

The Teachers “No Child Left Behind” Leaves Behind

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All I ever wanted to be was a teacher. While my friends wanted to play house, I wanted to play school. While my friends wanted to make Ken and Barbie into marriage, I wanted Barbie to sit Ken down and teach him some lessons. While my friends asked for dolls or ponies or clothes for Christmas, all I wanted was my own chalkboard. When my mother said no because chalk was too messy, I made my own chalkboard in my nightly bath, soaping up a washcloth and sticking it against the bathtub wall, then using my finger to trace letters in the soap for my roly-poly Weebles toy people to learn.

When my mom went into labor and I waited at the hospital, my thoughts weren't that I would have my first sibling, but rather, that I would have my first student! This was not a role my sister easily embraced. She didn't want to be a student—she wanted to be a mother. Not just a mother—she wanted to be a pregnant mother, with me as her doctor. She would stuff a pillow under her shirt and lay on the floor writhing in pain, moaning and groaning until I relieved her of her misery by delivering her pillow baby, which I would quickly steal away and enroll in my school.

I'll never forget the first day I walked into my own classroom. My own classroom! Not a bathroom with a washcloth on the wall, not soap for chalk, not pillows or Weebles for students, but a real chalkboard, real chalk, real students. I'll never forget my first day of school as a teacher, that first morning when students poured into my room and brought the sunshine with them.

I taught in that classroom, in my first classroom, for 16 years. If you would have asked me halfway through those 16 years, I would have told you I thought I'd die in that classroom,

teach right up to the time of my last breath and with that last breath still try to impart something of importance to those achingly beautiful human beings called *high school students*.

And yet, I put in only sixteen years, and at the age of 40, I quit. When people ask me why I left, I have a pithy anecdote I often tell. I am teaching Freshman English again for the first time in years. A boy struts into my classroom and proclaims in front of everyone that I taught his mother. I laugh out loud. I've only been teaching for 15 years, I tell him. My mom was 16 when she had me, he replies. Do the math, English teacher. Pardon my English, but he was an ass all year long. She was pregnant when she was in my class, and she gave birth to this ass who then tortured me 15 years later in the same classroom. It was time to leave.

But that's not the truth, the whole truth, or anywhere close to the truth. The truth is, I became a casualty of the standardized test, and its by-product, a bastardized education. I am the teacher "No Child Left Behind" left behind. I am a high school dropout. And like many dropouts, though I have moved forward, I still look back, often with regret, always with nostalgia.

From my 16 years in that classroom, I carry with me a keepsake box, full of hundreds of letters, notes, and cards from students I taught. Each student wrote to me because together, we touched something that mattered. I have saved the letters because they matter to me. They fill me up, they leave me full-filled, they remind me of how fulfilling those 16 years were. I loved (nearly) every minute in every period in every day in every week in every year I was there. If you were to open the box and read any one of those letters, you'd understand why.

Dear Ms. Selig,

I especially want to thank you for being my teacher. No where have I learned as much as I did in your class and in your presence and what I appreciate most about this knowledge is the way you teach it. Rather than throwing facts and truths at us, you give us ideas to evaluate for ourselves. The things you teach are

empowering and give us more freedom. We don't have to believe them, we don't have to like them, but the fact that we experienced them gives another dimension to our lives and a lucidity to look at the world, through enlightened eyes, if only for a moment but possibly forever.

*Love,
Lisa*

I began my career in my twenties as an English teacher, guided by a piece of a poem by Audre Lorde.

“I know this appetite
the greed of a poet
or an empty woman
trying to touch
what matters.”

I fantasized about inviting great works of literature into the classroom, and delving into them in a way that would deepen and ripen and transfigure us all. Literature was not an object to learn, but a subject to learn from, the venue for touching what mattered. For me, it wasn't *Romeo and Juliet* that mattered, it was love that mattered, and *Romeo and Juliet* gave us the excuse to discuss love in the classroom.

