
The Teaching Presence

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“We teach who we are.”¹
“Walk your talk.”

Or, as Emerson put it, “What you are speaks so loudly that I can’t hear what you say you are.”

Beyond technique and curriculum, the most effective teaching also includes a more elusive quality that profoundly affects the learning that is possible – the teacher’s own way of being with students.

We celebrate those precious moments when we embody a “presence” that carries the class to a place where minds and hearts are moved and genuine connections occur. Some teachers just naturally live there most of the time. But how do we find that place? What qualities of teaching or being do we develop to discover what I have called the “teaching presence”?

I have wrestled with this question for almost two decades as I have worked with thousands of adolescents and teachers. As I witnessed myself and others feel “on” one day and “off” the next, I felt called to find words to describe this elusive state and to help teachers strengthen this aspect of their work.

Not Presence

Ironically, the words first came when

¹ This is an unpublished extended version of the “Teaching Presence” article that has been published elsewhere in shorter forms.

I observed a class in which a teacher was going through the motions, with competent methods but with his heart closed and the spirit of the work utterly lost.

This class has no beginning. It just starts. There is no gathering of energies, moods, and personalities. He does not look at each child, even in the process of taking roll. There is no effort to connect, to see who is really there today.

The children rock raucously at their desks. Not contained, their energy threatens to spill, fall, topple over, and cause harm. With no call to stillness from the teacher, students interrupt frequently, and one boy gets up and moves around. Side conversations erupt. And still there is no call to focus, to respect those speaking—and no call to a sense of purpose.

He begins the exercise—hesitantly, mechanically. It is an exercise about limits, about experiencing what it feels like to reach one’s limit and be pushed beyond it. The group is asked to listen to a number sequence and then write it down. Each time, the sequence is longer until it goes beyond the capacity of memory.

When the teacher asks them why he had done the exercise, one boy says, “Because it’s good for us to concentrate, to challenge our minds. Kids need to be quiet sometimes and concentrate.”

It was not the answer he was looking

for, so he doesn't notice the insight in the boy's words. He passes an opportunity to acknowledge and build on the wisdom of a child and to teach a lesson about stillness, focus, and about the shift in the atmosphere of the room and how good it felt. It is an opportunity to recognize a call from this child for guidance to that stillness.

But it is not the answer he was looking for, so it goes by. And throughout, I notice that this teacher is not open to the moment, not willing to work with the surprises and wisdom that come up and validate a child for his or her gifts.

I begin to realize that this teacher is not really present. Consequently, he can't really see what is going on. Several children never say a word, and the teacher does nothing to bring them in. One boy raises his hand repeatedly for long periods, and the teacher never notices him.

I also begin to feel that his heart is closed. I recognize it from a tone, a deadness in the voice, a mechanical quality of going through the motions—asking questions, getting answers, without ever really hearing the answers, let alone what is being said between the lines. His unwillingness to protect the children from the rudeness of others also suggests to me that his heart is closed to what he and others are feeling.

That teacher gave me a clear picture of what can happen when the lesson plan is more important than what I have named "the teaching presence." We can have the best curricula available, train teachers in technique and theory, but our students will be

unsafe and our programs hollow if we do not provide opportunities for teachers to develop their own souls, their hearts, their own social and emotional intelligence.

Students yearn for a curriculum that invites them to share what matters most to them. Such learning comes alive with connections that bring meaning, higher order thinking skills and motivation.² This means entering the territory of heart, community and soul. But in doing so, students are very sensitive to the qualities of their guide. They are reluctant to open their hearts unless they feel their teachers are on the journey themselves—working on personal, as well as curriculum integration.

Let us look now at three qualities—discipline, presence and an open heart—that evoke the "teaching presence" in the classroom.

Respectful Discipline

"To believe that one can teach respect through coercion is to confuse respect with obedience." (Brendtro and Long, 1996)

If we want our classroom to be a place for students to share what is deeply meaningful to them, to take the risks, ask the questions, and make the mistakes that allow for creativity and intellectual growth, we must take responsibility for creating an environment that is safe. Only then will they respond with their heart and spirit and ask

² See the work of Renate Caine, Parker Palmer, Nel Noddings, Rachael Kessler.

fundamental questions that might seem foolish. A teacher alone cannot create safe space—it is a goal and a process that must be shared by the whole group. But the teacher is the *guide* for how a safe place is created for the human heart, and the *shepherd* who protects when danger appears. Respectful discipline is an essential tool in creating this safety.

