

Chicken Bone Epiphanies: How the Lives of the Eminent Can Inform the Teaching of English

The majority of my friends are living Wasteland lives. In teaching, you have people who haven't come into the Wasteland yet. They're at the point of making the decision whether they're going to follow the way of their own zeal—the star that's dawned for them—or do what daddy and mother and friends want them to do. The adventure is always in the dark forest, and there's something perilous about it.

—Joseph Campbell (In Osbon, 1991, pp. 66–67)

I was working cafeteria duty at the junior high school where I also taught English and yearbook. It was Thursday and the menu was going to be fried chicken legs, mashed potatoes, mixed fruit, and cookies. Rumors had been rampant all morning that a “chicken bone war” was going to break out at some point, so I was on high alert. The last time the cafeteria served fried chicken, lunch ended in disaster. At first, students started sword-fighting with drumsticks, but then it escalated into throwing bones at neighboring tables, and launching “chicken bone bombs” (don't ask). Eventually, half of the cafeteria erupted into a weird, chicken bone food fight. The transgressors were so numerous that I only managed to identify and apprehend a handful.

This time, the assistant principal had heard the rumors and showed up to help police the cafeteria. Together, we scrutinized every table, demanding students throw away their trash and put away their trays as soon as they were done. I kept any

student in my sites who so much as raised a chicken leg. Suddenly in a corner where the “jocks” usually ate, I caught a glimpse of an airborne bone. I rushed over to the table and ordered everyone to put up their trays immediately. A few football players who were in the last stages of eating lunch protested, but since I also served as football coach and threatened twenty extra laps after practice for non-compliance, they didn't protest for long.

The next flash of chicken bones occurred on the other side of the cafeteria, where the “tough guys,” a group of students who were older than most—the result of failing a grade or two—like to sit. Unfortunately, without the threat of long-distance running to bolster me, I had little leverage with the tough guys. I had to play it straight.

“If you are finished, put away your tray and go outside,” I barked.

The eight students crammed together at the table looked as though they hadn't even heard me. A guy with long, stringy black hair finally spoke. “You want my chicken bone so much, go fetch,” he said, and he grabbed the half-eaten chicken leg from his plate and threw it on the floor under the table.

I smiled. “Pick that up, please. Then, you can report to the office.”

“I'm not picking up any chicken bone and you can't make me,” he said. This kid had never caused trouble previously that I could remember. The

other tough guys at the table laughed and waited for me to react.

Rather than respond right away, I had an existential moment. I wondered, “Is this how my life will be twenty years hence—monitoring chicken bone activity, warding off chaos, accosting students for poor table manners?”

I loved teaching, but as a man in my early thirties, I worried that I was fast becoming burned-out and cynical. I feared that I was headed for an inconsequential life of mediocrity. Perhaps if I had been a more effective teacher or if I had not agreed to supervise the cafeteria, maybe I wouldn’t have become so depressed, but there I was, in an uncomfortable confrontation with a teenaged kid who was trying hard to impress his friends by speaking to me as if I were a dog.

The assistant principal came over and sent the kid to in-house suspension for three days. Together, we managed to stave off Chicken Bone War II.

On the car radio on the way home that evening, I heard a testimonial from then Dallas Cowboys coach Jimmy Johnson about “flow,” the theory of peak experiences. Because I was having few peak experiences at the time (ha! Please note understatement), I went to the library and checked out some books by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the psychologist who first popularized the theory of flow. When I opened *Finding Flow*, I read a passage that seemed to speak directly to me. “If we don’t take charge of its direction, our life will be controlled by the outside to serve the purpose of some other agency. Other people will try to take as much of our energy as possible to further their own agenda” (pp. 1–2).

My energy was being expended for someone else’s agenda, all right. By its nature, teaching is altruistic, but I was doing absolutely nothing to-

wards goals of my own choosing. Still, I realized, I couldn’t blame cafeteria duty or my lack of focus on anyone but myself. The principal offered me the extra duty as a favor—there were three or four other teachers who would have jumped at the chance to earn some extra income during the school day. The thought never occurred to me that I was paying for the measly few extra bucks with my soul.

