

## LETTER FROM A FORMER STUDENT

March 2008

Dear Walter,

It has taken me a long time to locate you. I hope you remember me from the classes that I took with you at the University of Cincinnati when I was a student there in 1979-84. I was the one who did a 25 page report in an attempt to get you to change a B+ to an A! Yes, and I am still neurotic.... and you did change the B+! That however, was not why I loved you so! I see from your website you have taken an interesting and very worthwhile path through the last 25 years. Good for you.

Maybe it's just the nostalgia, but I look back at those college days as one of my favorite times in life. I really miss the research part. I looked into finishing my PhD, but I don't think it is going to happen.

I am in Las Vegas now, and of all things, teaching 4th grade. I decided to take it easy in my old age and do something relaxing. The kids are so funny at this age ... just entering hormonal hell but still a little sweet! It's a cushy, private school so they are definitely sheltered and spoiled though. I ran my own website development business and an exotic bird farm for 15 years. It was fun, different and definitely required lots of energy and long hours. So, teaching is definitely taking it easy.

Let me know when you will be back to California. I'd love to visit you out there sometime. Hope to hear from you soon.

In closing, I just want to say this.

After all these years, I still remember you as my favorite teacher. Never, in all the years since then, have I felt as challenged and as motivated as I did in your classes. I also think that the compassion I have felt my entire adult life for other people, especially other cultures, was nurtured and strengthened from seeing those qualities manifested in you. So, this is a big thank you for that.

Debbie

## WALTER WILLIAMS REPLY:

Dear Debbie,

Thank you so much for your touching email. I was touched by your eloquent words, despite the fact that I cannot remember all those things you refer to. I have been teaching for thirty-five years, at five universities on two continents, and have had so many thousands of students I cannot remember 99.9% of their names (I am really bad with names). I can hardly remember my own name sometimes. I have learned the hard way that there is a reason professors have the reputation for being absent-minded. Our brains are overwhelmed with so much thinking that anything non-essential gets tossed into the recycle bin of the cortex.

If you liked my class on American Indians, you might be interested in my most recent book *TWO SPIRITS: A STORY OF LIFE WITH THE NAVAJO* (Lethe Press). I poured into that book a lot of what I have learned over the years about Navajo philosophy of life that many people have found valuable in applying to their own life.

Please do not take personally my inability to remember these things. Not only have I forgotten everything about most of my former students, but I can hardly recall things about my own life. Every once in a while my mother will be talking about my childhood, and she will remember

things I did about which I have not the slightest recollection. Sometimes I think she must have raised a secret brother I don't know about.

So I apologize if my memory is a blank. I am exhibit A in the need for people to keep a journal. I wish so much that I had started writing down my thoughts and experiences when I was younger. Please tell that to every young person you meet. You can go through life and accomplish a lot, but then by the time you have all those kudos you are so old that you forget all those things you did. It is hopeless, unless you write it down at the time.

What I find touching about your email, and the fact that you persevered so long finally to locate me, is not those long forgotten memories, but what you say about my continuing impact on your life for the past quarter century. What higher compliment could someone receive than to say what you said. Thank you for that.

You should also thank yourself for saying that, because you have gotten a benefit from expressing what is important to you. Life is so full of regrets, and one of the biggest regrets I have is that I never went back and told those teachers who had such a strong impact on me how important they were to me. Though this happened when I was in first grade I can still see the pained expression on the face of my teacher Mrs. Barber, who when I complained about some poor kids wearing such shoddy clothes, responded, "Even if they are wearing rags they have just as much right as anyone else to receive the blessings of an education." She taught me not to be haughty toward the poor, before I was even old enough to understand that my own grandparents had grown up in poverty. I remember my fifth grade teacher Mrs. Parmalee, who had such a stately aristocratic air in all she did. One time when I was acting up in class, she looked down her long nose at me and exclaimed, "Walter, a little gentleman does not act like that." She taught me to always strive to improve myself, and to aim higher in life. So many caring teachers added this quality and that quality to the person I became.