A respectful climate encourages children to speak from the heart. Speaking from the heart is what makes a class come alive; it is what engages other children to want to listen. And when they listen to someone speaking from this depth and vulnerability, their own hearts open to that person and they feel compassion. What was at first respectful behavior becomes true respect for someone they may have previously disliked or dismissed. “Respectful relationships ... have a way of sustaining and replicating themselves,” writes Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot. “Respect generates respect; a modest loaf becomes many.” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2000, p. 10)

What is this quality of discipline that comes so naturally to some teachers and continues to elude others?

- Respectful discipline includes: clarity of purpose,
- a positive image of discipline,
- inner strength to be able to risk being disliked,
- understanding and willingness to use one’s whole person in an expression of personal power.

Clarity of Purpose

Each teacher must find his own words to convey simply and clearly

the purpose of welcoming a more personal dimension to learning. Then the teacher can create a partnership with his or her students to establish the conditions for safety that will allow authentic dialogue to unfold. Early in the semester, I ask “What are the agreements you need so you can really be yourself here – so you can take risks to grow and learn, so you can talk about what really matters to you?” I write their words and encourage them to clarify their needs:

- no interruptions;
- no put-downs, “bagging” or “dissing”;
- no judging;
- respect;
- honesty;
- the right to be silent;
- honor the privacy of what is spoken.³

Together we make a list, which looks remarkably similar from class to class, region to region, and year to year.

I remind my students that only when each of us honors these agreements can our classroom become a safe place. While I can’t ensure this alone, I will do all that I can to protect the sanctity of this agreement.

For me, it was crucial to see that my primary responsibility is to the group, not to individuals. This by no means implies an indifference to

³ “Confidentiality” is a problematic ground rule for both students and parents. I generally do not recommend including it as an expectation. Please see the PassageWorks Institute website for guidelines.

individuals -- what makes the group work is the genuine caring we feel for each person. But when an individual is sabotaging the group effort, then the priority must be to protect the group, which indirectly benefits that individual as well. The child who is disruptive is calling out for limits on his or her destructive power.⁴

A Positive Image of Discipline

Many of us came to adulthood and teaching in an era in which discipline was a dirty word. Its connotations were authoritarian, repressive and punitive. The word discipline conjured up a picture of someone with power using it to diminish or humiliate someone without it.

"Tell us a story about an experience from your childhood that comes up when you hear the word 'discipline'?" I ask teachers in my courses. Some stories are inspiring. Others disturb us deeply.

I was in first grade and my little friend Saul kept squirming and speaking out of turn, interrupting like he always did. Well, it was the final straw. Our teacher grabbed the masking tape from her desk and taped his mouth shut. We were all stone silent. She didn't stop with his mouth. She just kept winding that

⁴ Students who sabotage group safety often carry wounds they dare not feel in school. If anyone in the group is safe enough to express genuine emotion, these youth may be triggered to feel their own overwhelming pain. Knowing this can help us deal compassionately with saboteurs in ways that both protect the group but also relieve the anxiety of these troubled youth.

tape around and around his face and body until she had mummified this little child. I have never been so afraid.

The dark side of discipline reveals much to us about what we often react against. Many teachers are drawn to teaching from the heart because they have a strong desire to empower children and to foster the natural blossoming of an inherently good seed.

They experience a contradiction between their image of discipline and their image of nourishing and empowering children. How can they "draw out" what is inherent in the child (the original meaning of the word educate) with disciplinary behavior they assume will be repressive? Confronted with the need for discipline in an exceptionally rambunctious class of fourteen-year-olds, one teacher kept insisting to me that he didn't want to become a "drill sergeant." Frank had two images: the nice guy and the drill sergeant. Neither his heart nor his mind could offer him an image of discipline that provided love, safety, and empowerment.

