marriage to his mother (whom he describes as less than a beast) has brought him so much emotional pain, so much psychic suffering, that he yearns for oblivion.

Now how do you connect this to their lives, the second of the two critical goals? The adolescents who are your audience know all about sadness and angst and embarrassment and despair. They know all about *yearning to disappear* from a dance, from a date, from a party, from the cafeteria, the Prom, the bus, their parents' gaze, their teachers' presence. They know all about deep, spine bending emotional pain and how wonderful it would be to just let all...that...pain...go. Do you remember what it felt like to be 18? Do you remember your stories about your desire for all kinds of voids? Do you remember your 18 year old desires? Go back. Tell them. Use your stories to show them how their feelings and their stories are referenced and even contained in the layers of Hamlet's words and images and experiences.

Literature does not matter if we cannot link our kids' sensibilities and deepest experiences and emotions to it. Harold Bloom speaks of reading as a way of coming to know our deepest selves. We enter the consciousnesses of Hamlet and Cordelia, Iago and Othello, Ahab and Robert Jordan, Caddy Compson and Jane Eyre and Inman and Swede Levov and Ree Dolly and in solitude we come to see how they are like us and how they are alien. This is reading's critical event, these revelations, and we want to open that event to our students – that our deep experience as readers has and does forever replenish our lives through the lives of characters.

Shakespeare: read him aloud. Ask your students to act the parts. Tell them that the only sin is the sin of monotone. Show them how to use his verbs and nouns as the entrance to understanding his sentences and images. Take parts yourself. You must model, and you must be an engine at least powerful enough to start them up. Stick to the plays that have lots of action (fights and blood work well). The flow and speed of the class are important. They do not have to analyze every glance or 'methinks'. Let them acquire comfort with the language. Ask them to memorize lines – 10, 15, 25, more. Get some Shakespeare into their heads (and some poetry and some Melville, etc. I was a great believer in memorization).

P.S. Please, try to avoid using worksheets. More often than not their use encourages cheating. They do not inspire kids to read but instead stifle such interest. They deaden literature by reducing it to a series of desiccated exercises; they destroy its soul. On the part of a teacher their repeated use over time can be the mark of laziness and mediocrity.

On Cheating

Do not take it personally. Doing so will only cloud your judgment. As much as possible, avoid punitive responses. Neither be a bleeding-heart sucker nor a villain.

Try to make the situation one in which the student might learn something of value. For example, have the student re-do the assessment for a lower grade. Do not emphasize your anger at him or her, but instead your disappointment. Remember that he probably wants you to think well of him. Use that leverage.

The Net has made it easier than ever to fool us. We have spoken to our classes so many times about cheating that our kids can mimic our voices and speech patterns as to how we deliver the news. If you do not think that is the case, ask them to do so.

So why not try this approach: ask your kids about cheating. Ask them to think about it as opposed to you just telling them that it is bad, that the consequences are severe, that they will be thrown out of college. They have heard that lecture a dozen times. They have stopped listening.

When our students cheat, some may do so out of expedience- they find it easy, convenient, and altogether simpler to do so. They cheat without forethought: "Can I have your homework from last night?" They cheat out of desperation. They lack subject knowledge or skills. They feel the pressure of time. They cheat because they believe it will give them a competitive advantage.

Some few cheat because they are amoral; they just do not care about the right or wrong of the act. These are the inveterate cheaters. These are the same few individuals who will lie and be cruel and game every rule and generally make a tiny part of your life difficult. No matter what you say, these individuals will do the deed.

Our moral codes evolve. Do you remember actions you took in 6th or 7th grade that you would never have committed as a senior in high school? With maturity and experience and wisdom we acquire an ethical self. We construct an honor code. Can you look back on your high school years and see the moral pivot points where you understood right and wrong more deeply and personally?

Over a pretty compressed period of time I think that we and thus kids adopt these kinds of moral commonalities: our 'word' becomes a mark of our integrity as in "I give you my word that I will do x." We avoid lying. We more consciously oppose cruelty. We learn to more ably resist temptation. We acquire integrity. Maybe trying to help our kids to acquire these virtues through our speaking with them on cheating (and other ethical issues) will produce better results than more lectures, more threats, more yadda yadda.