When I graduated from high school my teacher Mrs. Kravitz wrote in my yearbook: "I want a copy of your first book." I was stunned when I read that. I loved to read books, but it had never seriously occurred to me that I might actually write a book myself. Her words put that idea into my brain. And not only did she say that she wanted a book I wrote, she specified my FIRST book. That put into my mind not only that I might write a book, but I might write more than one book. If she had said she thought I would publish ten books I would probably never have believed her, but lo and behold that is exactly how many books I have published.

After I published my first book, SOUTHEASTERN INDIANS SINCE THE REMOVAL ERA (University of Georgia Press), I contacted my high school to send a copy to her. Unfortunately, she had left the school system and no one knew her present location. By that time I wanted also give a copy of that book to my two favorite undergraduate professors, Bell Wiley and Robert Sellen, but by that time both of them had died. And now I am sure every one of those outstanding teachers must be long gone. So, I have no opportunity to tell any of them what you just told me. I have a longing that can never be filled for the rest of my life. It is my loss.

Please, as you go through life, never hesitate to tell people how much you appreciate the help that they gave to you, and the impact that they had on you. Because you never know how soon you will lose that opportunity forever.

You have lived long enough now to understand that, for those students who reach out and grab the opportunities that are there, the time spent in college can indeed be the best time of life. But, like people standing in front of a huge banquet table who are too cautious, addled or distracted by ephemeral things to load up their plate with all the many choices of delicious foods, so many young people go through their university years only getting a few bites of the feast that is laid out before them.

Even in your brief email I can tell that you are one of those people who did in fact feast heartily at the table of academia. More than any grade you received, more than any long-forgotten facts I spewed forth in lectures, or even the certificate of graduation that you were awarded from the university, the really valuable things that you received are exactly the two things that you said. First: to be challenged--and challenged hard--but instead of being defeated by challenges to transform them into motivation to always do your best at everything you attempt, and to become a better person as a result. Second: to develop a high sense of compassion. In Buddhist philosophy, being compassionate toward all human beings and all sentient beings is valued extremely highly. Compassion for others is right below enlightenment and Buddhahood. Therefore, I take it as a high compliment that you would perceive me as actually manifesting compassion in my own life. And I take it as an indication of your wisdom that you have incorporated that strong sense of compassion into your life.

Academia is great, and I owe academia a lot. But please do not regret that you did not complete a Ph.D. degree. There are so many ways to make a positive contribution in the world. It sounds to me like you are doing extremely important work in your fourth grade teaching. And the fact that you see it as easy is truly incredible to me.

Your words remind me of the time when I was living on the Cherokee Indian reservation in 1973. I was a Ph.D. candidate at the time, and still in my early twenties. My best friend Gillian Jackson was a fourth grade teacher. He was needed by the Cherokee Tribal Council, and he asked me to substitute for him. I asked what subjects he was teaching, and he said one long history class in the morning, and music all afternoon. Well, I thought teaching history would be a snap, but to be sure I stayed up late preparing my lecture. However, I had never taught music before and I was really nervous about those classes. When the children came in for their morning history class I began quite hopefully. The kids would listen aptly with genuine interest for awhile. I had really prepared thoroughly. But their attention spans were simply not big enough to fill up the whole class time. As I lectured away in great detail about early American history some of them started chatting with their friends. I could keep the rapt attention of about one third of the class. The other third talked with their friends. And the other third, to my increasing panic, started doing things. They pulled at each others' clothing and hair, they took down artwork from the walls and folded them into little airplanes—or worse, into tight balls—and threw them at each other. Nothing I said seemed to make the slightest difference to them. They smiled politely to me, said OK, and then resumed what they were doing. Plastic straws appeared at the ready, and soon they were shooting little spitballs at each other. Those who were

hit on the back of the head would come up to me at the front to tell me that so-and-so had hit them with a spitball, as if I were a blind teacher who had no idea what was going on in front of me. "NO," yelled the accused student, "It wasn't me who hit you, it was Joey." Whereupon Joey countered, in an even louder voice, "You big liar! You know it was you." "Was not." "Was." "Was not." "Was." Etc. etc.