The teachers in my department taught *Romeo and Juliet* according to their passions and gifts, emphasizing different parts of the plot, different themes, using different strategies to make Shakespeare's language and story come to life. Mr. Clark was also the drama teacher, so he had students up in front of the room acting out the play, staging mock-fights with construction paper swords, directing Juliet onto a desk for the balcony scene, handing Romeo a Diet Coke to use as poison in the death scene. Mrs. Reed was our teacher with the greatest sense of humor, so she painstakingly deconstructed all the obscure and bawdy puns until the students were laughing hysterically. Ms. Barker was a purist about the classics, and she would read aloud the most

lyrical passages, her eyes filling, then spilling over with tears. Students in all of our classes got a different experience of Shakespeare—from an appreciation of his staging, to his sense of humor, to the beauty of his language, to the universality of his expression of youthful love—each experience intimately tied to the passion of the teacher.

Some will disagree, but it seems right to me to teach in this way. There is no one Shakespeare, and there is no one response to Shakespeare. What mattered was not that all students received the same Shakespeare, but that all students had a passionate encounter with Shakespeare facilitated by a passionate teacher.

However, standardization changed all that. First, we were told by the head of Curriculum Development for the district that we must have students write an essay as the final assessment. Gone were Mr. Clark's video-taped performances shown at Back to School Night; gone were Mrs. Reed's "one-pun-upmanship" competitions where students wrote their own Shakespearean puns; gone were Ms. Barker's Globe Theatre Days where students memorized and delivered a soliloquy in costume, all gone because they took too much time away from writing the essay. Gone too was my particular essay topic comparing teenage love in the 16th century with today, because that wasn't deemed *what mattered most* for students to take away from the play.

Of course, I am being extreme here. No matter how standardized the final test on *Romeo and Juliet*, no one can stop a teacher from talking about the theme of love in the play. No one can stop a teacher from staging a scene, from deconstructing a pun, from waxing eloquent on the lyricism of the language. It wasn't that those things were entirely squeezed out, it's just that we had to fight for any time at all to squeeze them in. It *felt* extreme, as the classroom increasingly became a battleground where we each had to fight to teach what we felt was extremely important.

I became Audre Lorde's greedy poet over time. "Hurry up and learn this stuff so we can talk about what's important," I'd whisper to my students after I shut the classroom door.

In the cards, notes, and letters, they told me how much they appreciated this approach.

Ms. Selig,

I just wanted you to know that I have a lot of respect for you as a teacher and I admire you as a person. You are one of the only teachers that makes me feel like the stuff I'm doing is going to help me somehow and usually you tell us straight up if it's not all that important. You are the absolute no nonsense teacher. What an honest thing. I love it that you tell it like it is. I find it so great that you leave in your personality while you teach. That's the kind of thing that makes a student trust a teacher and it's very important to me.

Sincerely,

Mario

As heart and soul and spirit were squeezed out of the English curriculum, I felt the heart and soul and spirit squeezed out of me. Though Mario felt I left in my personality while I taught, I felt the pain of everything I had to leave out. On the one hand, I had to "teach to the test" because the test was tied to their grades and their grades were tied to their futures, and I couldn't ruin their chances of getting into the college of their dreams because I didn't prepare them for the test. On the other hand, the curriculum felt empty to me, and I felt the hunger, the appetite, the "greed of a poet" raging within me as it raged within them as well.

After a decade of vocational bliss, I considered quitting the teaching profession for the first time. I struggled, wrestled, grappled, resisted, thrashed about in my own turmoil. I wanted to stay. I looked for compromise. If the soul was being squeezed out of the English curriculum, I thought, then I'll introduce it somewhere else. I proposed teaching mythology as a semester-long elective course. It was approved.

I taught mythology as ancient psychology, following the philosophy of Joseph Campbell. I organized the course around “the big questions”—where did we come from? What happens to us when we die? What makes life worth living? What is worth dying for? What is the relationship between humanity and divinity? What is love?

The class was so popular that we added a second section, and the next year, a second semester. Scads of the letters and cards and notes in my keepsake box are from students who took those classes.

Dear Ms. Selig,

A lot of what you said is true, how mythology ties everything together. And I did get a lot out of this course. I would like to study psychology in terms of mythological concepts, that totally intrigued me. It has opened up my mind to much more new information that I can take in and apply to myself or others. It's funny how I kept on thinking through the love unit, that if people studied mythology and psychology and understood the stages of love, there wouldn't be so many problems among people. I do feel I have died and become someone new.

