

TEACHABLE MOMENTS FOR TEACHERS ...

LIFE-CHANGING
MOMENTS: LEARNING
TO ACCEPT YOUR
STUDENTS' CHOICES

BY KARIN MIKA

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Teachable Moments for Teachers ... is a regular feature of Perspectives designed to give teachers an opportunity to describe a special moment of epiphany that changed their approach to presenting a particular topic to their students. It is a companion to the Teachable Moments for Students column that provides quick and accessible answers to questions frequently asked by students and other researchers. Readers are invited to submit their own "teachable moments for teachers" to the editor of the column: Louis J. Sirico Jr., Villanova University School of Law, 299 N. Spring Mill Road, Villanova, PA 19085-1682, phone: (610) 519-7071, fax: (610) 519-6282, e-mail: sirico@law.vill.edu.

Without a doubt, having a child diagnosed with leukemia is a life-changing moment. In many ways, you leave everything you ever knew behind and embark upon a new life in which each day brings new challenges, new insights, and, in the end, a rebirth into a different world. This different world looks like the world that you formerly lived in, but it is so vastly different that you have a hard time explaining its differences, especially to yourself.

My daughter's diagnosis and subsequent two-and-a-half years of treatment were the impetus for my teachable moment. I should properly say, teachable moments, because there were so many subtle things that happened during that time frame that it would be difficult to pinpoint a moment of epiphany, and I can't even say that I had an epiphany. However, I did change, maybe imperceptibly to some, but I changed nonetheless. Interestingly enough, the ways in which I changed, especially as a teacher, might seem contradictory at first. However, the changes are cut from the same cloth and have managed to peacefully coexist.

Before I explain how I changed, it might be best to give some background as to who I was as a legal writing professor. When I first began teaching, I had the normal zeal associated with being a young teacher. I had started out at my law school as an assistant in the Legal Writing department. I was responsible for distributing assignments and materials to 12 adjunct professors, and I was the universal tutor for all first-year students.

In my position as assistant, it was easy to proclaim what were the flaws in the system and I spent each day thinking about how I would correct those flaws if I were allowed to teach. The next year I had that opportunity.

Once I became a full-fledged legal writing instructor, I came at the job believing that there was no student who could not be taught to write well and that I would ensure that this would happen. Thus, I took personal responsibility for the success of each of my students. If they didn't get it, it was a blow to my ego, and thus I spent all of my time doing things such as chasing students down the hall, modifying and remodifying assignments, and, of course, getting up in the middle of the night because I had an idea about how to "fix" a particular problem.

I did this for several years until experience taught me two fundamental truths: 1) that some students did not particularly care about succeeding, and 2) that no matter what I did, some students did not have the potential to succeed. Coinciding with this was a move in our school to do "more weeding out" and to "use the full range of grades," especially in legal writing. Thus, although I don't think I became less of a nurturer, I limited it to those who wanted to be nurtured. I no longer had mandatory conferences, and I no longer chased students in the hall. If they wanted to see me, they knew where to find me. Nevertheless, I still jotted down ideas in the middle of the night, but those related mostly to the salary and status issues that were often the focal point of all of my hours not related to student services.

My world changed on December 25, 2001, in my 11th year of teaching legal writing. On that day, I decided to "brave" a lengthy wait in the local emergency room because my then 12-year-old

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daughter had been feverish for weeks and, despite several reassuring doctor visits, I was bound and determined to get an antibiotic for her before we left on our December vacation to the American Association of Law Schools meeting. Six hours later, we found ourselves in a room at the Cleveland Clinic discussing a bone marrow biopsy, surgery for a chest port implantation, and the lengthy protocol for childhood leukemia.

Without getting into the nitty-gritty of leukemia treatment, let me just say that the trip is daunting. Girls are treated for two-and-a-half years, and boys are treated for three-and-a-half years. The treatment involves a perpetual toxic cocktail of drugs that is sometimes intravenous with pills, sometimes pills with leg shots, and sometimes leg shots with intravenous drugs. Then there are the spinal taps ... somewhere between 20 and 30 over the course of the two-and-a-half years. As my daughter joked, “You know you’re here too often when you’re on a first-name basis with all of the personnel in the operating room.”