However you choose to handle it, do not become a lunatic. More than likely all your display of temper will do is blow up a situation and bring in parents and the administration. Handle these situations quietly. Cheating does not make a kid a beast. Forgive but remember, and in most cases, keep it within the confines of your classroom.

Teaching smart kids

Accept this first -- most of them are smarter than us. They will have higher IQ's and a quicker path to understanding than we will. However, we will (should) have read more, and we will certainly have figured out more about how to live than they will have. Keep those advantages in mind. They should give you confidence, and with Honors and AP kids, confidence is the magic 'open sesame.'

Some pointers: they have acute observational skills. They can use those skills in cutting ways. Thus, you must possess a measure of confidence to teach them.

They have high expectations of themselves and they are, by and large, internally motivated. Their engines rarely rest. Therefore they will have high expectations of you. In a teacher they most value fairness, a reasoned approach to decisions (take the time to explain your decisions to them), hard work, a willingness to occasionally wander away from a strict curriculum (hit teachable moments hard), a sense of humor (a self-deprecating sense of humor is best) and competence. Do not try to pretend that you know everything. They do not expect you to be infallible. Say you don't know and then find out.

They are a delight to teach and to speak with, but you will have to consistently work very hard to stay a step ahead.

Teaching difficult classes

We had a program for the non-college bound that we called MAC, standing for Making a Connection (the best program of its type within which I was ever privileged to teach). In one tenth grade class we walked down to a copse of trees, about two acres worth, on the edge of school property. We were going to build a nature trail. We were trying a hands-on unit that tied in with what we had been reading. One boy dropped to his knee and said "Do you see this Mr. Wall?" He was delicately brushing ruff away from the packed down earth. For the next five minutes he showed me deer prints, the hoof marks of multiple deer that used those trees as a passageway and as a place of refuge. He was able to tell the difference between adults and yearlings and fawns. He showed me buck scrapings. He described where he would place his deer stand and how to determine which deer would be your best prey. He could see and understand signs in a world where I had little knowledge and less insight. This was a 16 year old who struggled to read, who had been in one kind or another of trouble forever and who yearned to be anywhere other than school. His intelligence encompassed another realm of knowledge that brought him intimate contact with the natural world, that engrossed him for hours and sometimes days and that would keep him fed long into adulthood. He is representative of most of the students who I have taught in challenging classes. They have their talents. They have areas where they can teach us. We must remember this. The idea of multiple intelligences applies especially to these kids.

On a more practical side, all classes demand something from you. These classes demand more patience, a thicker skin (actually, a skin like a reptile), a balanced, flexible sense of firmness (you cannot be a martinet), and your affection. You have to like these kids even when they do their best to be unlikable. You have to have a feel for them. If you were not a terribly attentive or obedient high school child, you have an advantage that you should tap. You can get inside their rebellious heads.

That said, what comes first in these classes is the imposition of order. They cannot speak when you are speaking. Never, in any class, ever, try to speak over kids who ignore your call for silence. You have to confront that disrespect and stop it cold.

Greet kids at the door. Call them by name. Make it personal. Smile. Smiling is not a weakness. Stand in front of them. Let them see you. Call for attention and then wait for it. You want to see their eyes. If you have their eyes, you have a reasonable shot at getting their brains to follow. Begin your class with silence. Go through the tasks for the period. Emphasize what it is that you want them to learn, and then leap in and shift their focus and tasks multiple times during the period. Keep them busy. Repeat this set-up and repeat and repeat. A routine pays off in any class but especially here.

Once you have a reasonable expectation of daily order, then you can move to teach deeply as opposed to the holding actions you had been performing up to this point.

Read. Challenge yourself. You cannot be stupid or lazy.

A good part of teaching is figuring out a dozen ways to make a concept, idea or skill clear to your classes. You need as many metaphors, examples, imaginative visions, and analogies at your command as you can conjure to make yourself clear and thus to actually teach. You have to make an intellectual life for yourself outside of the classroom and outside the narrow confines of your curriculum. Therefore, read....everything....some part of the New York Times everyday, a select group of magazines, new material for your content area, novels, histories, science, memoirs, plays, poetry, biographies....read, please. Listen to NPR, go to the movies, listen to music, step away from people like yourself, and go outside into parks and woods, into the natural world. Thoreau once said that if he knew the names of grasses, his life would be incomparably richer. Think of part of your job as making your kids' experience with you in the classroom incomparably richer.