Love,

Vanessa

I felt like I died and went to heaven after reading that letter. Mythology was the Holy Grail, that grand quest that led us deep into the heart of the questions that matter the most. Though I still taught English, I lived for the periods where I taught mythology.

And then, something inside me died.

After several years of ever-increasing popularity, the class was canceled, along with many other electives. “More college-prep courses” was the cry. “Back to basics,” it was decreed. It's not that the course doesn't matter, my principal explained to me. It's just that it doesn't count.

I'm not arguing here against teaching the basics. Nouns matter. Love is a noun, and it matters. Love is also a verb. When I change it to *loving*, it becomes a gerund. Gerunds might be

on the test, but whether you love, what you love, why you love who you love, how loving you are—*what really matters*—will not be tested.

This is good—it should not be tested. But it should be taught. Not taught as in “let’s tell students *what to think* about love,” but taught as in “let’s teach students *to think* about love, and give them a place to explore *what others think* about love so they can refine *what they think* about love.” Riffing off a quote by Einstein, there is a difference between what should be taught and what should be tested. Not everything testable should be taught. Not everything taught can be or should be tested.

I felt like I was being tested, my principles against my principal’s decision. After teaching mythology, I was convinced more than ever that students were hungry for a meaningful curriculum. I proposed a psychology class and made sure that it met the requirements (which meant it counted) for a college-prep course. It was approved. I taught it for several years. It was the best thing I ever taught. Many of the letters and cards and notes in my keepsake box are from students in those classes. Some are even from parents of students thanking me for teaching their child, for inspiring their child, for saving the lives, sometimes literally, of their child.

There’s one letter that haunts me still. It’s from a woman named Linda, who was mother to Amber, one of my most exceptional psychology students. Linda wrote to me because I had just published a gift book for graduates, and she bought a copy and wanted me to sign it as a graduation gift for Amber. After making that request, her letter continues:

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank you for the admirable job you have done with her psychology class this semester. I recognized the enthusiasm you must exude by Amber’s behavior and comments right away. She has continued throughout this semester to discuss what she has heard and learned in class. The thought-provoking topics also gave our family opportunities to share with each other ideas we might not have shared otherwise. Amber has expressed the desire to “tread the waters” of psychology in college, and possibly as a career choice. Your class has helped Amber realize that she has empathy with other people and a

strong desire to learn more about them. With your encouragement and enthusiasm, she is showing more passion about her future.

But there was no future for Amber. Two weeks later, she took her passion to her grave, killed in a fiery car accident. I took it hard. I cared for her. But I took some small measure of solace knowing that before her death, she was closer to her mother than ever. Though she had no future, in the last months of her life she and her mother had shared a more meaningful present. They had touched what mattered, and the psychology curriculum had played a part in that, had served as a bridge between mother and daughter where together they could stand with more open hearts and minds.

And then I got word that class was canceled as well.

To be a teacher, to be mentor, to be a midwife, to be a guide, to be a witness to these young souls as they were struggling to find their unique way through the world, this was everything to me, and if it wasn't happening as often in my English classes because I was concerned with teaching to the standards, then at least it was happening in my elective classes, where I, where we, had a measure of curricular freedom. But the standardization ax felled all electives. I was needed elsewhere, my principal said. I was needed to teach a remedial section of English to students who were in danger of failing the High School Exit Exam. Another test. I lost heart. I stayed one more year until the boy strutted into my class, and told me in front of everyone that I had taught his mother. I took my exit from high school. I walked away with a box full of letters, notes, and cards. I walked in circles for six months, meditating on the koan: Who am I if I am not a teacher? Who am I if I'm not in the classroom? The answer was always the same. *I am a teacher. I was born a teacher. The classroom is my home. And I am in exile.*

I knew I couldn't return to teaching high school, not public high school, not like that. Nor could I stay away from teaching. Eventually I found my way into upper education, teaching adults at several private universities. I don't take this opportunity for granted but I will confess, there's not a day that goes by when I don't miss teaching high school students. There is no keepsake box for my college students, because it's not where my gifts and talents lie. I'm not bad at it, it's just not where I'm the most good either, or where I'm most needed. Aristotle said that where your talents and the needs of the world intersect, there is your vocation. Teaching high school was my perfect intersection. I felt good there, and needed, until No Child Left Behind left those feeling behind.