The regimen of drugs cannot be described as anything less than heinous. The object of these drugs is to destroy cells, and destroy cells they do. Not only the leukemic cells, but stomach cells, red blood cells, platelets, liver cells, heart cells, mouth cells, intestinal cells, and, of course, the cells that produce hair. In addition, part of the object of leukemia treatment is to keep the immune system barely functional. This pretty much means isolation for the child, and also means that at the hint of an illness, you can expect at least a 48-hour hospitalization. You spend much of the time anticipating what may come next and come to expect the inevitability that you will have to drop everything in order to take your child to the hospital. This is in addition to the sometimes tri-weekly appointments that you are going to during the first nine months of treatment.

Then of course there are the other side effects—nausea, lack of appetite, excessive appetite, water weight gain, rashes, soreness, mood swings, watery eyes, and, in the case of a drug called Vincristine, leg cramps and a complete loss of reflexes. Aside from this, there are the other things that go along with such an illness—constant disinfecting to prevent germs, dealing with friends and family (which included a younger sibling), paying the bills, and, in general, just

trying to figure out how you will get through the next day with a shred of sanity left. It is at that point, just when you don’t know if you can do it for one more day, that you go to one of your regular appointments, glance down the hall, and realize that you and your child are the lucky ones. At least you were given a chance. Many others are not. Such is life in the pediatric oncology department.

All this while, I was having my teachable moment, except that I didn’t know it at the time. About all I knew was what I was doing in the next minute, and sometimes not even then. I did teach during this time period, and I would hope that I even did a credible job. But I couldn’t say that this was the result of anything other than intuition and experience. My world was a grand fog, and there were many points when I was sure it would never lift.

I think I first discovered I had had a “teachable moment” in the fall of 2003. My daughter was a mere seven to eight months away from the conclusion of treatment, was having no complications, and was attending high school and participating in extracurricular activities. The perpetual worry about what the next minute was to bring was slowly lifting.

One day in the fall, we were having a brown bag luncheon to discuss methods of helping students pass the bar exam. This topic had always caused a contentious debate amongst our faculty, and I was often in the thick of things. This time, however, I decided not to go to the luncheon. I found that I did not care what was said, and had no interest in having my opinion heard. I was a little bit surprised at my own disinterest and spent a long time assessing what was going through my head.

The feeling becomes difficult to describe. It is not that I no longer cared about whether students did or did not pass the bar exam, it is that I had somehow completely lost the ability to be moved by the contentiousness surrounding academic bureaucracies or law school hierarchies. It is not that I don’t care that my office is windowless and in the basement, but that I have lost the ability to consider this to be a major issue in my life. While I haven’t lost any of my fight or spirit, I no longer see academic problems as life-and-death matters.

The students may not see it, but I believe my teaching changed dramatically this year. I recall in years past arriving at legal writing class steamed over some faculty slight, and leaving legal writing to pen some memo to the dean or some other committee chairperson. Although I never tried to let any of this preoccupation pervade any of my interactions with students, I'm sure it did on numerous occasions, especially with a wisecrack or two. I'm sure that whether it was done willingly or perhaps subconsciously, I made students my personal soldiers in whatever was my quest for the week, and I'm sure that when I had that ever-important memo to write, I would have to grit my teeth and smile when a student approached asking whether I could explain something.

As a result of my teachable moment, whatever current quest I have is completely separate from my teaching. It is no longer intertwined. Because peripheral issues no longer "get to me," my teaching has really become all about the students. No longer do I have to feign enthusiasm when a difficult student walks in my office because now I actually feel that enthusiasm and am delighted to give that student all the time he or she requires to either get it, or perhaps not get it. Naturally, I'm still not thrilled to spend several hours with a student who will fight me every step of the way, but I no longer am subconsciously impatient to move on to that important memo to write, or that quandary I need to sort out regarding salary, status, or why we've got a 35-year-old copy machine.

