

MERELY A TEACHER

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Deep down I think I always wanted to be a teacher. Not that I didn't have other dreams—working in the sands of Egypt, enduring Las Vegas-type heat while digging for as-yet-unimagined treasures that would change man's knowledge of history, or maybe spending years at my Smith Corona portable electric typewriter resting in its turquoise case, capturing in words the essence of life in such simplicity that it would become the next great American novel. Oh, I had big dreams.

At the same time, my real-life experiences were building within me an awareness of what I truly admired. I was mesmerized by my sister, six years my elder, who was always the teacher in our bedroom schoolhouse. To me she was the image of an all-knowing goddess—she read fluently, knew multiplication and division, gave my brother and me a lot of time for recess, and managed always to keep the two of us under control.

I remember Miss Coe—standing in the front of our second-grade classroom, pointing to each word of the poem so beautifully printed on the chalkboard as she slowly read it over and over until we began to join the recitation—and an inward responsiveness that recognized her love for the flow of those words.

Then there was Mr. Hatch—handsome, young, a BYU graduate—a first-year rookie hired to develop an innovative, challenging program for an eclectic group of sixth-grade students. Mr. Hatch was tough; he challenged us daily; he made us think for ourselves and defend our ideals; and his example showed me that learning is a process that is stimulating. My vision of *teacher* was beginning to be defined.

Twenty-five years later, I was ready. Armed with two degrees certifying that I knew content and pedagogy, two student teaching experiences that attested to competence, on-the-job decision making practice that comes from being the mother of six young children, and a conviction that I could make a difference in the world, one child at a time, I anticipated that first day of school even more than the children who were assigned to my charge. I was ready for anything and everything... or so I thought.

I had envisioned my role in education in much the same manner as I envisioned my role as Primary President—I had a stewardship; a shepherding calling; a chance to serve. I imagined that one day I would be fondly remembered by students and parents for touching their lives in some unforgettable way. My experience would be similar to the one penned by Patricia Polacco as she described the chronicle of her childhood struggles in school and the teacher who brought hope into her life:

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The rest of the year became an odyssey of discovery and adventure for the little girl. She learned to love school. I know because that little girl was me, Patricia Polacco.

I saw Mr. Falker again some thirty years later at a wedding. I walked up to him and introduced myself. At first he had difficulty placing me. Then I told him who I was, and how he had changed my life so many years ago.

He hugged me and asked me what I did for a living. “Why, Mr. Falker,” I answered. “I make books for children.... Thank you, Mr. Falker. Thank you.”¹

I was anticipating the moment when I would hear those words—“Thank you, Mrs. Anderson. Thank you.”

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But my vision of public education and the reality of public education rarely proved a match. Commitment, hard work, perseverance, and dedication were all traits that I worked to embed into my persona of teacher. But they were not enough! Over the next thirteen years, I continued to pursue the scholarly approach to learning and teaching—attending workshops and in-services, participating in local and national conferences, pursuing additional degrees, collaborating with colleagues, and joining professional organizations. Yet something was missing from my intellectual education.

- I had been taught classroom management skills... but wasn't sure what to do when a second-grader was inextricably wrapped around the legs of a classroom table, holding his teachers and classmates at bay with his profanity, and daring me (now an administrator) to do something about it.
- I had been taught the importance of accessing prior knowledge and setting the stage for learning... but didn't know how to relate the student's tale of a drug raid and the cops and the whizzing bullets and hiding under the mattress for hours until it was safe to come out to our study of the weather.
- I had learned about diversity and cultural identity... but realized how little I truly understood as a student I loved sat next to me in my office, waiting for the police to arrive and explaining that I didn't understand—he had to beat another student with the metal pipe because if he hadn't, he could never return to the projects where he lived. (The other student had made a negative comment about this boy's mother.)
- I had been trained to work with parents for the benefit of children... but no one had mentioned how to respond when, during a conference, a parent stated in front of her child, “I don't want him... I never wanted him,” and I was looking into the eyes of that child.

So now I am at BYU-Idaho, working with other faculty to send new teachers on a journey that will bring them some of their greatest moments of satisfaction and accomplishment blended with their greatest moments of frustration and sadness. To prepare them for this journey, we teach our students content... we teach pedagogy... we teach language and management and motivation. Yet because we are at BYU-Idaho, we have the right and the responsibility to teach and model those things that transcend secular knowledge and embody the gospel of Jesus Christ.

