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Notes from an Accidental Teacher

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What builds a solid teacher? The right setting, a sense of calling, a zeal for learning, and a renewable energy source.

I've always liked the title of Anne Tyler's book *The Accidental Tourist*, perhaps because much of my life—and certainly my teaching career—seems accidental. I'd love to say that I never wanted to be anything but a teacher. In truth, I aspired not to be a teacher.

My mother was a teacher—a very strong one. For one year in my early adolescence, I went to the school where she taught. It was a dismal year for me. I was the new kid in my class, having just moved with my parents from another town. I was too tall for 6th grade. My hair was too long (until I made an argument for getting it cut, and then it was too short, too straight, and too stubborn). The school was very different from my prior school, and I couldn't quite figure it out. I was pathologically shy.

The teachers in the school were good people and good educators. That made no difference. From time to time, a teacher would say something to my mom about me and the comment would innocently make its way into dinner-table talk at home. I hated the feeling of being watched and talked about. I vowed with rancorous fervor that I would never under any circumstances be a teacher. I didn't major in education in college. My first job out of college was stultifying and had nothing to do with teaching. One Friday in late October, finding the morning at work to be particularly tedious, I read the want ads in the local paper at lunch. There was a teaching vacancy in a town an hour away that I had never heard of. I took the afternoon off, applied for the job, and began teaching the following Monday.

To say that I didn't know what I was doing when I entered the classroom redefines the word understatement. I planned to finish out the year in that little rural school and then get a "real" job. That was four decades ago, and I've never since had the inclination to do anything but teach.

Nonetheless, my career evolved—as it began—more by happenstance than by design. Teaching works for me, my work is satisfying, and I feel proud—at least on many days—of what I do. But when I reflect on why all this is true, one thing is clear: It's not because I had a clear sense of direction at the outset!

I've learned a great deal about high-quality teaching from things that worked in my classroom—and things that didn't—and from watching teachers whose work speaks of excellence. Of the many elements and practices that make up the architecture of effective teaching, I offer here five that I have come to believe are foundational.

## **Find a Place That Fits You**

Teaching is hard. Teachers at every stage need to be cultivated. That's certainly the case in the novice years, when a teacher is practicing who he or she will become. It's important for each fledgling teacher to find an environment that nurtures fearless practice and discovery. Early in my journey as an accidental teacher, I taught in three settings for roughly a year each. In each place, I learned an immense amount, and each place contributed significantly to my understanding of teaching. Two of the schools had relatively toxic environments; the third was neutral. I'm not sorry I worked in any of these settings, but I would have been a very different teacher—and not as good a one—had I remained in any of them for long.

The fourth school in which I taught was precisely the right setting for me during the years I was there. It was relatively small; in a larger place, I would have been lost. It was, when I began teaching there, fairly unsophisticated in its pedagogy and expectations. That, too, was right for me; I'd have felt like a failure in a cutting-edge place. The community was embracing; and I needed the sense of being known, welcomed, and trusted. The district leadership was, for the most part, open to new ideas. In that way, the school was an incubator for creative teaching.

During the years I worked at this school, the community, the district, and the school changed in a way that mirrored my own development. We grew up together, which continued to make the place fresh and challenging for me for nearly two decades. Leaving there was wrenching. I wanted more than anything to continue teaching in that place that stretched and nurtured me.

Serendipitously—accidentally?—an opportunity to be part of a university faculty opened up just at the point when the district leadership changed. I would not have accepted the university position, however—I would not even have noticed it—except that the new leadership felt pernicious to me and I sensed that remaining in the school would erode my growth rather than contribute to it. I wasn't able to articulate all my thinking at that point, but here's what I know now: The places in which we teach shape who and what we become. If they don't feed us as human beings and as teachers, we atrophy. In teaching and in life, if we are not growing, we are losing ground. So a school, school district, and community need to be the right fit at the right time to fuel our professional and personal evolution.

## **Understand Teaching as a Calling**

A job is something that has to be done to receive a paycheck. All legitimate jobs are worthy, of course, but a calling is something more. It challenges us to be more than we think we can be and to draw on capacities we didn't quite know we had. A calling becomes a way of life, offering us the opportunity to affect individuals in a profound, enduring way.

I once asked two nurses in difficult hospital settings why they each did what they did. The first said, "because I am most fully alive when I'm here." The second responded, "because I can give people hope when they are in pain and companionship when that's all that's left." I found it interesting that neither spoke about the actual medicine they were practicing or the routines they followed every day. Those things were integral to their success, yet these two people did not see their knowledge and skills as ends, but rather as tools in service of something greater. If I get sick, I hope I'll have the good fortune to be aided by someone who is knowledgeable about medicine, but who also, like these two nurses, feels called to do everything feasible to help me heal—and who feels most fully alive while doing so.

Great teachers are like those nurses. They feel called to connect content and kids. They understand that they interpret shared human wisdom, codified in the academic disciplines, to young people who need to make sense of life. They look at both the content they teach and the people whom they ask to learn that content with considerable reverence, and they find what Steven Levy (1996) calls the genius in both content and in students. They dignify whom and what they teach by making the act of learning dynamic and compelling.

### **Know You Don't Know**

Excellent teachers never fall prey to the belief that they are good enough. The best teachers I have known are humbled by how much more they need to learn. They don't add to the chorus of voices chiming, "I already do that."