Like it or not, you are a model for your students. Behave accordingly.

Every day 5 or 6 classes of students file into your room, take their seats and then look at you and listen to you and look at your classroom and its arrangement and décor and begin to make judgments about your qualities of character. They are aware of you when you come to school events. They are aware of your Facebook pages. They watch us at supermarkets, cafes, the dry-cleaners and the gym. Few occupations have its members more closely observed than ours.

What do you want them to believe about you? What qualities of character do you want them to discern in you? You will answer these questions, either consciously or blithely. Our choice of this career locks us into considering these questions. We will be judged.

If you have taught high school kids for any length of time, you know that collectively they possess superb bull shit detectors. You will not fool them for long. Character ultimately shines through in your performance. We operate in a crucible that lasts for 180+ days, and we step into that place 5 or 6 or more times a day. Do you really think you can hide who you are and how you feel about your job over all those weeks, year after year?

What is good about most kids most of the time is that they allow for flaws, they understand weaknesses, they accept honest mistakes (as long as those mistakes are not accompanied by pettiness or meanness or unfairness and arrogant stupidity). Begin with this attitude: I will make mistakes. I will sometimes make thoughtless remarks. I will make bad choices. I will have bad days in their classes. We have to begin with humility.

Kids will welcome sincere apologies and an acknowledgement of mistakes. Consequently, they will often reward you for your patience with their mistakes and their clumsy grappling's in trying to figure out how to live. Humility begets empathy.

Dress for the job.

The mode of dress that you adopt as a teacher will usually either create a sense of impersonal detachment from students or foster familiarity. You want the detachment. If you are a man, dress in decent trousers and a shirt and tie. Look sharp. If you are a woman... I'm sure someone more competent than me can give you fashion advice, but the end point remains the same. Look sharp.

Dressing well creates a kind of uniform. Uniforms by their nature are formal. Formality breeds distance.

Look, you have friends. Students have friends. They need teachers, not another bro or sister. You need to convince students (not just the ones in your classrooms) that you are a serious person, that your purpose, to help them learn, is one that you take seriously, as should they. Dressing well will help you carry off the Mr. or Ms. or Miss or Mrs. that should appear in front of your last name when students speak to you.

Students should address you as Mr. or Mrs. or Miss or Ms. and never by your first or last name alone.

Do not allow students to call you by your last name. Doing so takes you close to the edge of a cliff – you want their respect, not their familiarity, their desire to learn from you, not be your older *bro* or *bff*. You are no longer 18 but an adult tasked with the responsibility of governing and teaching over 100 adolescents 38 weeks out of the year. You work in a

community where your name will be on the lips of parents, graduates, administrators and Board members. Reputation matters. It will help you in your classroom every year. Do you want students coming into your classroom to think of you as a serious adult who knows his or her stuff and who has a sense of maturity and a grown-up presence? Then make sure you firmly correct them when they casually say “Hey wall, what do you want us to write tonight?” I can still feel the hackles rising.

You cannot be afraid.

You have to find and use your capacity for courage to be a good teacher. Students can be demanding and belligerent and insulting and sometimes scary; parents impossible, colleagues’ pushy, administrators intimidating. Others will confront you. Stay calm. Take deep breaths. Imagine that others are watching you: how would you want to behave if you knew that a report would be written detailing your actions? Caution does not imply a lack of courage, but simply the wisdom to spend that courage well.

In crisis situations you just have to move: kids come first. Make sure they are safe. Use common sense. These situations may be easier than the more mundane, nasty parent conferences.

In those ugly conferences, first, wait. Let them talk. The more they talk, the less you have to talk. Make them define and give precise, coherent examples of your failings. Limit your vulnerability. Prepare. Know what you want to say -- exactly and precisely. Do not walk into one of these tiny death-matches blithely. In other words, do not be a dreamy idiot. Stay laser-focused on the topic of the conference. Do not allow their attacks to distract you from the stated purpose of the meeting. Do not smile. Do not try to please them. They may want to fry your ass; do not heat the stove for them. Be civil, logical, as cold as Spock. Bullies will feast on your fear but you can drive them back by your refusal to be intimidated.