The concept of the "difficult" student brings me to my second teachable moment. This one, however, can probably be traced to an actual moment in time as opposed to one that developed over the period of two-and-a-half years. Again, a little bit of background is required.

When my daughter began treatment for leukemia, she was 12 years old. At the time, she had been poked by a needle only once in her life, and was pretty much a homebody who loved reading and hanging out with mom. For about one-and-a-half years after her diagnosis, I became responsible for everything in every moment in her life. This stemmed from dispensing medication, to keeping appointments, to being emotional

cheerleader, to deciding when she should go somewhere, to home-schooling (including reading her assignments to her and writing down her answers), to feeding, to monitoring every waking *and* sleeping moment.

But during the course of treatment, she turned 13, and then she turned 14. Then she started high school.

It's not that I dreaded my daughter starting high school, but I was still wrapped up in the "what ifs?" What if she got sick during the day? What if the class load was too much? What if she was hospitalized and she fell behind? What if the school wasn't as accommodating as middle school? What if I was required to start teaching subjects I knew nothing about?

Thus, when she started high school at full steam, even participating in extracurricular activities, I spent the majority of my time worrying, and far too much of my time asking her, "Are you sure you're OK?"

On one particular Sunday night, my daughter was doing what she typically does—playing the Sims, or Civilization, or reading Harry Potter fiction on the Internet. Then I did what I typically did. I started getting edgy because she hadn't yet started her weekend homework. On this Sunday, I kept asking her how much homework she had, and whether she needed any help. I also kept reminding her that she needed to finish before she got too tired. Finally, my daughter turned to me and said, "Mom, my homework is not your responsibility. It's mine. Even if I chose not to do it all, it would not be your responsibility, it would be mine."

It was at that point that I had my epiphany: At some point one has to let go of control over some things. My daughter was no longer 12 and completely understood herself and her world. She knew which meds she had to take and when; she knew when she was too tired to do something, or when she should pick herself up despite how she felt. She knew the difference between a minor ache and something that should be reported. She also knew how much time she needed to complete her homework, and just how much effort she wanted to put into the assignments given her.

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Numerous times I felt the urge to say, “I don’t think you should do that,” or “Why don’t you try this?” or even, “I think there’s another section you can include in this essay,” but I have held my tongue. I must accept that she has made choices and will continue to make choices long after I’m out of the picture entirely. Whatever those choices are, whether I would agree with them or not, she must be able to make them and I must accept living with them.

So too is the situation with my students. At the onset of my career, I would not accept that students in my class would not succeed, nor could I accept that a student would choose not to succeed. I took failures personally, and believed that I had a responsibility to make students be all they could be.

However, even though my “chasing” days are long over, I have always had a problem with the student who could do so much better but seemingly did not. I may not have chased that student, but I have no doubt that my frustration likely seeped into my grading commentary on occasion, or that my feelings were made known either implicitly or explicitly. What my daughter taught me is that sometimes people make choices that you would not make for yourself, but that you must still accept those choices.

In many ways, it is all related to ego—replacing your idea that people should be what you want them to be with the idea that it is OK if people choose not to be the thing you want them to be. (This happened to Julia Roberts in *Mona Lisa Smile*.) Although I am hopeful that I am still the teacher who would provide whatever guidance is necessary for a student to succeed, I am now comfortable with the thought that there are students out there who do not necessarily want to be as good as I would like them to be. In fact, just this year I had such a student. But that might very well be another teachable moment!

Currently, my daughter has completed treatment and is heading to her sophomore year of high school. There is not a day that I don’t worry, nor a day that I am not learning something about myself and about the world around me.

The leukemia experience has had and still has an impact on everything that I do. It might very well have made me a better teacher, if for nothing else, than for my expanded understanding of virtually everything related to human emotion and vulnerability. It is an experience, however, that I would not wish upon anyone.

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