Csikszentmihalyi’s simple formula for enhancing the quality of life was intriguing. First, you should discover what you love and what you hate. Then, you should do more of what you love and less of what you hate. Of course, a fundamental requirement for making such a formula viable is understanding yourself well enough to articulate personal preferences. I knew that I hated cafeteria duty, but I wasn’t sure about much beyond that. Eudora Welty once asked, “How can you go out on a limb if you do not know your own tree?” (1998, p. 793).

So, I decided to learn about myself by becoming acquainted with the lives of men and women I admired. Instead of heading off on vacation or finding employment as a landscaper, I decided to stay at home and read all summer. In addition to books by Csikszentmihalyi, I read several works by (or about) philosophers, writers, thinkers, and prophets. A definite pattern, a sort of commonality of character, emerged again and again from the lives of the individuals about whom I read. Four of the strongest commonalities were 1) focus, 2) resilience, 3) the desire to make a positive contribution, and 4) routinized quiet time. Then I used some of that quiet time to consider how each of these attributes pertains to English.

Focus

The eminent relentlessly directed their energy towards meaningful goals and “let go” of activities that had no meaning for them.

As a teacher, one of my greatest fears was having students finish assignments well in advance of the dismissal bell. After experiencing the chaos that ensued when I gave students “free minutes” at the end of class, I quickly learned the habit of over-

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planning. Although over-planning is a good strategy, it also led me to a mindset where the goal of keeping students busy often superseded all else, including the pursuit of real knowledge. In other words, I had started to confuse *activities* with *action*. Activities were tasks designed to keep students occupied; action was movement towards a meaningful goal.

Students in my classes always had plenty to do, but too often my teaching was neither meaningful nor enduring. According to Aristotle, “Courage is the golden mean between foolhardiness and cowardice” (Papazian, 2004, p. 168). As a teacher, it takes courage to teach what you consider to be worthwhile. The state department of education, the principal, the chair of your department, and parents have certain ideas about what should be taught. It would be as foolhardy to ignore all their expectations as it would to accept them unconditionally, without regard to your own talents or the students sitting in your classroom.

At the urging of my department chair, I (and the rest of the English faculty) used to teach a 6-week unit on grammar every term. Finally, one year, I gave a grammar pre-test and all my students passed it. Although my department chair grumbled, I stopped using grammar *activities* and started pushing students to enhance the quality of their writing through more appropriate *actions*—reading, and plentiful and varied writing assignments (with plenty of detailed feedback).

Regarding relationships with students (or anyone else for that matter), the Dalai Lama (1999) suggested, “Let go your desire to triumph over others. Instead, try to benefit them. With kindness, with courage, and confidence that in doing so you are sure to meet with success, welcome others with a smile. Be straightforward. Treat everyone as if they were a close friend” (p. 236). What kind of teacher would you rather have for your child? One who adheres to a preset curriculum or one who teaches your child as if she were a close friend?

Unfortunately, performance on standardized tests shifts the focus for learning from developing character and the intellect to memorizing seemingly unrelated bits of data. Writer Laura Esquivel

(1992) warned, “Each of us is born with a box of matches inside us. Each person has to discover what will set the fire. If one does not find out in time, the box of matches dampens, and not a single match can ever be lighted” (p. 115). If a student’s critical period of development goes unheeded, a spark that could have turned into a raging fire may never have a chance to ignite.

The English curriculum is ever-expanding. State curriculum guides are thick with pages of lists, correlated standards, model lesson plans, and endless suggestions. Teaching what matters takes courage and focus.

Resilience

The eminent turned obstacles into opportunities, disasters into demonstrations of character.