My own views of discipline began to change in the late 1970's listening to the wisdom of a colleague with 40 years of experience with children. "Children do not always know yet what is safe for them or others," said Dorothy. "Discipline and limits are a way that we create a circle of safety for those not yet ready to do this for themselves. Picture these limits as a big hug—our strong arms encircling the child with comfort and safety."

More recently, a student of mine, a middle school English teacher,

offered the metaphor from which she draws when she speaks with her students.

This classroom is our boat. We are the crew on a quest for knowledge. Working together, we will get there safely and quickly. Knowing each other and ourselves well will help us work together. There may be times, however when someone rocks the boat. They might do it because they're bored and need a little action. They might do it because they are angry with one of us and they're trying to put us in danger. They might not even know why they are doing it, but nonetheless, it happens.

As your guide on this journey, it is my responsibility to ensure the safety and success of the group. I will do whatever it takes to protect the group from this dangerous behavior. I will then try to understand the origin of the behavior so I can help that person to never put us in danger again. (Bamford 2002)

At times, people might try to jump out of the boat. They won't care about the quest for knowledge and they'll try to make sure others jump out with them. I don't want to lose anyone on this journey. I care about you and know that I will learn from you. If you try to bail, I will reach out and grab you any way that I can.

Once we see discipline as an act of love and containment, we can be creative and responsive to the style and degree of discipline needed with a particular child or group. I encourage teachers to seek their own metaphors to help them discover a positive outlook on discipline. When teachers distinguish respect from

fear, and provide limits from a desire to protect, we are not defending our power as teacher. We are helping students create the safety to be vulnerable and authentic with one another.

Although we know that these limits are coming from love, the student who is disciplined may not perceive it this way. Whether we have expressed a firm call to silence, a refusal to tolerate put-downs, or as a last resort, a directive to leave the room, the child may feel caught, shamed or sometimes picked on. He or she may be angry and hurt, tell us we are being unfair or mean, or just give us a wounded look. This can be devastating to a teacher who wants to be a model of loving kindness. That student may dislike us for a day, a month or forever. And others in the group may be frightened by the sternness in our voice and dislike us as well.

Inner Strength and Self Worth

Many of us attracted to teaching from the heart have wrestled with the tendency to care for others more than we care for ourselves. We may tolerate transgressions of our own limits to be loving to another. But when teachers are supported to become more empowered to identify their own needs and boundaries, they can truly discipline from the heart. Students can learn from our modeling that we can help and love people without submerging or violating our own needs.

Personal Power: The Whole Person

Finally, we can learn to use the full range of our personal power to command respect. Becoming

conscious of our movement, humor, voice, eyes and emotional expression, our whole selves can be instruments that convey respectful discipline.

Appropriate display of negative emotion can be a crucial yet complex aspect of calling for respect and bringing students into focus. If a class is out of control, or just extremely unfocused, a teacher has many emotional responses: frustration, disappointment, hurt, and anger. If a teacher is mature and self-aware, expressing one of these emotions in a controlled but powerful way, grounded in love, can have a positive impact on a class.

Self-control is essential here. It is through choice, not loss of control, that a teacher can effectively and safely use negative emotions. The choice must be made deliberately and thoughtfully with the students' best interests in mind. To maintain this level of choice, teachers need safe professional outlets to express their frustrations to their colleagues, not their students.

Knowing that their vulnerability will be respected and protected, both teacher and students can begin to open their hearts. They can begin to connect deeply with themselves and one another, and risk bringing their full humanity to the classroom.

An Open Heart

An open heart is a precondition to being fully present. A teacher with an open heart can be warm, alive, spontaneous, connected, and compassionate. He or she can read the language of the body and hear the feelings between the words. An

open heart is what allows a teacher to be trustworthy and to help build trust in the group.

To open our hearts, we must be willing to be vulnerable and willing to care.

Vulnerability

To be vulnerable is to be willing to feel deeply, to be moved by what a student expressed or by what comes up inside ourselves in the presence of our students or the issues they raise. According to the dictionary, vulnerable means "susceptible to injury, insufficiently defended." It comes from the Latin word "to wound." It implies danger and risk. This potential for wounding is a clue to the challenge of teaching with an open heart.