By this time the principal had heard the racket from his office down the hall, and he came into the room and immediately got the students to be quiet. I was amazed how he did this. Nothing in my academic training as a graduate student had prepared me for how to discipline children. I was used to teaching people eighteen and over. That was that day I learned I was not a disciplinarian.

The principal and I collected all the straws, and he was obsessive in carefully cutting up all the straws into little pieces that he then threw into the trash can. There was something definitely neurotic about the look in his eyes as he did this. I apologized to the principal for the disturbance and promised it would not happen again. He gave me this little empathetic smile. I was green behind the ears and he knew it. Doubtless he had seen this all too many times before in his long career.

There was one fatal flaw with the principal's technique. As soon as he left the room his intimidating effect left as well. Gradually the chatting started back. I tried to get the chatterers to talk about history, but I might as well have asked them to recite Latin. This time, deprived of their straws, they started throwing pencils at each other. I was seriously panicked by this time. A flying pencil could put someone's eye out. "Stop, STOP," I was shouting, but suddenly they seemed not to understand the English language. A previously sedate girl suddenly lunged for a pencil being held by the boy sitting in the next row of desks. By the crazed look in her eyes I was sure she was going to ram the pencil right up that boy's nose. Wondering how I was going to explain to a distraught parent why their son was in the hospital emergency room, I lunged for the pencil myself. I confiscated every pencil in sight after that. Gone were my thoughts about how the students were going to take notes on my history lecture. At this point I just wanted to get all the pencils hidden in my briefcase. I had visions of the principal coming back in with a large axe and smashing all the pencils into tiny slivers.

Just as I was collecting the last pencils, and thought all my troubles were over, two boys at the back of the room climbed up on top of parallel desks and engaged in a pushing contest until both desks fell over with a loud crash. That generated a lot of laughter, whooping and hollering, and banging on desks.

Now suddenly the door was thrown open like a starting gate at a horserace as the principal came rushing in, yelling at the children at the top of his lungs. He scared me to death, but not those kids. The look in his eyes this time was definitely crazed. Gone was any look of empathy for me. I was definitely an interruption of his day.

After the principal ranted and raved at them, the students looked genuinely contrite. They promised to be quiet. Who could doubt such sincere expression on these angelic faces? This

time, as the principal stormed out, he gave me this look of total disgust. How could I be so incompetent that I could not keep a bunch of 4<sup>th</sup> graders quiet?

Amazingly enough, this time the students sat quietly and started listening again. But, just as I was regaining my confidence as a history teacher, the rule of thirds returned. I could genuinely keep a third of the kids fascinated, but the problem is that each individual child shifted in and out between those thirds.

So, in what seemed to me like mere minutes after the principal had gone back to his office, probably about the time he got really absorbed in whatever he was doing, the pandemonium started building again. Making up for the lost time when they had kept their mouths shut, the kids increased their volume geometrically not arithmetically. I could not believe it as my alternating demands and pleas to them to be quiet were tuned out like radio ads. I steeled myself for the door to be flung from its hinges as the principal bulldozed his way into my classroom for the third time. This time, I was quite sure, he would hack me into little pieces with his battleaxe.

What happened next almost sent me into an epileptic fit. An ear-splitting alarm rang threateningly. I was sure it must be a bomb threat. But the kids jumped up and yelled excitedly, “Lunchtime!”

I had literally been saved by the bell. Mercifully, twelve o’clock had arrived and the history class was over. I was so shaken by the morning’s experience that I thought about leaving the school right then. If I had done this poorly in the history class, I could only imagine what a catastrophe I would be in the afternoon music class. I decided I would not go to lunch, but would walk unnoticed to the outside, and from there decide what to do. I really wanted to leave, but I felt a sense of responsibility to my friend Gillian to hold his classes for him. After all, I had promised.