Every fall before the first day of class, I used to examine my class rosters with the expectation that the upcoming students would be the most intelligent, enthusiastic, well-mannered group ever. However, the truth is that my classes always contained a mixture of students—some brilliant, others struggling; some polite, others rambunctious; some cooperative, others oppositional. According to Walt Disney, life is composed of both light and shadows. “And we would be untruthful, insincere, and saccharine if we tried to pretend there were no shadows” (Smith, 2001, p. 131).

Jack Davidson was a student in my third period, seventh-grade language arts class who brought along plenty of shadows. Jack set the record for number of detentions issued in my class in a single year—60. In an academic year of 180 days, that meant Jack received, on average, one d-hall every three days in my class. Jack was talented, smart, and never missed a day of school in his life, but he was also irascible, openly defiant, rude, and as unmanageable as humanly possible. When Jack called me a “stupid fuck,” my natural tendency was to say something equally insulting in response. Certainly, I had been irritated enough to allow a grudge to form, but I think Bill Wilson (founder

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of Alcoholics Anonymous) was right when he wrote, “A life which includes deep resentment leads only to futility and unhappiness. To the precise extent that we permit these . . . we squander the hours that might have been worth while” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976, p. 66). The Buddha wrote, “Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world. By non-hatred alone is hatred appeased” (Boeree, 2003, p. 117). Above all, a teacher must

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operate above the fray and greet adversity with a gentle smile. Surprisingly, by the end of his record-breaking year, Jack and I had developed a solid rapport—perhaps something to do with innumerable hours spent together in detention-hall. The next year, I was assigned to teach eighth-grade language arts and Jack showed up on my rolls again. However, the next year he was a near-model student who positively influenced the rest of the class. Not only did our relationship continue to improve, Jack became one of my biggest advocates and one of the brightest students I have ever known.

Sometimes when disaster strikes, it takes enormous perspicacity to frame the moment-at-hand as an opportunity. Martin Luther King Jr. (1981) remarked, “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy” (p. 35). Teachers are provided with daily opportunities to respond to challenge and controversy—we get to say who gets rewarded and who gets punished, who gets an *A* and who gets an *F*.

Leo Buscaglia wrote, “We can turn despair into hope, and that’s magical. We can wipe away any tears and substitute smiles . . . There are two forces at work, external and internal. We have very little control over the external forces . . . What really matters is the internal force. How do I respond to those disasters? Over that, I have complete control” (Short, 2003, p. 130).

When I was whining about a tumultuous day at school one day, my Uncle Jack took me aside

and told me a story. “Lad, if you are walking in the woods and you step in dog poop, you can respond in two ways. Stare at your ruined shoes, fret about it, feel sorry for yourself, maybe go back home and find another pair of shoes. Or you can pick up a stick, scrape off the poop, and keep on walking.”

Friedrich Nietzsche (1990) once offered the famous dictum, “That which does not kill me, makes me stronger.” Similarly, Joseph Campbell commented, “Any disaster you can survive is an improvement in your character, your stature, and your life. What a privilege! This is when the spontaneity of your own nature will have a chance to flow” (Toms, 1989, p. 37).

The power of resilience is difficult to overstate. Emerson said, “A snowflake will go through a pine board, if projected with force enough” (Richardson, 1995, p. 437). And so it will.

The Desire to Make a Positive Contribution

The eminent chose enduring contribution over temporal happiness.

If a student who always gets in trouble lays his head down on his desk during class and tries to sleep, a teacher can respond by letting him sleep or poking him until he wakes up. A teacher gets nothing for reviving the student—not more money, not added prestige, certainly not more peace of mind. In fact, disturbing a sleeping student often leads to disruptions or worse.

Another familiar scenario is the case of the gifted student. Say you are teaching a sixth-grade class and ask students to write a narrative. Most papers fit your expectations—stories about a favorite pet or an important athletic contest. Instead of the usual half-page response, however, one sixth-grade girl writes a 12-page paper, the first paragraphs of which follow (this is an actual excerpt):

Nova gasped and sat upright, feeling sweat run cold down her face. Strands of yellow gossamer, her mane of pale hair, fell across her chest and down her back, its soft, brushing touch almost soothing after the horrific dream.