Listen carefully to this and do not misinterpret it: *to do this job you have to have a little swagger inside yourself and ready to be applied in confrontations*. That is not arrogance. It simply means that you have to find the steel you possess (you do, you bloody do!) and call upon it when someone wishes to push you around. This is not machismo. Men and women both need this steel and both possess it.

Step into the breach

If it comes to it, keep this in mind: if you believe that you are protecting your safety or the safety or lives of kids or other staff, do what is necessary. Be careful about overreacting, do not lose control, but also do not be a victim.

If one of your colleagues is physically confronted by a student, step into the scene. Do not take the situation over. Let your fellow teacher try to handle it, but let that student and

all the students in the area know that you are ready to jump into the conflict if it escalates. Man or woman, balls matter.

Be aware of your failures.

We all have our blind spots, both personally and professionally. To improve every year, you need to find a way to become acutely aware of those weaknesses in your craft. Be critical of yourself. Set high standards of performance both for your instruction and for your relationships with your students, with fellow teachers, with everyone involved in your work.

A capacity for doubt about your mastery of your craft is not only always healthy, it is essential. You know others who seem utterly unable to detach and see into their behavior. They never do anything wrong. It is always someone else's fault. They never understand why other teachers or administrators or the world seems arrayed against them. You do not want to acquire that reputation.

When you have successfully learned the art of controlling a class, and when you have some confidence in your abilities, try this: at the end of each year, on the second-to-last day of class, pull up a chair facing each class and ask them what you could have done better that year. Limit their answers to constructive criticism. Make it clear that you do not want to hear about what you have done well. If you do not limit the scope of their comments, as with most of us, your kids will try to please you through compliments, but you will not have a clear idea about what you need to change.

Try asking them about the material you covered that year first. Then go to the personal stuff – how they thought of your treatment of them, your annoying habits, etc.

Take notes. Do not argue. Ask clarifying questions only.

I did this in all my classes for the last 22 years of my career. I changed ½ a dozen critical pieces of my approach for the following year based on what they told me.

This will be hard, but you need to develop a thick skin to become a better teacher anyway. Remember, this is “business.... It's not personal....”

Do not let your failures control you.

You are going to make normal mistakes every day. Once you understand this, then resolve to learn from those mistakes and thus to give yourself a break. Figure out what you will do differently. Plan to make the change (do not just do so in your head – write it down until it becomes second nature), Let go of the failure. If you dwell on it, you will lose your ability to take risks in the classroom. You will grow afraid. You cannot allow that to occur. Confidence is magical, but confidence always acknowledges mistakes. Otherwise, it is delusional.

Pick your fights.

You cannot fight them all, and you surely cannot win all the ones you choose to fight. You only have so much energy and time in a day and a career. Plus, you do not want to become a malcontent, the one who always, always has some bitchy, whiny remark about the latest inconvenience, injustice and minor apocalypse. Make a list. Keep it short – what is vital to you as a teacher? What actions can you not abide? What are you willing to shed figurative blood to fight? What are you willing to risk? You want to become the teacher who speaks when something critical is on the line, not the one who provokes eye-rolling or yawns or murmured comments from your audience because they have heard your shtick many times. When in doubt, think, count to 20 or 30 and then decide if you will enter the discussion.

Avoid making yourself a spectacle.

If you are going through rough times, do not broadcast those events in the lunchroom or in meetings or (*God Forbid*) to your students.

If you put yourself front and center again and again in ways that require the deep, distressed attention of many people again and again, then you will develop a reputation for being unreliable and troublesome.

Therefore, avoid histrionics. Avoid feuds. Avoid being a pain-in-the-ass. Shun personal drama. Do not seek the limelight by making your personal life the center of focus for others. If you have done all this, stop. Teachers and administrators do move on. You can recover. Your strengths will assert themselves in others' perceptions.

Do your job. Stay focused. Work hard to be pleasant and considerate. Find one or two trustworthy, discreet friends and speak to them. Every teacher needs those friends. The job has too many frustrations and too much stress to always expect us to be stoic. Unload, but do it quietly. Remember, every other teacher and administrator's life has its own sets of tensions and conflicts. Everyone struggles.

If you do the right things as a teacher, you will get recognition from kids and fellow teachers, and over time, the community.