Choosing to be vulnerable in public, in one's work life, is a decision that many people do not make. It has, in fact, been one of the key distinctions between public and private life. At home and with friends, we express a broad range of feelings and engage deeply with others; at work, we are more likely to play a role or wear a mask that hides anything that could be construed as weak or negative. In the movement towards integrating soul and heart in both schools and in the workplace, this distinction softens so students and teachers alike can express themselves more fully. Expanding the notion of "home" to the classroom and the school, educators create meaningful or "authentic" community, where it is safe to bring in more and more of our whole selves.

In *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*, M. Scott Peck gives his own definition of "community":

If we are going to use the word meaningfully, we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to “rejoice together, mourn together,” and to “delight in each other, make others’ conditions their own.” (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), p. 59

Leading our students to express their emotions and respond fully to others, we are more effective and trustworthy if we are a part of the group ourselves rather than placing ourselves apart from, or above that circle of genuine feeling. But vulnerability is not to be confused with a failure to set boundaries. Indeed, it is often not until a teacher has developed such boundaries that he can afford to be truly vulnerable with his students without losing his own center.⁵

Even teachers who have learned to be vulnerable with young people may go through periods when it is difficult to do so. When we are emotionally raw, when something is going on inside or outside that is painful or confusing, we need our walls to protect us and to protect others from potentially volatile impulses. Since we all have such times, it is useful to explore how we can keep our hearts open in the face

⁵ On the PassageWorks Institute website, I discuss the thorny issue of personal disclosure by teachers in the classroom, suggesting guidelines for what serves student and protects teachers and what can cross the line.

of overwhelming stress or turmoil.

First, we acknowledge it to ourselves. Just allowing ourselves to become conscious about our defenses helps keep the heart open to others. Meditation or reflection can help teachers scan their hearts to see, acknowledge, and sometimes heal current troubling feelings.

Second, we can acknowledge this pain to others—to unload, process, and heal.

But it is precisely at these times that we don’t share such issues with students. So a teacher must have resources—a friend, colleague, therapist or supervisor—and must be willing to use these resources. Creating a regular opportunity when teachers can choose to share personally has been an important feature of my work in social and emotional learning.

Through regular group supervision meetings, we can build into school a safe container for teachers’ feelings. Such support for maintaining an open heart is particularly important because exposing ourselves to the volatile emotions of children or adolescents can stir some of our own deepest issues.

Many teachers with whom I have worked over the last twenty years have expressed grave concern about learning to facilitate a classroom community where students can speak from their depths. “What if I am so touched or disturbed by something a student shares that I lose it? I don’t think it serves my students for me to be bawling right there in front of them.” Or, “when I open my heart to my students, I

become saturated with all their pain and it just wears me out. I really can't afford to be so open." Many teachers need support in strengthening their boundaries, in developing good filters instead of choosing between being wide open or erecting a steel wall.

Issues or wounds not yet examined by a teacher will show up in neon in the mirror of student search and struggle. If we are unwilling to honestly confront these personal issues, we can go numb or be rocked off our moorings. Teachers who choose to open their hearts and classrooms to the feelings of their students also need opportunities in a safe, guided environment to revisit their own issues from childhood and adolescence so they are not triggered by their student's stories. An important dimension of my approach to professional development is to provide opportunities for teachers to make friends with the full range of their own emotions.

It takes time, practice and support for teachers to open our hearts more and more to our students without being knocked off of our own centers, or absorbing their feelings like a sponge. We learn to cultivate a quality of detachment that is integrated with warmth and compassion. And when a student's grief or anger does get through our filters, we learn practices for cleansing, clearing and returning to the integrity of our own self.

Willingness to Care

What does it mean for a teacher to be willing to care deeply about his or her students? I believe that teachers

cannot really develop the "teaching presence" without being willing to love. Knowing the limitations to perspective, skill or self-mastery in the young, a loving teacher feels deep respect for the essential humanity—the depth of feeling and capacity for wisdom—in even the smallest child.