One of our missions at Brigham Young University-Idaho is to “build testimonies of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ and encourage living its principles.” Having worked “in the world,” I do not take for granted the privilege of praying in class, the freedom to discuss gospel doctrine within the context of my discipline, the blessing of inspired leadership, faithful colleagues, and honorable students. Believing that each of us has been prepared to be at this university at this time for purposes beyond our own, I want my students to learn from my experiences. What do I want them to really know?

*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples,
if ye have love one to another.²*

How easy it is to love those who share our beliefs, our values, and our desires—and how critical it is that we learn to love unconditionally each of our Heavenly Father’s children. As simple as it may sound, it truly does not matter how much we know until others know how much we care. I want to always remember the feelings I experienced when meeting with the family of a bright, handsome young boy who had been a near-drowning victim and was now severely disabled. During the meeting this boy’s father, an executive officer of a major corporation in our community, looked at me with tears in his eyes and said “Thank you for loving my child”—not “thank you for teaching my child.”

*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works,
and glorify your Father which is in Heaven.³*

There exists an indefinable attraction toward individuals whose lives reflect the example of the Savior. During a stake conference we were once counseled to “live your life in such a way that those who know you but do not know Christ will want to know Christ because they know you.” I have seen it occur over and over again—teachers reporting that they quickly identify which of their students’ families are Latter-day Saints simply by watching them; teachers asking other teachers, “What is it about your life that I want to have in my life?” And they are equally apt to report that a Latter-day Saint acquaintance was observed doing

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something inconsistent with the principles of the gospel. I must teach my students that what we do has much more of an impact than what we say—and that a powerful influence for good is generated when these are consistent.

*And now, my brethren, seeing that ye know the light by which ye may judge, which light is the light of Christ, see that ye do not judge wrongfully; for with that same judgment which ye judge ye shall also be judged.*⁴

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I was raised in a community not known for its morals, modesty, or tastefulness. I attended thirteen years of public school with classmates of differing races, religions, and cultures. I have worked with families and colleagues representing diverse socio-economic statuses, philosophies, backgrounds, beliefs, and lifestyles. I have learned that (almost) all parents love their children, that all children want to be loved, and that my standards and beliefs are not shared by the majority of those with whom I have come in contact. I have learned that people are innately good, that they try to do the best they can with what they have been given, and that no one makes the right decision all of the time. I realize that I have become who I am in part because of my interactions with other members of mankind. Is it then conceivable that others become who they are in part because of their interactions with me?

*Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.*⁵

In spite of our best efforts, I will not be able to adequately prepare my students for every challenge that they will encounter as they enter this chosen profession. I can provide role-play and simulation activities; practicum and student teaching experiences, but I cannot provide every real-life parent and every real-life student and every real-life situation that could possibly occur in an educational environment. I can provide guidelines and manuals and basal texts, but I cannot provide every resource that may be necessary to effectively meet the needs of all learners. I can provide strategies and techniques for good instruction and classroom management, but I cannot anticipate the myriad of variables that together create each unique learning environment. However, I can instill within my students a testimony that their Heavenly Father knows them by name, that He knows their hopes and their fears and the righteous desires of their hearts. Armed with this knowledge, our students can seek understanding because they will know that He will direct their paths.

After eight semesters (hopefully), our students leave the safety and security of this formative and nurturing environment to assume their rightly earned roles within the vast realm of education. If we have done

our job of adequately preparing them for what lies ahead and they have done their job of availing themselves of the learning opportunities provided, what can they—and we—expect? As Elder Henry B. Eyring prophesied:

I will simply tell you: The day will come that that capacity to influence people around you for good will have you singled out as one of the great leaders in whatever place you're in. They will not quite know why, but you will know that the reason you are being singled out is not because of your innate gifts as a leader but because you have done what the Savior would do—learned how to, and did.⁶ ∞

NOTES:

- 1 From Patricia Polacco, *Thank you, Mr. Falker*.
- 2 John 13:35.
- 3 Matthew 5:16.
- 4 Moroni 7:18.
- 5 Proverbs 3:5, 6.
- 6 *A Steady, Upward Course* (BYU-Idaho Devotional, September 18, 2001).