Ironically, the first course I taught at the university level was one in an education department teaching curriculum development. Instead of teaching the standards to secondary students, I was now teaching future teachers how to teach the standards to secondary students. *The more things change, the more they stay the same.* "I'll teach you the stages of curriculum design," I told the students, "but the techniques and tools and strategies in the book are not what matters. The heart and soul of education begins in the heart and soul of the teacher. So tell us about your favorite teacher, the one who inspired you to be here today."

After they introduce their teachers, I ask them to tell us why that teacher was so influential. I listen carefully to the stories. Sometimes it's "she made me feel special." At other times, it's "she saw me." "He cared about me." "He encouraged me during a time when it was really hard for me." "When my dad died, she came to the funeral." Never was it "she really helped prepare me for the standardized test." Never was it "he stayed so close to the state standards." It's never the *standardization* students appreciate, but the *individualization*. "She

made *me* feel special.” “He cared about *me*.” “He recognized *my* ability to draw, and encouraged *me*.”

Even those who recognize their teacher’s infectious love for the subject matter often remember little of that subject matter itself. For instance, one young woman remembered a physics teacher who would dress up like a mad scientist on lab days, but when I asked her to describe the content of the labs, she couldn’t remember any of them. Another remembered his teacher’s love for poetry, but could only recall a few lines from one of the poems she loved. Some remembered disliking the subject matter themselves, and marveling that someone else could love it so.

What mattered in the educational encounter, I asked? What did these stories have in common? On the chalkboard, we note the similarities: it’s the human connection, the passion, the eros, the joy of learning, the journey from having a question to finding an answer. It’s seldom the answer itself.

But education these days is obsessed with the answer. The outcome. The measurable learning result. Objectives, not subjectives like passion, like attention, like encouragement, like love. We have forgotten Einstein’s *other* theory of relativity: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” In education today, it’s all about what can be counted, measured, assessed, quantified.

So together, we count. I say, “You were in their class for 180 days, 180 hours, 9000 minutes. Tell me what you did in that time, in those hours, with those minutes.”

They can’t account for them. “He made me think,” one student shares about a beloved history teacher.

“About what?” I nudge gently. “What was the curriculum? What did you do in all those hours?”

She furls her brow. “I don’t remember, I just remember he made me think so hard sometimes I’d leave class with a headache.” We smile. We all recognize good teaching, though we have no idea what the goods were he was teaching.

These are not students who are decades away from high school themselves. These are students in their early twenties being asked to recall what happened five, six, seven years ago. And so I ask: “If you’ve already forgotten the vast majority of the curriculum you learned from your favorite teacher, what are the implications for your own teaching, for your own curriculum development? If the vast majority of your students will forget the standards you are so laboring to teach, what does it say about those standards?”

The room is silent. We sit steeped in the questions, which are like zen koans. I can hear their minds racing, their hearts beating, their stomachs growling. They are hungry poets too, every one of them. We all know one thing—that we want to teach because we believe it matters. Soon, someone raises the question, *the* question haunting teachers across the country today. “But how can I teach what I believe matters if I have to cover all this material for the standardized state exams?”

Everyone looks at me. I look out the window. There is no easy answer to this in sight. I turn them instead to look at a myth, the myth of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

In the center of the Arthurian legend lies the Holy Grail, a symbol for healing, for wholeness, for vitality, for life. Unfortunately, the Grail's power is stunted because it is being guarded by a very wounded King, sometimes called the Fisher King. Different versions of the myth vary regarding how the King was wounded, but most agree that a lance pierced his thigh; some say it castrated him. Because there's a connection between the King and the country, as the King withers away, so does the country, becoming a dry, desolate, lifeless wasteland where nothing grows.

For many of us, education has become precisely that wasteland, as sacred classroom time is given over to preparation for dry, desolate, lifeless scantron tests, a wasteland where test scores are the only thing the country (the district, the state, the nation) is concerned about growing while the souls of children shrink.

Many teachers like me recognize ourselves in the wounded Fisher King. We feel castrated, like we've lost our power and have become slaves to the state rather than the contributors to the country we know we are. The wounded King, like us, feels inefficacious. He has to take, we have to take, everything literally lying down, because he, because we, have lost our power through our wounding to stand up and lead.