I once had a conversation with an elderly relative who declared that some people are interesting and others have nothing to say. I tried to speak respectfully but felt passionately opposed. "In my work, I have found that any person who feels safe enough to speak from the heart is interesting to listen to." I responded. "So many times I have been surprised when an apparently superficial, rebellious or dull young person was moved by love and respect to speak with a tenderness, depth, and wisdom that moved me to even greater love."

So how do teachers develop this capacity to love? As a teacher, I had to work first to develop compassion and forgiveness for myself. Working with teachers, I carefully build a set of experiences, which invite them to feel their love for themselves and for one another.

A teacher's love is at the heart of effective discipline. An open heart, like vulnerability, should not be confused with a lack of boundaries. Love does not tolerate behavior that is abusive to anyone. But love does accept and forgive the child from whom this behavior springs.

The love and discipline I bring to my students is based on a belief that there is a core of goodness in each child. I believe there is an innate

thrust toward creative growth in each person. If we connect to that core, if we can nourish, affirm and acknowledge it, the seed will grow and flourish into its unique potential.

Acknowledging the Shadow

Built into this trust in our essential goodness is a willingness to acknowledge what Carl Jung called the "shadow" side of human nature. Qualities such as envy, greed, hatred, prejudice, lust, anger, and even sadness and depression have been despised or disowned by many people who strive for "goodness." Some of the positive thinking approaches common to some New Age or self-esteem programs deny the shadow altogether.

When we create a safe environment for young people to acknowledge what they have disowned, they begin to forgive themselves and each other and learn ways to contain and transform destructive emotions. Teachers who uncover what is in their own shadows become much safer guides for their students. What we do not see in ourselves we are likely to project onto our students and colleagues through feelings of envy or disgust. Suppressed, the shadow will erupt in ways that are often out of our control. It will catch us from behind, grab us by the tail and swing us around until we lose our balance and perspective. We cannot really open our hearts, cannot really afford to love, if we remain afraid of the shadow in ourselves or in the young people we teach. Helping teachers work constructively with their own shadows is a crucial part of my approach to professional

development.

Each of us has a **personal shadow**: I may disown my desire for material comfort because my parents were so shaming towards anyone who was "demanding" or "self-indulgent." I may disown my urge to control because my father was so controlling. Or I may not claim my talent as a musician because my brother commanded such approval with his music that I sought other ways to be noticed in my family. In my workshops, teachers discover clues to what they have disowned by reflecting on what they find repulsive in others; they find the "golden shadow" -- gifts we have not yet claimed -- by looking at what they envy in others. Here is a random sample of qualities shared anonymously by teachers from an inner city high school in New York when we first began to explore the shadow during an in-service retreat:

WHAT DISGUSTS ME

Cheating
Superior attitudes
Blabbing
Manipulation
Greed
Selfishness
Abusiveness
Wimpishness
Rapid change
Pushy people
Closed-mindedness
Unreasonableness
Complainers, whiners
Bigots
Super inflated egos
Prejudice
Materialistic people
Phony
Jealous
Use their influence to hurt others
Instigators of chaos
Slovenness
Nosey
Power hungry
Dirty, smelly

WHAT I ENVY

Organization
Good communication skills
Ability to move on
Wealth
Prestige
Talent
Achievement
Fame
Success
Control
People who are at peace
Calm, serene
Good verbal skills
Patience
Strong leadership
People who express feelings freely
Artistic people
People who speak without being shy
People that are always happy
Eat one meal a day
Completely faithful and trusting
Spontaneity
Slimness
Perfect wives, mothers
Close family ties

In addition to our personal shadows, we are also profoundly affected by what is disowned and despised in our culture and our institutions. This “**collective shadow**”⁶ often takes the form of scapegoating or prejudice and may lead to discrimination.

What one group cannot tolerate in its own members, it will project onto another group with shame and blame. Even when we strive to treat all people with fairness and dignity, the corrosive residue of prejudice we have absorbed from our surroundings may close our hearts to certain students, colleagues or parents. Confused by the murky feelings inside ourselves about the “other,” we are weak and ineffectual with our students in protecting them from both subtle and overt displays of bias and discrimination. Only by taking time in a supportive environment can we as teachers begin to excavate some of these unconscious attitudes and behaviors that may close our hearts to some students or undermine us when we are trying to care for and set boundaries with our students.

