Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 22
Issue 1 *Teaching and Advocacy*

Article 17

2006

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Recommended Citation

Peterson, Scott (2006) "The Cycle of Teaching," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 22: Iss. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1187>

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The Cycle of Teaching

Scott Peterson
Mattawan, MI

I received a Christmas present this year from a student in my school. In years past, when I had my own classroom, this wouldn't be such a noteworthy event. A shelf full of cheap cologne takes up space in my bathroom and a rack of ties with pictures of pencils and erasers hangs in my closet from my years of teaching. Since I moved out of the classroom, however, and began working on curriculum and staff development for my school district, Christmas gifts have been fewer and farther in between.

This present came from a third grader named Summer, and a more fitting name could not be found for anyone. Her hair is as blonde as a surfer's and her cheeks are always flushed a healthy red. Even in the gray cold of winter, she looks like she's just been kissed by the sun. Her gift was a candle in a creamy white jar with robin's egg blue Christmas designs stenciled on the outside. When I lifted the lid, a vanilla scent escaped into the air. It was a lovely gift, just like the girl who gave it to me, and I thanked her profusely for her thoughtfulness. I then asked her in an off-handed sort of way what made her think of me while she was buying her Christmas gifts this year. Thus began one of those stories that make working in an elementary school such a fascinating experience.

This was her first year in our school, Summer began. She had moved here from another state, and there was not much she had liked about her previous school. Her teachers tended to be old and crabby and her classmates unfriendly and even mean at times. School was a chore, she told me, something she slogged through day after boring day.

All that changed, though, when she moved to our school district. From the moment she walked into her new classroom and saw a young lady with hair as blonde as hers standing in front of the chalk

boarding greeting students with a smile on her face, she knew she was into something good.

Her first impression went right to the mark. Her classmates were welcoming and friendly to her. She loved the projects she made in art class. She loved learning to play the miniature key board in music class. She loved the leafy playground with the shiny slides and climbing structures to conquer every afternoon. Every part of her school life had improved substantially since she moved here, and she felt more than a little fortunate to be where she was this Christmas.

Summer was determined to show her appreciation, too. One Friday a week or two before the holiday break, she came home from school and told her mother that her Christmas gift list was going to be longer this year. There were just too many people she had to thank to limit the list just to her classroom teacher. She opened up the red spiral notebook she carried to and from school every day and read off nine names she had added to her list. It included the bus driver who greeted her so warmly every morning, the custodian who helped her find her precious red notebook the time she left it on the library floor, and the recess lady who bandaged her finger when she slit it open coming down the slide. I made the list because I worked in her classroom setting up some writing projects that she had thought were great fun. Believe me, making that list was not the smallest honor I have received in my life.

After listening to her story, her mother took a hard look at Summer, let out a long sigh, and finally said, "I guess we're going to The Dollar Store this weekend." It took her a good portion of a Saturday morning to get the job done, but finally she had selected the precious gifts. Her mother handed her a twenty dollar bill, and off she went to pay for her purchases.

"And you know what the best part of the whole deal was, Mr. Peterson?" Summer asked me at the conclusion of her story. "My mamma let me keep the change!"

The Beautiful Ignorance of Beginnings

I have to admit, I am a sucker for stories like Summer's. They are such distillations of a

person's true essence, gems of personality that define the unique individual. These stories sing with such unique clarity of voice and sound. These songs are so sweet, so powerful, they make us forget the high stakes testing, the demanding parents, the daily grind that wears on our soul. For one brief instant, at least, we put down the heavy burdens of our teaching lives and replace them with the celebration of the individual that lies at the heart of teaching.

Summer, of course, isn't the only one that has her own songlines. All our students, past, present, and future, bring with them their own set of music ready to release to the world. These songs flow into our classrooms and mesh together to form something new. Each year has a tone of its own, a sound unique to itself. In June we release our students into the world knowing full well that next year's class will have a different sound to it

Every year, then, is a form of re-birth. This sense of re-birth, this idea that we can wipe the slate clean and begin anew, is one of the characteristics unique to our profession that send us through the school door each August with a tingle moving up our spine. We have the pleasure, as Stephen Dunn writes in his beautiful poem, "Loves" to find each year "the classroom alive with the beautiful ignorance of beginnings."

Oiling the Hinges

This feeling of re-birth isn't the only characteristic of the teaching process that keeps us coming back for more each year. Teaching, by its nature, can also be redemptive. By redemptive I mean we can reflect on what we did in the past and change that which did not work. We can re-visit what we have done in the past and fix it, make it better. We have the power to correct our mistakes, to re-invent ourselves and become something better. We can build into our teaching lives a consistent pattern of reflection, growth and renewal. "Life demands a lot of tinkering," Thomas Merton wrote, "and requires people to give birth to themselves not just once but over and over again." This tinkering, this on-going process of self-reflection and change isn't easy but has its rewards. In a sense, it grants us a form of immortality because we can stay young forever.

A consistent pattern of change and renewal has another benefit: it neutralizes the acidic process of teacher burnout. One cause of stress and burnout is the repetition of a dull, mindless task over a long period of time. We all have worked with a teacher who has dedicated an entire career to duplicating the same exact lesson and activities every year. This endless repetition brings diminishing pleasure. This principle states that every time we repeat an activity we derive a little less pleasure from it. The pictures on our living room walls go from eye catching beautiful to dull and mundane as we become more and more familiar with them.

The cuisine of our favorite restaurant becomes bland and even distasteful if we indulge too often. In the same way, a teacher who repeats the same identical lessons derives less and less pleasure until only a smoldering coal of anger remains inside. This anger is evenly divided between those stupid kids who aren't like they used to be and those young teachers whose new fangled ideas lack academic rigor and erode the lofty standards of a bygone era.

Eventually, this kind of burn out causes teachers to fold in on themselves and leads to a kind of mental or spiritual death, a shutting down of the mind. As Jonathon Katz writes in *Running to the Mountains*, "I'm not really as afraid of dying as I am of the hinges inside my mind and soul rusting closed. I am desperate to keep them open, because if they close, that's one's first death, the loss of hope, curiosity, and possibility. After that, it seems to me, the second one is just a formality."

When I was in college, many ideas and theories were bandied around in my education classes. Some of them were good and held up well to the test of time. Others had no relevance to life outside the ivory tower and were quickly tossed on the slag heap of useless ideas. But one thing one that no one ever claimed was that teaching was going to be easy. The pressures heaped on our classrooms from outside sources grows. The lack of respect

from an unsympathetic public bites away at our morale. The amount of energy that needed to keep so many balls in the air is enormous

Despite all this, though, we have two things unique to teaching in our corner. The first is the sense of re-birth, the idea that each year will be different from the ones before. The variety and diversity of the songs that flow into our classroom each year assures that. The second is the concept of redemption. We have the ability to reflect on our practice and fix what we don't like. If we use these tools to our advantage, if we add these two songs to those of our students, then we can walk into our classrooms each August whistling our own sweet tunes.

About the Author

Scott Peterson recently retired from the Mat-tawan school after 34 years of teaching and curriculum development. He teaches elementary English education part-time at Western Michigan University.