As I was trying to decide what to do, two teachers I knew came to the door and insisted that I go with them to the lunchroom. I had to eat, they stated firmly, so I could get through the afternoon. Reluctantly, I went with them to the lunchroom. As soon as I came out of the line with my tray of food, I was shocked that I heard calls from different parts of the cafeteria: “Mr. Williams, come sit here.” “No, Mr. Williams, come sit at our table.” “Mr. Williams, over here.” If they had paid as much attention to what I said in class as they did about where I was going to sit for lunch, I would have had an easier time of it.

I was surprised and appreciative of their desire for me to sit with them, but I opted to eat lunch with the two teachers I knew. Thankfully the principal was nowhere to be seen. I confided to them about the morning disasters. I could not believe it; the teachers just laughed, “Oh, ha, ha, ha. Those kids! They always act like that when a substitute teacher comes. Isn’t that funny. Ha, ha, ha.” Well, no, I didn’t think it was funny in the least. Between flying pencils and a rampaging principal, I thought I was lucky to have survived unscathed. I told them I was really worried about the upcoming music class. “Oh, don’t worry. Ha, ha, ha. You’ll be fine.”

Against my better judgment, I took my briefcase and went back to the classroom. As I entered the scene of my destruction, I became even more fearful. Within a few minutes, the little darlings came filing back into the room.

“What’re we gonna do now?” questions rang out. Not knowing what to say, I said, “music class.” “Yay,” went up the enthusiastic cry. At that point I think they feared another history lesson as much as I did. Two girls ran to a corner and pulled out a stack of books. Without any direction from me they passed out a book to each person in the room. Amazingly, no book was thrown or torn open.

“Mr. Williams, who gets to choose which song to sing?” “Me, me, Mr. Williams. Me,” rang out several voices. At that point I had an idea. “Whoever answers a question correctly from the history class this morning gets to choose the song.” Then, before they could object, I asked a question. A hand of a little girl who had said nothing all morning went up. She answered correctly. So I let her choose a song. As soon as she chose, everyone turned to that page in the songbook. They obviously knew this songbook well. They sang the song quite nicely. After that, I asked another question from my morning lecture. Amazingly, someone answered this question correctly also. How could they possibly have learned that information, since they were talking so much?

And so it went. Throughout the afternoon, I asked a question about American history and they told me an answer. Even if the answer was wrong, it was still a good guess. They actually had been thinking about what I was saying after all. And if they gave a correct answer they seemed genuinely happy to be able to choose the song for the whole class to sing. Not one person objected to the choice of the song. No pulling of hair or throwing of paper wads. I was totally surprised at the result.

The music class, my greatest fear, turned out to be the highlight of the day for me. At least I could get them all to sing in unison, even if I could only get a third of them at a time to listen to my lesson. They could—and did—sing as loud as they wanted. As long as they were all singing nicely, their loud voices brought no chastising from the principal. So they, and I, sang our lungs out all afternoon.

From that day forth, every time I went anywhere in the community, I was sure to hear a child’s voice calling “Mr. Williams, Mr. Williams.” They would rush up to me like I was their best long-lost friend, begging me to sit with them or do something. They really were totally sweet. I adored them all.

But I never went near an elementary school classroom ever again.

So, when you say that teaching fourth grade is so easy, I am in total admiration. You must be an outstanding teacher. I doubt that anything I do as a college professor is anywhere near as difficult as what you do with those kids.

Just remember, please, not to take those kids for granted. Because something you say could have as great an impact on them as what those inspiring teachers said to me when I was a boy. So for

all those children who never tell you how much you mean to them, do not make the false conclusion that you are not having an impact. I am their mouthpiece as I speak for them, and I tell you of my admiration for the important work that you are doing. I express my appreciation for the way you challenge your students to learn as much as possible, and motivate your students always to do their best. I express my thanks for teaching them to be compassionate by manifesting compassion in your own treatment of others. I state these words of appreciation for you, and I offer these words of gratitude for all those teachers that I lost my chance to say it to, so many years ago. Thank you. Walter