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A True Teacher Knows How Important It Is To See The Cake

I want to share a story with you that makes me feel just a little bit of pain every time I read it.

As a father, a teacher, and a husband, I have often found myself in a situation where I “failed to see the cake” and I know I missed out on some pretty special moments.

No matter what role you find yourself in, there will be times when you too may “miss the cake” if you focus on the wrong things. As we move forward into a new school year, let’s remember that we are all going to experience times when it is easy to see the “mess”, but life will be so much more enjoyable if we make sure we focus on the cake.

The Cake, by Joseph Walker:

Cindy glanced nervously at the clock on the kitchen wall. Five minutes before midnight. Her parents were expected to arrive home any minute. She carefully put the finishing touches on the chocolate cake she was frosting. It was the first time in her 12 years that she had tried to make a cake from scratch, and to be honest, it wasn’t exactly a culinary triumph. The cake was lumpy and because she had run out of sugar, the frosting was bitter.

And then there was the way the kitchen looked. Imagine a huge blender filled with all of the fixings for chocolate cake - including the requisite bowls, pans and utensils. Now imagine that the blender is turned on - high speed - with the lid off. Do you get the idea?

But Cindy wasn’t thinking about the mess. She had created something which was special to her - a masterpiece of flour and sugar rising out of the kitchen clutter. She was anxious for her parents to return home from their date so she could present her anniversary gift to them. She turned off the kitchen lights and waited excitedly in the darkness for them to arrive. When at last she saw the flash of the car headlights, she positioned herself in the kitchen doorway. By the time she heard the key sliding into the front door, she was on the verge of exploding and couldn’t wait to share her excitement.

Her parents tried to slip in quietly, but Cindy would have none of that. She flipped on the lights dramatically and trumpeted: “Ta-daaaaa!” She gestured grandly toward the kitchen table, where a slightly off-balance, two-layer chocolate cake awaited their inspection.

But her mother’s eyes never made it all the way to the table.

“Just look at this mess!” she moaned. “How many times have I talked to you about cleaning up after yourself?”

“But Mom, I was only...”

“I should make you clean this up right now, but I’m too tired to stay up with you to make sure you get it done right,” her mother said angrily. “So you’ll get up early and do it first thing in the morning.”

“Honey,” Cindy’s father interjected gently, “take a look at the table.”

“I know! It’s a mess!” his wife said coldly. “The whole kitchen is a disaster. I can’t stand to look at it.” She stormed up the stairs and into her room, slamming the door shut behind her.

For a few moments, Cindy and her father stood silently, neither one knowing what to say. At last she looked up at him, her eyes moist and red. “She never saw the cake,” she said.

TRY TO SEE THE CAKE YOUR STUDENTS ARE TRYING TO BAKE AND NOT THE MESS

While it is true that our children all need to learn to be responsible and suffer the consequences of their actions, parents must never lose sight of the fact that even though things like muddy shoes, lost money, dented fenders, and messy kitchens are frustrating, they are not worth the sacrifice of a person’s dignity and feelings. It is my sincere hope that my own children have learned from watching my wife and I, that when they become parents themselves, they must never lose sight of the fact that there are things in this life that may seem important right now - but at the end of the day they are not worth damaging a relationship. After all, what’s a little mud, a broken object, lost money or torn clothing compared to a child’s self-esteem? You can clean up the mud, replace the broken object, live without the money and fix the clothing, but any damage you do to a relationship or to someone’s self-esteem will last forever.

The same can be said about teachers. Your students will make a "mess" at times while they are trying to experiment with projects and assignments in order to seek your approval. It is easy for us to be critical of the work of children. Ask a child to write an essay and we can find dozens of mistakes to point out. We can even demand that the student do the work over again. But we must always take time and care to "see the good points" or we will "miss the cake" and our critical comments will "destroy" the teacher-pupil relationship that is so very important for learning to take place.

REMEMBER THIS WHEN YOU ARE MARKING STUDENT WORK

The next time you are about to mark a student's assignment, take a moment to re-read this article again or at least recall the feeling of the young girl in the story, Cindy, as she waited in anticipation for her parents to come home. Many of your students are waiting in anticipation of you to read their assignment. They have worked hard to do this assignment for you and they may not have paid much attention to the "mess" they were making. It is the "content" they want you to see. It is the "cake" they want you to see.

There are times in our life when perhaps it is all right to see the mess in the kitchen.

And there are times when we only need to see the cake.

It is a wise teacher who knows the difference.

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