

11.

We Are All New



The sharp ring of what my cell phone calls “Pachelbel” drills its metallic tones into my brain. Even though I am awake at ten to six in the morning, listening to the first bird wake up in the cold August fog, it still takes me forever to realize that the noise is pointed at me. In fact, I seem to know that it is violating the sleep of my roommate at our annual faculty retreat before I realize that I am criminally responsible for it. My shame mounts as I leave the room and turn off the call at the same time.

Who can this be?! When the menu of missed calls says “Brooke,” my eldest daughter, the professor in Nashville, I am incredulous and punch a nearly random sequence of keys to discover the truth. Then a beep and the liquid crystal display indicate that I have just received a voice-mail message.

This is what my intelligent, responsible, infinitely thoughtful daughter-teacher-wife-mother has to say: “Dad, it’s 5:50 in the morning your time.” [*Yes, it is, Brooke.*] “So I am glad I didn’t wake you up . . .” [*Well, to be honest, you didn’t.*] “I just dropped your granddaughter off at kindergarten for her second day, and I want you to know what an amazing feeling it is. I am sending this person, who finally has no more baby in her, off into the world on her own. I just wanted to mark the moment.”

Well, Brooke, of course I forgive you. (Whether my roommate will forgive me is a different matter.) What am I saying? Forgive you? Of course! The daughter of my daughter is now taking her own walk into the world. School opens for me this week also. Now I am awake to what is really going on. Thank you, Brooke, for reminding me of what the moment is really all about. Dozens of little ones just like my daughter's daughter—only completely different, too—will be entrusted to me in two days.

It is an awe-inspiring responsibility to receive all these new young students into the school building. More than five years of love (feeding, talking, waking up in the middle of the night, nursing back to health, resolving conflict, noting the benchmarks of development) are now being tested as little people are released into the complex social and physical environment we call kindergarten to begin the mastery of the world on their own. The feeling, for both parents and children, must be akin to the first test flight of a new spaceship.

It's important that we—teachers and parents alike—remember what the first day of school is really all about. We adults, of course, think it is about the beginning of a child's academic career. But we forget. What was it to us? For most of us, it was the chance to find friends and develop relationships.¹¹

These two visions of school need not be in conflict, if we see it the children's way. They want to learn to read and write, of course. Every time I ask incoming first-graders what they are looking forward to in first grade, they say, "Homework!" The difference is that for children, everything they do in school is all lumped together under their favorite thing: learning. Only the adults separate out book learning from all learning and make a special case of it. One of the underlying messages of Lucy Calkin's book *Raising Lifelong Learners* is that the children's

view is truer: “The qualities that matter most in science and math, reading and writing—initiative, thoughtfulness, curiosity, resourcefulness, perseverance, and imagination—are best nurtured through the ‘everydayness’ of our shared lives.”¹² I would add the rigors of the classroom, too. Best to nurture them in everything we do at school and at home—both.

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pennies by piling one on top of the next. School must also be an education. If one wants that tower not to topple but to keep on growing through life, it will be a

pyramid with a broad base, not a narrow tower. For lasting results, learning must be multi-dimensional. Even at the top of our pyramid, the last penny sits on a three-dimensional base of cognitive, emotional, and social meaning.

One year at opening assembly, I asked the students what they noticed that was new that year. Someone said, “We are in a new classroom.” Others mentioned new classmates, new trees, new teachers, and new lockers. Teija Corse said, “We are all new.”

That answer was so insightful that I jumped up on the sandbox we use as a stage and said, “That’s right. We are all new. I am going to make a declaration: I am new. Raise your hand if you are new, too.” Most of the hands went up. “This is a school where you get to be yourselves, and if you want to be new, you get to be new: make new art, write something new, learn something new, make new friends. That’s what we do here.”

In creating the conditions for the optimal leading out of the genius, giving ourselves and others permission and encourage-

ment to be new at the beginning of each day, as well as at the beginning of a school year, is a good first move. Humans naturally build self-images around our genius, and those self-images often determine behavior. How each person's self-image plays into what he or she does will be different for each person: "I am the class clown"; "I am popular"; "I am a great reader"; "I am a bad speller"; "I can't do math"; "I am a loser." Self-image shows up in other kinds of "egospeak." Often we define ourselves as being *not* someone else, as in: "School is stupid" (unlike me); "Frieda is conceited" (unlike me); "My mom is, like, *soooooo* controlling" (unlike me); "My brother is a total geek" (unlike me). To help children grow maximally, we must help them change and transcend these generalizations. Truly loving includes not labeling.

I have the fantasy that at the beginning of their next seventeen years of schooling, each of these new students will sit down with his or her parents and say, "Okay, you guys: I will learn to read and write and solve problems mathematically and any other way you think is good, if you will recognize that I have my interests, I need my friends, and I need to do stuff in my own way in my own time. Most of all, I need to be trusted. I will even let you tell me stuff, remind me, make me do things, as long as you don't start acting like my education is more important to you than it is to me. You may not realize this, but I really appreciate you telling me what you and the world want; just don't start taking it personally, because it's my life, not yours. You know, you guys, I want to learn even more than you want me to."

Since they are only five-year-olds, and they don't know as much as I do yet, let me say it for them. Come on, parents, let's make a deal.