

An Apple for the Teacher

Suzan Lake, East High School Graduation Speech, June 5, 2015

An apple for the teacher. Doesn't that sound like a great reward from students? Or is it just another form of apple polishing? Before I really thought it through, I secretly longed for that apple, so I bought an apple for myself. A silver necklace with a silver apple core, dangling around my neck. At least I had part of an apple, and I could pretend that students had given it to me. Now after years of teaching, I would have the apple core, something to show for years of trying. I wore it quietly without explaining to people that I was only worth the core, not the whole apple.

Instead of languishing about it, I decided to earn the right to wear that apple by choosing to be the kind of teacher who earned appledom. The criteria? To earn my reward by offering students the real fruits of learning: growth, honesty, confidence, hard work, involvement, joy. That sounds so idealistic and impossible, but for me it was true. I knew the demons that students have to fight - fear, pain, isolation, complacency, despair, others' power and control, and the meaninglessness of school. I was ready. I geared up for battle.

First I knew my own humanness and reviewed how I had coped in high school. I had been there. Horrors!

- I pulled buttons off Carol Meservy's gym blouse because I could. She cried. I was triumphant.
- only once in college I copied answers from notes I smuggled into the test. (I've NEVER told anyone that.)
- I gossiped about other girls that I was jealous of.
- But to counteract, I tutored Lavell for a whole week so he could pass a spelling test. I made a redeeming attempt.
- I was afraid I wasn't good enough.

And what have I watched students do?

- copy each other's papers and cheat without guilt
- be so afraid of coming to class unprepared that they sluff and lie about it
- make rude comments about other students
- shun students they want to ignore
- not read the novels or complete the writing assignments
- treat school as a social gathering, not a place of true learning
- write meaningless papers that are really teacher-pleasers.
- avoid actually being curious or learning in depth

My job? To help counteract all that has become stale in the classroom. I longed for students to know who they really are. That meant peeling back the layers of callousness that had deadened the soft hearts of my students.

Listen carefully to the key that must light up students' lives, all of your lives. LISTEN. Are you ready?

There are times when you are going to do well, and times when you're going to fail. But neither the doing well, nor the failure is the measure of success. The measure of success is what you think about what you've done. Let me put that another way: the way to be happy is to like yourself and the way to like yourself is to do only things that make you proud. That's the real reason not to lie or cheat or turn away in fear. The person who you're with most in life is yourself, and if you don't like yourself, you're always with somebody you don't like.

So the fight is between your best and worst self. I hunger to teach students to observe, feel, discover, organize, analyze, interpret, embrace, and love. That's all I want to do: humanize students, mix literature into them, teach them to birth their hearts into written words, and let them float on the electricity of their discoveries.

Let me give you some examples of students who have come to their best selves over this last year. Concentrating on making meaning out of their lives has taken time and patience. These examples come from wrestling with all facades and appearances and desires to have me or other students like them. They worked at learning what it feels like to be open and vulnerable and honest with themselves, learning that centers in the blood and nerves, not just the mind. These are snippets from final exams I gave to my classes, asking them to discuss what they have discovered this year:

One of the best lessons that I learned this entire year was to not live my life in fear. Fear and honesty go hand in hand as two opposite sides of a coin.

I experience triumph in looking for just the right words in my writing. It's funny that it is so difficult to write honestly.

I was letting the world slip by me. I wasn't taking the time to notice how light hit tree tops or how water drips from the sink. To me, only big events mattered.

Learning how to obtain deeper understanding of literature is what amazed me the most because I did not expect it, especially coming from a kid who hates to read.

I lie about my feelings. I was scared to be honest about feelings because I have spent all of high school being a little faker. I never showed people how I really felt.

The person I was in August never had enough courage to comment in class. Consequently, I read for the teacher; I didn't read for me.

The written word captures all the angst, joy, and jubilation that makes being a human such a thrilling rollercoaster.

You made me write the painful truth, and then you taught me that to write the painful truth is to take away its power over me, and what a gift that has been.

I also learned that I need to stop letting fear prevent me from projecting my own voice through my writing.

It took me a while but I realized that I didn't have to find out what books meant to others, but what they meant to me.

I didn't believe that I could learn how to become a better person through literature, but this year proved me wrong.

Literature is not about the plot of the novel; it is about what the words make us feel and what they tell us about ourselves.

I have learned how to better write only by learning how to see.

I have always been so focused on doing it right and giving the teacher what they want to hear, but I now write from the heart and with pleasure.

I have blossomed into someone who no longer writes for the sake of a grade or completion of an assignment, but with the intention of fully expressing myself and striving to gain a deeper understanding of this crazy world we live in.

I have now learned how to find pieces of myself in characters and create an emotional bond with them.

I have learned how to read and write fearlessly.

And what does all this have to do with the apple that students could give to the teacher? That good-looking apple? I finally learned that it's a disguised peace offering that lets the appearance of tantalizing fruit hide all the deceptive devices that keep students and teenagers from being honest and true to themselves. I now perceived that apple filled with fears, deceptions, laziness, avoidance, meaningless schoolwork.

One by one, I watched my students take bites out of that tainted apple, shudder, and spit the apple out, destroying that teacher-tempter fruit that looked so good, leaving only the apple core. Now I see with my inner soul. Isn't the core the heart? The center with the most meaning? I am the luckiest of the lucky, the blessed of the blessed because I wear the silver apple core, forged through the fearless inquiry of students and their intense desire to be vulnerable and true. Live on, you exalted creatures. You have become the lords and ladies of the Order of the Apple Core. You are my dearest brats!