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Dear Teachers

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Dear Teachers

Cover Page Footnote

Liz is a Literacy Specialist at Great Falls Elementary School in Gorham, Maine.

Dear Teachers

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Dear Teachers, especially those beleaguered veterans ready to walk or crawl away (depending on your stamina) and those new teachers ready to run far away from the education profession, this missive is for you,

A hearty hello! You need hearty right about now to make it to the finish line of the school year. Celebrate making it past Spring Break! You've made it through nearly all the school seasons, and that is no small feat indeed. You breezed through that brief summer/fall 1st two weeks of Honeymoon Season, establishing routines and feeling the dueling sense of excitement at the promise of the new school year, and the unease at the dread of the new school year. You strode through Autumnal Season with a driven focus to make it to fall conferences and the impending holiday while all the while marching through the curriculum doing everything you can to make sure each of your students is getting their needs met, and simultaneously glancing off blows from parents and society who insist you do more, you do it better, you do it according to this or that standard that has nothing to do with your current reality.

You endured Snow Day Season when, in certain parts of the country (although with climate change I suppose every part of the country), your sole reason for *being* is holding out hope for a snow day. Not just any snow day, but a well-placed sanity-saving snow day timed perfectly to

reset your focus and keep you going despite the looming winter weeks ahead. You see the wall that is March in the distance, so you shore yourself for that month of no holidays, no days off, no reprieve from the crushing responsibility of shaping the young minds and hearts of our future.

Teaching is not Rocket Science. It's not Cancer Science. It's not any one science. It's every science of humanity wrapped into one. And it matters. Remember that as you approach End of Year Season, those last weeks of the school year when time speeds up and it seems impossible to cram every bit of learning in before that blessed last day when your students joyfully exit the building and you join your colleagues in a group wave as the busses circle the loop one last time.

It'd be nice if your end of year were as simple as a group wave goodbye and a collective sigh. But, surprise! It's now Post-End of Year Season when you finalize grades and get all your teacherly possessions, both personally bought and school purchased, off the floors in your classroom so they can be waxed over the summer. My sympathies if you have to move your classroom. That subtracts days off your so-called summer vacation. But I stray off topic. I'm writing to let you know I hear you. I feel you. Don't leave.

Regardless of where you are at in your career and in whatever school season you happen to be in, I'm so grateful you're here. Our students need you. Your colleagues need you. And your student's parents and guardians need you. We are in a new era of teaching post-pandemic

when our triangles have been inverted. Our highest needs students now occupy the base of tiered support. Divisive politics have infected legislators, school boards and parent groups who strive to restrict inclusivity and bully educators to adopt culture war legislation and bans. We are doing our best, but, like everyone else in the entire world, we are still living in a pandemic induced storm. I'm not sure what kind of boat you've been riding it out in, but most of us in education have plowed through in leaky vessels. I'm happy to report, we're still afloat. Now, more than ever, we need your eyes and ears and minds and hearts to help us navigate.

Back when I was new at teaching I had mentors, both those assigned to me and those I serendipitously was blessed to work alongside. My mentors versed me in both the art and pedagogy of teaching. I do love how that word *pedagogy* trips off the tongue, but don't be put off by its snobbery sound. I have to look up the definition every time I say it.¹ I do hope that you have been lucky enough to have had a mentor well versed in *pedagogy*, but even more steeped in emotions. For reasons that continue to mystify me, there is a loud group out there clamoring for academics over social emotional learning. Never mind that there can be no academic learning when emotional needs are not first met. It is my sincere hope that somewhere along the line, you have had or will have a mentor experienced in emotions.

¹ Here's what Wikipedia has to say about Pedagogy (/ˈpɛdəɡədʒi, -ɡoʊdʒi, -ɡoʊgi/), most commonly understood as the approach to teaching, is the theory and practice of learning, and how this process influences, and is influenced by, the social, political and psychological development of learners. Pedagogy, taken as an academic discipline, is the study of how knowledge and skills are imparted in an educational context, and it considers the interactions that take place during learning. Both the theory and practice of pedagogy vary greatly, as they reflect different social, political, and cultural contexts.

Just in case nobody has given you a heads up, you ought to know that the content of what you teach is merely an aside in your day. Most of your day will be spent dealing with big emotions, both your own and your students. But don't worry, if your district supports social emotional learning you will have mindfulness built into the curriculum. You'll need a lot of focused belly breathing practice to make it through all the school seasons.

Not so long ago, before the global pandemic upended everything, a few strategic belly breaths could do the trick. In March 2020 teachers transformed the way they delivered their lessons in a matter of days. While instantly adapting to all virtual instruction may have been our most dramatic magical feat so far, it's really not all that new for educators to pivot to keep pace with the rigors of their job. We have pretzeled our way through fully remote, hybrid teaching and full on response to upheaval teaching that was School Year 21-22. School Year 22-23 has tested whether this school system, this student or this educator can long endure.