Learn when to shut up.

It is not necessary to have an opinion about everything. Keep this attitude in mind: you are not the most important person in the room. Listen. Think before you speak. Speak when you have something to say that can contribute to the discussion. Occasionally, be a smart-ass, but do not make it a habit. You may think it cute, but no one likes a smart-ass.

In meetings, listen and watch. If you make an argument, argue from logic first.

Passion is fine as long as it is rational. Prepare your argument. Very few individuals can make a sound, complete case by pulling it out of the air. Appeal to reason, justice, common sense, efficiency. Trust the power of arguments made from a close, careful observation of experience. Make your argument always based on the answer to this question: What is best for kids?

Do not talk smack about your students or about other teachers.

Every workplace has a grapevine, but a high school's grapevine runs through teachers and students and parents and now, with Facebook, it has unlimited potential. Therefore be circumspect about what you say in school (and in public) about your students and your colleagues and bosses. This does not mean that you should become a paranoid wreck about speaking at all. It does mean that you should use common sense and kindness when speaking of others. If not, at some point your gossip will come back into your life; such situations can grow ugly with great speed.

If you hate teaching, do something else.

It seemed like such a good idea, and suddenly it all turned sour.

You hate the time you have to spend outside of the school day preparing lessons and grading, going to grad school, meeting parents (a whole other universe of discomfort). You have little to no patience left for kids' questions or their normal whining and misbehavior. You have developed a morose, dark wit (at least you think so) about all things school. You hate Sunday nights.

Make a plan to leave. It might take you a couple of years, it will certainly take training in another field, and it will take a serious, honest appraisal of your real talents as opposed to your alleged talents, but you must do this. Otherwise, here is what you have to anticipate: decades of loathing for your occupation and the consequent warping of your entire life. Do you really want to hate your life and in turn be despised by multitudes of others? You know that I am telling the truth. You have seen it happen to other teachers. Do not let this happen to you.

Take off Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights.

You must let go of school to do a better job when you are there. This is common sense. Unless you are overloaded in many other areas of your life (really overloaded), take these nights off from all school work. Find ways to just be and do. Let your mind simmer. Let the unconscious work. Let other influences (many, many) into the scope of your life.

Go home to somebody.

The job is too hard to drive home to silence. You need someone to take away the working world for a few hours and give you a fresh start in the morning. Take risks on love. As Norman Mailer once wrote “Sweet Sunday, dear friends, and take a chance, for we are out on the lottery of the years.” Take those chances.

Find a friend(s) at school whom you trust implicitly.

You need such a person so that you can blow off steam to him or her. This has to be the one to whom you can say anything about your kids, your colleagues, your administrators, and he or she will understand and never speak of your ravings to others. You will want to rant. Teaching can be a maddening profession. Ranting can occasionally be good for your health as long as it is just a rant and not a life choice.

Exercise forever.

This job demands an enormous expenditure of physical and psychic energy. Outside of acts of God and feral stupidity, your desire to teach for a long time will come to pass. That desire will be assisted by being in good physical shape. A work out focuses the mind away from school. It blows out stress. It reenergizes you. If you feel good, you will look good and in front of the class, image counts. You do not want to be nickel-and-dimed by breakdowns in your body as you hit your late 40's and 50's. Those should be your prime years in front of your class and in the school community. Begin a common sense program of physical activity and adapt it as your needs and body changes, but keep with it. The payoff from this investment is, literally, life.

Laugh at yourself.

Underneath all of our pretensions and professional skins, our private selves are a bit foolish – all of us, teachers, Presidents, carpenters, CEO's, waitresses. Remember that you too are often goofy.

Let it go.

What can you control in your little world of your teaching that has been progressively swallowed by the leviathan of the society that surrounds you -- by your HS Department, by the State, by parents, by their histories, by administrators, by the economy, by budgetary restrictions and class size policies and the coarsening of popular culture and on and on, one fish being engulfed by a bigger fish with you and your 5 or 6 classes a day being the bloody minnow?

Not much.

Let it go.

You can close the door to your room and make a difference there, sometimes a life-saving, life-changing difference, but you will not be able to do so if you are continually freaked-out by many actions that you cannot control. Let many of them go. Your evolving judgment will tell you which to worry about, which to fight, which to laugh at and which to just shake your head to and say "WTF!"