Obstacles to Caring

The fear of loss or rejection that can come with love may block our ability to care. We may feel that if we care deeply, we give a person more power to hurt us.

How much safer it seems to mute our willingness to care deeply!

“Doing it right” can also be an obstacle to caring. When we are

totally focused on “covering the material”, preoccupied with competence and success, we often forget to open our hearts to the young people. Particularly if they are “sabotaging” the “success” of the group, we may shut down. Coaching one new teacher, I simply had to say kindly that she appeared so concerned about doing a good job that she had forgotten to open her heart. Her instant recognition began the shift immediately.

Our hearts can become blocked also when we are attached to a particular plan, technique or approach in the classroom. If we can keep our hearts open, we see the unique needs of our students and discover an entirely different way to reach our larger goals. This capacity to care deeply about our students and about our mission without being attached to a specific, “known” outcome on a given day is crucial to the art of being fully present.

Another obstacle that has been a challenging issue for me personally is the impact of speed and overload prevalent in our culture today. I see it in young and old today and I have watched my own heart grow cold and tight when I take on too much and move too fast. Only after an opportunity to slow down and feel my heart come alive could I see how uncaring I had become when I was overwhelmed by doing too much.

Caring and responsiveness does not need to conflict with high academic goals. In fact, it is often the precondition to improved achievement. After years of academic struggle and failure, a student helped her former teacher

⁶ See Meeting the Shadow

understand her leap in academic performance. "Because you held our hearts last year," she said to high school teacher John McCluskey, "I discovered that my brain could work."

Being Present

"The present moment is one of power, of magic or miracle if we could ever be wholly in it and awake to it." (Dooling 1990)

"The way to experience nowness is to realize that this very moment, this very point in your life, is always the occasion." (Trungpa, 1984. p 71)

Being fully alive to the present is the very heart of "the teaching presence." A teacher is expressing this capacity when she is:

- open to perceiving what is happening right now,
- responsive to the needs of this moment,
- flexible enough to shift gears,
- prepared with the repertoire, creativity and imagination to invent a new approach in the moment;
- humble and honest enough to simply pause and acknowledge if a new approach has not yet arrived.

Being present can mean letting go of a particular approach. It may also mean letting go of the goal of that day's class. Is this goal more important than what is coming up in the moment? We must wrestle with this question, because the answer is always different. If we have developed our capacities for discipline, we will not change course just because students complain or

get sidetracked. But sometimes our larger vision of the purpose of this class, which transcends the goal of a particular lesson plan, reveals an opportunity to learn better now what we might have planned for two months from now.

We were supposed to teach about anger management today, but Josh's grandfather just died. The whole class is moved by his grief. I see it is time to talk about death and mourning, a time when they are hungry to understand the way humans grieve and heal a great loss.

The term "the teachable moment" has been coined over the last decade to honor this capacity in teachers to be responsive to students when we see the bigger picture.

Being present also means the ability to see that when things are going "wrong"—the air conditioning keeps breaking, or the group is always tired because this class is scheduled for the last period on Friday—there may be an opportunity for these students to learn something about meeting a challenge that is unique to this group.

How can we be present if we come into class with a load of baggage—preoccupied or exhausted by a conflict that occurred this morning, or an exciting event coming up this weekend? If we can find ways to clear our minds and hearts, to refresh our spirits, we can be fully present in class. Most of our issues—a fight with a colleague, a personal family matter, a troubling dream—are too private to be share with our students. We neither want to risk ourselves nor risk using our students as our own support system.

Particularly at a time when so many children are being enrolled to parent their own parents, children need adult role models who care gracefully for their own needs without imposing them on children.

What are the ways that teachers can contain and express their own feelings before coming into class? What supports teachers in becoming fully “awake” so they are resilient, responsive and creative with their students?