Some time ago—before mass school shootings, before 9/11, before No Child Left Behind, before the Common Core, before standards based grading, before project based learning, before experiential learning, before Mass Customized Learning, before Every Student Succeeds, before whatever iteration of grading and pedagogy was the flavor of the month—one of my earliest mentors imparted these words of wisdom that I will now pass on to you.

First, you are not teaching English [or fill in your subject matter here]; you are teaching manners. Second, you are tossing pearls before swine. Third, you will need to find your teacher-voice to carry you through the emotions of teaching.

I learned these valuable lessons back in the mid-1990s when I taught at a now closed progressive K-12 Seattle Public School. These long ago nuggets still matter though it seems ludicrously quaint to think that our primary task is simply to teach manners. We are charged with so much more. Our students are in need of so much more. It's a daily struggle to balance the world in your classroom with the chaos that is going on in our world outside the classroom. It's no surprise that our youngest learners bring the chaos of their home lives into the classroom and disrupt the learning for all.

In the mid-90s, I taught 10th grade English Language Arts and various 7-12 electives, which changed in topic based on my desire to lessen the number of papers to grade, including Beginning French, Creative Writing, Dance and Journalism. My purpose was survival. I needed to survive each day by not only being prepared with engaging lessons, but I had to face an audience of teens who ranged from lovable, funny, curious learners to angry, misunderstood, disengaged learners. If you're blessed with the gift of the gab and can walk into a classroom of 20-25 mischievous, rebellious, querulous young people and command attention from the get-go, bravo for you! You are more than halfway to doing your job, which is to educate the youth so that they become informed citizens and critical thinkers. If, like me, you don't have the gift of the gab, you will somehow devise ways to adapt and compensate for crippling stage fright.

In Spring 2023, the same standards apply. Meet your students where they are. All who think they know better and insist on telling us how to teach, please get out of the way. You have no clue what it's like. Teaching is not about assessments, not about curriculum, and certainly not about culture wars. Teaching is about connections.

When I was new at this profession, I felt great discomfort in front of an audience, but somehow every now and then, I managed to pull off an awesome engaging *moment*, and I knew the work planning and even the anxiety about planning all that work was worth it. It wasn't about the lesson, or the subject matter, or the grade but it was about the moment. A moment of connection that bonds and can send both student and teacher on a lifelong path of discovery.

You Are Teaching Manners

Jade was in my 10th grade ELA class. It was my second year at the school, and I had seen and heard the reports of her fiery outbursts in 9th grade. She was somewhere in the middle of a large family with the last name of Burden (let the name associations begin). She spent most of her energy arguing with anyone who would nibble at her provocations. Jade and I had had our back and forth over the school year, but I was never able to crack through her armor. Many of the students attended this school from kindergarten through high school graduation. Everyone called everyone by their first name, including the principal. With only about 50 students per grade at the high school level, staff and students felt a strong sense of community. One of the school traditions was an end of year class beach picnic. In the last weeks of 10th grade, Jade

had done something so egregious that she was sitting in the principal's office. The principal, Cathy, had had enough, and she told her so, "Jade, enough! You're done. We're done. You're not going on the picnic."

Without warning, Jade dissolved in her chair. "This is all the family I have! You're taking away the only family I have!"

All year I had been doing my best not to show a crack, not to appear weak, but at that moment I cried. I sucked in the isolation and loneliness of living far from my own family and felt Jade's sorrow. Jade rejected any connection to her actual siblings and clung to her school family. Strong, defiant Jade wept with me. "Go for a walk you two," Cathy ordered.

Jade and I walked and cried down the hall together. I wished we had had this moment in September instead of May, but you cannot plan or predict such a moment.

"You know, Jade, you catch a lot more bees with honey than vinegar." She had no idea what I was talking about, so I said: "Be nice. You get what you want when you don't piss everyone off."

Jade attended the picnic with her class, her school family. She learned a lesson in manners that day, and I learned that empathy is the secret sauce that will connect you, the teacher, to your students. You model and cultivate empathy every day and hope that it rubs off on your

students. That's a hard ask in these divisive times, but never has it been more important than now. There is so much noise and discord in our world, but in the world of your class no one can restrict the amount of empathy, positivity and energy that you imbue in the classroom that filters to the individual student.

Tossing Pearls Before Swine

When I was a new teacher, while I didn't literally think my students were swine, I also didn't pick up on the subtext of *tossing pearls before swine*, which I eventually figured out means: *Don't get so caught up in preparing the ultimate unit and lesson plans that you forget your purpose*. Back then I didn't know my purpose, so I relied heavily on over preparing to the point that I had very little to no personal life, even though I was married and the mother of a preschool son.

Remember dear Teacher, your students simply don't care about your lesson plan. And neither should you. Despite the apparent cynical outlook of my long ago mentor who warned me about *not* tossing pearls before swine, she still subscribed to the belief that if you make a difference in only one child's life, then you have done your job.

