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“The Day I Decided To Stop Teaching Reading, Writing and Arithmetic”

REFLECTIONS by...

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As I was going through some of my files one day I came across a wrinkled page on which was written a story that had changed my whole approach to teaching very early in my career. It brought back a whole lot of memories about former students of mine who I remember quite well to this day, not because of their superior academic accomplishments, but rather for their courage and perseverance once they realized that someone actually “believed in them”.

I just have to share this story with you and ask that you pass it on to any parents and teachers you happen to know. It had a huge impact, not only on my personal philosophy of teaching, but also on how I treated my own children.

The Teddy Stoddard Story

As Mrs. Thompson stood in front of her 5th grade class on the very first day of school, she told the children an untruth. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and said that she loved them all the same. However, that was impossible, because there in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a little boy named Teddy Stoddard.

Mrs. Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he did not play well with the other children, that his clothes were messy and that he constantly needed a bath. In addition, Teddy could be unpleasant.

It got to the point where Mrs. Thompson would actually take delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen, making bold X's and then putting a big "F" at the top of his papers.

At the school where Mrs. Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records and she put Teddy's off until last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise. Teddy's first grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly and has good manners... he is a joy to be around."

His second grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is an excellent student, well liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle."

His third grade teacher wrote, "His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest and his home life will soon affect him if some steps aren't taken."

Teddy's fourth grade teacher wrote, "Teddy is withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends and he sometimes sleeps in class."

By now, Mrs. Thompson realized the problem and she was ashamed of herself. She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents, wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy's. His present was clumsily wrapped in the heavy, brown paper that he got from a grocery bag.

Mrs. Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started to laugh when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some of the stones missing, and a bottle that was one-quarter full of perfume.

But she stifled the children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on, and dabbing some of the perfume on her wrist.

Teddy Stoddard stayed after school that day just long enough to say, "Mrs. Thompson, today you smelled just like my Mom used to." After the children left, she cried for at least an hour.

ON THAT VERY DAY, SHE QUIT TEACHING READING, WRITING AND ARITHMETIC. INSTEAD SHE BEGAN TO TEACH CHILDREN.

Mrs. Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive. The more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class and, despite her lie that she would love all the children the same, Teddy became one of her "teacher's pets."

Many years later they met again. By this time Teddy had gone on to medical school and had become a successful doctor. They hugged each other for a long while, and Dr. Stoddard whispered in Mrs. Thompson's ear, "Thank you Mrs. Thompson for believing in me. Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference."

Mrs. Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back. She said, "Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you."

During my 28 years as a classroom teacher I came across a lot of "Teddy Stoddards". My only hope is that they remember me as someone who believed in them and showed them that they could make a difference.

I have two video versions of the above story that I would like you to take time to watch. They are not very long and I am sure you will find them very touching. Please be warned, however, that you may want to keep some Kleenex tissues close by while you are watching these videos.

The first is told by Wayne Dyer during one of his presentations.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZKQX54MqrQ&feature=related>

The following link will bring you to a short video that is an animated version of the Teddy Stoddard Story:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GKHi0OLz6c&feature=related>