Swinging her legs from under the velvet coverlet, Nova walked with bared feet to the mirror, shivering as the cold winter air stung her skin. The silvery-gray eyes of her reflection stared back at her, wide and frightened. Her dreams made the aftermath of a war seem material for a lullaby.

As with the sleeping student, the easiest response to the gifted student would be to do nothing. It would be easy to think, “Great, I can use this student to help tutor others.” However, not challenging an eleven-year-old girl who possesses an extensive vocabulary and a vivid imagination would be a tragedy. As with reviving the dozing student, challenging the gifted student takes energy and time.

Whereas temporal happiness is alluring because it offers immediate gratification (the pleasure of eating a piece of chocolate), making an “enduring contribution” takes time, energy, and a relentless determination. One does not make an enduring contribution by giving up at the first sign of failure. Walt Disney went bankrupt twice before he managed to make cartoons profitable and the concept of Disneyland workable. Mother Teresa left her Romanian home at age 16 and never saw her parents again. Around age 29, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) ventured outside the royal gates and discovered terrible suffering among the peasants. He renounced his wealth, joined a group of ascetics, wandered around, and almost starved to death before finding “the middle way.” Martin Luther King persisted in his quest for human rights in spite of his opponents’ use of excessive violence, which frequently resulted in injury and death.

About happiness, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) wrote, “Some people say they are ‘happy’ even when they dislike their jobs, when their home life is nonexistent, when they spend all their time in meaningless activities. . . . The point is to be happy while doing things that stretch our skills, that help us grow and fulfill our potential” (p. 122).

Routinized Quiet Time

The eminent created blocks of time to be alone expressly for the purposes of thinking and creating.

The isolation of the teacher has been well documented by Cohen-Evron (2002), Guarino and Watterson (2002), and Franzak (2002). However, the tendency of teachers to devote their lives after school to school-related tasks has not been as thoroughly researched. Indeed, teaching is such a complex task that it is easy to become immersed in frantic, day-to-day challenges to the extent that every spare minute outside of school gets devoted to the education of other people’s children. I used to drag a backpack-full of papers to be graded with me everywhere—to dinner, to the gym, and even to the movies (all that time during the coming attractions, you know). Devoting hours outside school towards the care and assessment of students may be admirable, but too much work and not enough quiet time makes for a dull teacher.

Martin Luther King Jr. (1986) needed quiet time in order to remain focused. “Every day when I’m at home I break from the office for dinner and try to spend a few hours with the children before I return to the office for some night work. And on Tuesdays when I’m not out of town, I don’t go to the office. I keep this for my quiet day of reading and silence and meditation” (p. 372).

On her personal business cards, Mother Teresa included the following poem:

“The fruit of silence is prayer
The fruit of prayer is faith
The fruit of faith is love
The fruit of love is service
The fruit of service is peace.”

While keeping up with students is daunting, a teacher also needs to carve out time to recharge and gain a fresh perspective. Eudora Welty confessed, “The time comes when I can’t hear things on their immediate, ugly, unexplained level but have to look back at them through some vision” (Carroll, 2004, p. 131).

Meditative moments can help reduce stress

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and maintain sanity. According to the Dalai Lama (1998), “In terms of our enjoying a happy, day-to-day existence, the greater the level of calmness of our mind, the greater our peace of mind, the greater our ability to enjoy a happy and joyful life” (p. 22). Sometimes you need to step back and put chicken bone wars into the proper perspective.

Conclusion

According to Baines and Stanley (2004), up to 14% of every dollar spent for education—more than fifty billion dollars—was earmarked for accountability in 2004. Yet, testing does not improve learning, it merely measures it. Focus, resilience, desire, and giving human beings time to think and create: these are the attributes that promote learning, that awaken us to the rich possibilities of living.

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Lawrence A. Baines is professor of English Education at the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio. He can be reached at lawrence.baines@utoledo.edu.