High-quality educators are determined and often voracious learners. They seek daily to understand their content more fully, to probe the mystery of the young lives before them more deeply, and to extend their pedagogical reach beyond yesterday's boundaries. They know that the parameters of their own lives are extended every time they extend possibilities in students' lives.

These teachers seek out the best professional development opportunities. They read about education. When a district or school fails to support their learning meaningfully, they become their own professional developers.

Two years ago, as I conducted a multiday workshop in the late spring, I became aware of one older man within the group. His questions were interesting, and it was clear he was engaged with the ideas. At a break, this man came up to ask me another question. During our conversation, he remarked wistfully that he would soon be retiring after 40 years as a classroom teacher. My first response was to ask him why he'd chosen to come to a professional development session on a complex topic so close to his retirement date.

"Oh," he replied, almost surprised by my question, "I promised myself that I would learn something new every single day I was a teacher. I've kept that promise for four decades. I'll keep it until the day I close the classroom door behind me." He paused for a moment and continued, "How else could I have been the teacher my students needed?"

## **Associate Yourself with Quality**

The pursuit of quality occurs on at least three levels.

Develop friendships with colleagues who set high standards. Such educators are in every school, and their partnership provides both light and energy for professional growth. It's as true in the teaching life as in high school that we take on the attributes of those we hang out with. When we spend what little free time we have at school with colleagues who watch the clock or who have ready reasons to dismiss whatever threatens the status quo, we're more likely to have our aspirations lowered than raised.

I am a better teacher many times over because of people like Diane Wiegel, Judy Schlim, Debbie Kiser, Nancy Brittle, Sandra Mitchell, Mary Ann Smith, Dick Rose, and so many other colleagues who constantly reminded me of what excellence in the classroom looks like—and what is required to achieve that level of quality. Those teachers are roughly my own age. But I also learned much from Mrs. Gardner, who taught next to me during my accidental first year of teaching. It was her final year as a classroom teacher. She modeled excellence in everything she did, answered my naïve questions efficiently, listened when I was discouraged, and offered suggestions she knew were within my reach. She informally provided my first meaningful course in education over the eight months that I knew her.

As a more seasoned teacher, I learned from top-rate new guys on the block like George Murphy. Teachers like George, infused with the brash energy of youth, brought knowledge and strategies that I found fresh and renewing. For example, George taught his high school biology students to understand the scientific process in an indirect and potent way by involving them with a mock archaeological dig staged by students from the previous year, which involved hypothesizing about what was revealed by the artifacts they discovered. Then he reinforced that understanding by having them stage a dig for the next year's biology students. Through this project, students had to encounter uncertainty, look for clues, hypothesize, test conclusions, and so on.

There's something to be learned from everyone, and there's rarely a reason to be unwelcoming to anyone. Nonetheless, it makes a difference when professional friendships multiply your effectiveness rather than deplete it. Develop a keen sense of what quality looks like. Such organizations as the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Middle School Association, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals have delineated the attributes of high-quality teaching. Many books now exist that break down the elements of great teaching—Charlotte Danielson's *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* (ASCD, 2007); James Stronge's *Qualities of Effective Teachers* (ASCD, 2007); Ron Brandt's *Powerful Learning* (ASCD, 1998); or the National Research Council's *How People Learn* (National Academies Press, 2000), to name just a few. These would have been a godsend to me as a young

teacher. I was largely on my own to discover the characteristics of high-quality work; my focus would have been sharper and my progress faster had I had such resources to draw on. Great teaching is both a science and an art, and many educators who are both scientists and artists can provide rubrics that point the way to excellence.

Seek quality from students. We compliment young people by asking them for their best and supporting them in achieving it. Ron Berger (2003) talks about building "an ethic of excellence in the classroom" so that students take pride in producing work that reflects their highest possible effort. Clearly this not only benefits both individual learners and society, but also benefits teachers. When we ask students to give their very best, we are obligated to be sure the work we assign is worthy of that level of effort. In learning how to explain quality to young learners, we become clearer about how it looks in our own work.

### **Generate Your Own Energy**

It's a reality that in every human endeavor, those who are most successful work the hardest. In *Outliers*, in which Malcolm Gladwell (2008) describes boundary-breaking people in fields from technology to music, Gladwell notes that it was relentless effort more than raw talent that helped these professionals reshape their fields. We have no reason to assume otherwise in teaching.

Most teachers can mount a defense that they work hard. What makes the difference in the work ethic of high-quality teachers is that their work is regenerative; they draw energy from what they do. They achieve the state that Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls *flow*, a highly satisfying condition in which an individual feels aligned with a task and the work becomes its own reward. Some educators experience flow in teaching because they find their content fascinating, some because they find it rewarding to make a difference in students' lives, some because they love the creativity involved in making instruction work for a diverse group of students, and some because of the personal growth that stems from their work. Whatever the reason, teaching generates their energy rather than depletes it.

Most excellent teachers I know have "alternative energy sources," passions outside the classroom that renew their teaching energy. Those passions not only feed their teaching, but inform it as well. One teacher explained that his love of mountain climbing revealed things about himself and about the nature of teaching that he would likely never have understood without that pursuit. Another teacher said, "I give a lot of my life to teaching, and I wouldn't have it any other way. But I am a better teacher because of the times I can leave it behind for a while and give myself fully to something else."

There is no off-the-shelf blueprint for building a highly successful teacher. Yet excellent teaching, like excellence in all human endeavors, comes in significant measure from the right fit, a higher purpose, hard work, and perseverance. The truly good news is that those things are within our **reach**.

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