In the myth young Percival, the knight whose name translates into "wise fool," enters into the castle where the Holy Grail and the King live. The King is brought out on a stretcher, and he invites Percival to dine. During dinner, something amazing happens. A beautiful maiden walks by with the Holy Grail in hand, a Grail blazing so brightly that it puts out all the candles in the room and dims even the stars in the sky. Percival is filled with awe and curiosity and wants to ask the King about the meaning of the Grail, and about whom the Grail serves, but instead, he bites his tongue. Why? Because he's been taught by his mentor that good knights don't ask

questions. So he plans after dinner to ask some lowly servant about the Grail, but he forgets and instead, he falls sleep. In the morning when he awakens, the Grail is gone and the entire castle is empty.

Percival leaves the castle and goes back into the forest, where he chances upon a young maiden. He tells her of what he's seen, and she immediately chastises him. She tells him, had he asked the King the question on his tongue, "Whom does the grail serve?" he would have healed the King and thus, healed the kingdom, restoring life to the wasteland.

Percival commits himself to doing just that, but it takes him five years of wandering around before he's able to find the castle again. He does, and this time when the young maiden comes out displaying the Holy Grail, he asks the question, thus healing the King and the kingdom.

This myth has important implications for those of us in education today. Percival bit his tongue that first night in the same way we do when we fail to ask those in authority important questions. Like Percival, we are fools when we simply satiate ourselves with the curriculum served and then fall asleep. Like Percival, we become wise when we learn to ask questions of those in authority so we can gain back our potency and heal the wasteland that education has become. Like Percival, who had to learn to ask "Whom does the Grail serve?" we must not be afraid to ask, whom does education serve? We must ask, does it serve students? Does it serve society? Does it serve the state? Does it serve the economic system? And then we must ask, whom *should* education serve?

Does it serve students to regurgitate answers, rather than learn to question? When did standardization become the answer, the gold standard, and how we castrated by those standards?

Whose standards are they, anyway? In an era of accountability, to whom are we called to be accountable?

I raise these questions to this group of students on the edge of the great adventure that is teaching, to these students who, like me, who maybe like you, feel they were born to teach, who feel like the educational encounter is the holy grail that can bring wholeness, healing, health, and vitality to the kingdom, to the country, through the classroom.

But perhaps I am not the best one to guide these would-be teachers through the rough and tumble of these thorny questions and brambly koans. After all, I am the teacher “No Child Left Behind” left behind. I am a high school dropout, a woman who left children behind because she was told she would leave children behind if she didn’t comply with policies she knew would lay waste to the kingdom of the classroom. In ultimately leaving, I don’t know if I was courageous or a coward, if I lacked bravery or exhibited it. I don’t know if I’m wise or if I’m a fool; I only know there are thousands of children trailing behind me, their reflections haunting me like hungry ghosts. Like Percival, I’ve been wandering around haunted in this forest for five years, living in exile, and I am full of regret, not only personal regret but public regret that this is the state of education these student-teachers in front of me inherit today, even as I disinherited it years ago. I share with them my questions, my struggles, my successes and failures, my strategies for resistance, my regrets, my nostalgia, all of which are mine but not mine alone. They are shared by many teachers: those who had the courage of their convictions and dropped out, and those who have the courage of their convictions and stay in. I am not the first who stayed and asked, “Should I leave?” I am not the last to leave and ask, “Should I have stayed?” I am not the only one out who asks, “Should I go back in?” And then, “Could I go back in?”

All I can do now is ask questions. For these student-teachers, I have no answers. I live in limbo between what is and what could and should be, between what I am and what I was and what I long to be. I touched it once, the Holy Grail, and it's there in my keepsake box, in those letters and notes and cards that matter to me. I share it with them, I share it with you, because I am a hungry poet, greedy for change.

Dear Ms. Selig,

Thank you so much for all the help you have given me with my writing skills. Even though I can't spell there nothing you could do for me there. I've enjoyed my three years of having you as a teacher. You are very good at what you do. I also believed that you've helped people come to realized how different, but the same we really are. Thank you again for everything. I hope your up coming classes will give you more joy, than pain.

Thanks,

Russel