Cultivating presence is both a psychological and a spiritual path. The psychological dimension involves creating some source of support for processing our issues so that we can be more in charge of and more at peace with ourselves. Schools or departments can best sustain teachers by building in such emotional support through faculty meetings which include the building of authentic community. On a day-to-day level, teachers caught off guard by a sudden upset, can seek a friend or colleague with whom to share feelings so they don't spill into class.

The spiritual dimension is more elusive. Thich Nhat Hanh, poet, Zen master, and peace activist, describes the purpose of “nowness” in his book *Being Peace*.

We tend to be alive in the future, not now. We say, “Wait until I finish school and get my Ph.D. degree, and then I will be really alive.” When we have it, and it's not easy to get, we say to ourselves, “I have to wait until I have a job in order to be really alive.” And then after the job, a car. After the car, a house. We are not capable of being alive in the present

moment. We tend to postpone being alive to the future, the distant future, we don't know when. Now is not the moment to be alive. We may never be alive at all in our entire life. Therefore, the technique, if we have to speak of a technique, is to be in the present moment, to be aware that we are here and now, and the only moment to be alive is the present moment. (Nhat Hanh, 1987)

This future orientation keeps many of us from experiencing the fullness of the present, the fullness of life. Dwelling on the past—either idealizing it or obsessing about our wounds—is also an obstacle to being present.

Becoming fully present is a priority for both student and teacher in my approach to teaching. In class, we begin with warm-up exercises designed to let go of the past and future long enough to have a direct, immediate experience of ourselves and each other. Many teachers expect students to be present when they arrive in class.

One of the most important lessons I learned from a mentor is that it is my responsibility as a teacher is to help them come into the present so we can all learn together. Games wake them up; quiet reflection invites them to look inside and release distracting thoughts and feelings. Pairing, group sharing, art or journaling exercises allow students to express what may be preoccupying them so that it is easier to let it go. Later in the period, in classes where we have created a safe enough classroom for students to “speak from the heart,” such authentic expression is riveting, calling both speaker and listener into

the now.

Teachers have shared with me their own approaches to cultivating this quality of mind: running, hiking, playing a musical instrument, painting, meditation, writing poetry or keeping a daily journal all allow us to clear the mind. Most agree that discovering “presence” is a spiritual experience. In those rare times when I have spent an entire day or several days in a state of being present, I have felt my strongest connection to my spirit and to the exquisite gift of life.

As a classroom teacher, I found a daily meditation practice essential to cultivating presence.⁷ I would not only sit quietly in the morning at home, but also try to take five or ten minutes before each class to take stock of what I was feeling and clear my mind.

In those minutes before class --in an office, my car, even a closet in an empty classroom -- I imagined the class I was about to work with. I saw myself looking into each pair of eyes, imagining my heart opening to each child. This would often remind me or help me sense some issue that was going on in the group or with an individual that needed to be addressed that day -- something I would not think of when I was doing my lesson plan in my usual waking state. I would also take a few minutes to focus on deep breathing to clear my mind and oxygenate my brain, or do several minutes of “forced” yawning which refreshed my brain and allowed me to be alert and receptive to my students. When

I work with a partner, our goal is to take a moment together to become present and aligned with each other.

Conclusion

“In teaching...there is a secret hidden in plain sight,” writes Parker Palmer, pioneer of the field of “teacher formation.” “Good teaching can never be reduced to technique—good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. The quality of the work that is done...depends at least as much (and often more) on the inner qualities of the person doing it as it does on his or her technical skill.” (Palmer, 1995)

Welcoming the inner life into the classroom takes courage. Entering this arena—particularly with adolescents—can drop us into a cauldron of our own emotional and spiritual growth. But the rewards are great for teachers who are willing to engage their own depths and meet the demons and the allies that dwell within.

Nourishing the hearts of students, our own souls are fed. We find renewal of our passion for teaching and a long-term recipe for avoiding burnout. Bringing to the classroom an open mind, a heart full of love and a will strong enough to protect and guide their flock, teachers cultivate the personal atmosphere that invites students to safely explore what matters most to all of us. In both their professional and personal lives, such teachers discover the rewards of tremendous insight and personal strength.

⁷ See Jack Miller’s work on integrating meditation into teacher training.

Bibliography

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