You can control how you treat kids, how you treat your colleagues, how hard you work, how you perform each class period, how you summon your strength to face each year.... Let all the other stuff go. Do not let it erode your spirit. Your spirit is your engine; it fuels the certainty that you can do something of importance in kids' lives today.

Begin a TSA with your first pay check.

You will grow old. You will retire. Save as much as you can for as long as you can and do so consistently. Assume that no one else will take care of you when it is your time to walk out the school house door and never return. Begin saving now so that you, not desperation, can make the choice as to when to go.

When to go.

Assume that your health has been good. How then does one figure out the right time to leave the profession? When you are having more and more difficulty coping with the stress of the job, when you are losing patience with kids on a consistent basis, when your ability to be flexible has been severely eroded, when you begin to sense a slippage in your effectiveness in the classroom, when you begin to lose patience with adults, when your weariness overcomes your self-discipline and you begin shirking take-home work and in-school duties, when you are afraid on a daily basis of kids, of the classroom, of the uncertainty that is part of the DNA of the job, and when the chance of another year looks iffy in the sense that you can not give kids and staff your very best again.

In my last year, a very long March and April seemed filled with even more pressure and tension than was normal, with cascading problem after problem, task after task, failure after failure (whether this was so is not important – it is the sense that it was so and that I could not handle it as easily as I once had). I saw that now I had less patience with kids, less patience with both the good and the knuckleheads, less patience with their traditional, routine 'kidness'. I was able to focus my awareness on that and step up and keep an even temperament (mostly) in classes and in the hallways, but I would not have been able to do so for even one more year. Coming back would have been my failure, not theirs.

Think carefully. Make a rational, calm decision, but if it is time, most of you will know it. Most importantly, try to leave when you still love what you do, when it hurts to turn away. Try to leave when everything still looks bright -- no dark and bitter horizon, but just the growing light ahead and the warm light behind.

Say Thank you.

Practice good manners. Make them a personal habit. Say thank you to fellow teachers, students, administrators, support staff, parents -- whoever crosses your path and does you a service. Good manners make your school a better place for all.

Enjoy yourself.

I loved the classroom. I loved its give-and-take, its exchange of energy and the drama of engaged kids. Make your classroom a place filled with laughter and intense feeling, a place of lots and lots of questions, a place of grand and sublime foolishness as well as patient, deliberate learning. It is possible to have all of those qualities. The only time I was bored was in meetings involving only other adults. Gaak.

Never despair.

No matter how frustrated you become with some kids whose apathy is poisonous, or with some colleagues who do not do their jobs, or with some awful parents who either neglect or abuse or smother or psychotically support their children, or with grotesque politicians who use our profession as the nail upon which they hammer so as to increase their prestige or with what seems a pervasive attitude among the public as a whole that we are lazy, tax-swilling democrats who practice a slightly more sophisticated form of babysitting – no matter how furious you become with an educational industry that seems to get most things wrong, never despair and never give up. First, always remember this, that you too can be a wearisome pain-in-the-ass and almost certainly are to more people than you realize. I certainly was (and am). No high-and-mighty martyr's robe for you.

These are children in front of you. They are 14 through 18 but they are children, being shaped before your eyes. You have an obligation to them to be optimistic.

We have very little time with them. They are moving away from us second by second at light speed. Leave them with a memory of an attitude from you and an atmosphere in your classroom that was funny and buoyant and that saw the coming years as opportunities for them rather than as a time to be filled with foreboding and dread.

William F. Buckley wrote once that “despair is a mortal sin.” He was right. You cannot give up. As teachers we have a moral obligation to give of ourselves to kids. That is the contract – we give our empathy and knowledge and our ability to inspire and our ability to listen and our patience and understanding of their foibles. We give our time and thousands of joules of energy and our hearts to them. We receive a paycheck and benefits and the solace of a renewed youth for as many years as we teach. No cubicles for us. No dull years spent in airless conference rooms slowly withering under the droning voice of corporate managers. Instead, joy. Instead, we get more life. L’chaim.

This is who you are.

You are a teacher, one of the nobility of the earth. Stand up straight. Look 'em in the eyes.

Mike Wall
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