



At the Heart of Teaching

I didn't always want to be a teacher. There was a time when I wanted to be a smoke jumper, throwing myself from bush planes into forest fires. Then I wanted to be a ballerina, moving poetically to music for an appreciative audience. As it turns out, teaching is a mixture of both fighting fires and dancing for crowds.

Other than these brief interludes of desire for adventure and fame, though, I have aimed to be a teacher since Grade 4. Happily, on the day I graduated with my degree in education, a local principal offered me a position teaching six blocks of English and one block of Planning 10. I had no doubt that teaching was what I was meant to do. No doubt, that is, until my first day of school that September when, in a sudden rush of dry mouth and sweaty knees, I thought *What the hell am I doing?!!!*

I need not have worried; I've since learned that this is a question most teachers, even veteran teachers, ask themselves – often in a similar state of panic and on a regular basis. That's the single constant in this job – the sudden and urgent desire to question one's choice in career. Which brings me to one of the many things I admire about veteran teachers: when faced with this dilemma, they continue to choose the classroom over any other.

In this way, teachers are the sort of breed who notice barriers but don't stop to study the problems too closely. So many forces vie for our focus that if we dwelled on these challenges, we'd be distracted from finding ways around them. Budgets, politics, irresponsible testing, bad leadership, paperwork, more paperwork, and more paperwork – all these pressures and systems have nothing to do with the reasons we signed on for this gig in the first place. Most of us sought teaching as our life's work because schools exist at the centre of communities, because schools are where future citizens learn to think and question and communicate, and we wanted to be involved in that exciting process. For this reason, teaching is inherently political; however, if we let it be political without the personal, we have no place in the classroom.

I am an emotional person. Usually I fight against that part of myself, that knot that builds in my throat when I'm reading a short story aloud to my Grade 9s, about a boy who lay bleeding in the rain; when a student I barely know comes to me for help because she can't stop cutting herself; when a boy tells me that writing about his past for a memoir assignment freed him from events he had been running from; when yet another of my students is admitted to hospital for starving herself. *How unprofessional, I'd berate myself. Pull yourself together, Brooke. These kids need a teacher who can read a child's story without tearing up at the front of the room.*

But you know? When I think back on my time as a high school student, I remember the teachers who showed me who they were. Not all of them cried – but the teachers who impacted me were the ones who showed their passion for their students, their subject matter, their joy in life and learning.

I remember the teachers who were brave enough to ask the tough questions and dive into big topics. I remember the teachers, like Peter Lang, who one day put aside our grammar lesson to tell us about the Hutus and the Tutsis; he was so saddened by the genocide that he stopped class to tell us about it. Oddly enough, our English teacher was the only person to tell us about the children – our own age – who were killing and dying in that small, sun-soaked country in Africa. When Mr. Lang explained how neighbours were, at that very moment, murdering and betraying one another, he was asking us to consider the larger implications of violence and prejudice.

That day, Mr. Lang brought the world into our classroom, but because the conflict so deeply moved him he brought himself into our classroom as well; that's when I learned about what can happen when compassion is absent. It's a political message, for sure, but we understood it because Mr. Lang made it personal.

For our opening day speech this year, our district hosted Wade Davis. We filled every seat to hear this modern-day Indiana Jones talk about the interrelatedness of cultural diversity and the survival of our physical world. He taught us this powerful message in the same way that Mr. Lang taught me about genocide: by sharing himself with us. Davis didn't hide behind statistics or data; he told us stories about his experiences with different peoples around the world to show us how climate change actually depends, not on carbon emissions, but on learning to mutually respect one another's cultures and ways of knowing. A political message to be sure, and powerful because he made it personal.

These are the lessons we learn most deeply – when we connect the ideas with ourselves and our students on a human level, as individuals learning together. One day, when I'm a veteran teacher, I hope that I'll have arrived at that point, because choosing the classroom hardly seemed like a choice at all. |

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