After moving away from Seattle to the East Coast, I dabbled in other careers. Some day you may feel the need to step away from teaching because it's simply too much. I encourage you to stick with it and know that even if you walk away from it, you'll be back. For two peaceful years, I worked for a fashion designer doing data entry. I made more money than I could have

imagined as a teacher and had all kinds of perks, the most significant one being NEVER taking work home with me. Another big perk was that no one ruffled my feathers or swore at me while I was working.

But, in the end, I missed teaching. I missed the unpredictable nature of the job. As a teacher, every day is a fresh slate. I felt the tug back to the classroom and began anew at a rural school in Maine. I taught English to 10th grade college bound students and those in the “Functional Reading” track. This was in 2000, before the Department of Education mandated teachers to leave no child behind. Prior to No Child Left Behind, schools tracked students by ability. Teachers were not required to differentiate for students above or below grade level; the tracking system did that work. By high school, those students who had not yet learned to read were relegated to the lowest level classes across all subjects. These students were invisible against those students who cruised along at grade level, although those below grade level found ways to be seen and heard, most often through negative behaviors.

One of my “functional” readers who was repeating 10th grade English would enter the room announcing his presence with an insult to someone, no one, the world, it didn’t matter; he couldn’t NOT enter the room silently. His rough exterior belied the extremely fragile young adult beneath his imposing frame and harsh expression. Once settled in his seat, assuming he hadn’t said or done something so out of line that he would get sent to the office, he would listen so very carefully, leaning forward anxious to listen and learn, and not read.

During one class discussion, someone asked the meaning of the word *unconditional*. In response, I gave the example of my then 18-month-old daughter who would cry fitfully at bath time because she didn't want to get *in* the tub and would then shriek because she didn't want to get *out* of the tub. I explained that I still loved her no matter what, *unconditionally*, even when she drove me crazy. This young man sat still and thoughtful, blinking his eyes a few times, maybe remembering a bathtime that didn't go so well, that may have ended in screams and intimidation and physical violence. Our eyes locked. He wasn't a "behavior" in my class after that. No lesson plans are necessary when your true purpose as a teacher is to model and cultivate empathy. I knew without him telling me that he'd never experienced unconditional love, so that's what I tried to give him, and that's what I hope he gave himself.

Find Your Teacher-Voice

Back in Seattle, during my second week of my first year teaching, while I was still in the Honeymoon Season with my students, I had a bad feeling that this group of West Coast city kids was poised to eat this Midwestern suburban girl alive. We were on a whole school field trip to the state fair at the Puyallup Fairgrounds. I had dazedly sent my 10th graders to roam the fairgrounds in search of elephant ears and large stuffed snakes that wouldn't fit on the school bus home when my mentor gently guided me to a bench where we could sit back and enjoy the parade of humanity passing before us.

She told me, "Listen. It's like this. You have to find your voice, and you will. Finding your teacher-voice is what's going to carry you through the catastrophes of teaching. Believe me, it

gets better.” These words have carried me through decades of teacher trial and error. But here’s the thing about veteran teacher advice to the novice teacher: there is no hard and fast rule about any advice, especially about finding your teacher-voice. What works for one person, is a disaster for another because teacher-voice cannot be taught, imposed or copied.

I made a disastrous mistake my second year at Summit when I was introducing myself to my students during the briefest of brief Honeymoon Seasons. First impressions really matter with teenagers. My teaching partner was a former semi-pro basketball player who stood 6’ 9” and commanded attention. On his first day of the new school year, he was known for shoving a desk across the room to block the door and dramatically state: *The only thing standing between you and graduation is passing 10th grade Social Studies!* My second year I thought I better get ahead of that dramatic opening, so my first day line began: *I’m just a skinny white girl from the suburbs*, which was, of course, greeted by blank silence. It wasn’t until the end of the year when students responded to my request for feedback on positives and negatives that I heard when I made that introduction, I immediately lost respect.

Your authentic teacher-voice will burble up as you make mistakes and as you make connections. One day, when you experience a *moment*, your voice will boom right out of you without warning or foresight. That same teaching year when I blundered my way through opening day, I had my *moment* in the last weeks of school after I ditched all plans for teaching *To Kill a Mockingbird* and let the students write trivia questions to play a Jeopardy style test review.

Not having plans for a game show, I improvised using a stapler on a stool for a buzzer. The first students to face off were Ben, the tallest one in the class, and Raj, the shortest. When I explained the rule that the first person to slap the stapler gets to answer, Ben protested that short people had an unfair advantage. I thought a beat, slapped that stapler and announced “It’s about time!” A moment of suspended silence was followed by a cheer of laughter and applause. I had finally found my teacher-voice.

This brings us to a little known secret about education, and that is, the rewards of this profession are entirely within and out of your control at the same time. You will be asked to wear many hats, and most of them will not fit. That’s ok. You will find a way to make it work. Because that’s what teachers do. We make it work. We put in hours before school, hours after school, hours over weekends, hours during school holidays, yes, even hours over the summer, working hard to do our very best so our students can do their very best. And now we are tasked with keeping our charges and ourselves and our colleagues afloat in leaky boats amid chaotic social upheaval. You will find a way to make it work. We always do.