

April 25, 2015

Dear (first year) Self,

Right now you are both excited and nervous as you anticipate the approaching first day of school. You'll spend hours in meetings in the days leading up to it, taking copious notes, waiting for all of life's answers about teaching to be given to you. The day before school starts, you'll realize that all of those meetings and notes, your college education, and the last decade of your life spent in another career have truly done nothing to ease your nerves, let alone answer the mountain of questions you have. Every day this year you will continue to realize that it's true what they say: there is nothing quite like your first year of teaching.

There will be so much advice: "Start out strict. You can relax later, but you can't ever get more strict." "You are their teacher, not their friend. It's okay if they don't like you." "Don't smile until Christmas". "You need to teach them responsibility and accountability, not just math." "Fridays are just another day; don't dress casually because the students will think it's a day off of learning." Some advice is sound; some advice will make you roll your eyes. But the best piece of advice I received came too late in the year, and I wish I could share it with all first year teachers, particularly you: "Just be yourself."

The advice is simple. Unfortunately, as a first year teacher with no prior classroom experience, you'll find you aren't sure what it means to be yourself. You'll mimic the methods, attitudes, and behaviors of the other teachers around you. While it is certainly effective, it is far from comfortable, and both you and your students will be missing out on the amazing experience that only you can give.

In your first year of teaching you will experience a range of emotions including frustration, stress, happiness, pride, anxiety, excitement, exasperation, exhaustion, disappointment, calm, and hope. Your students will surprise you, both with their thoughtfulness and with their accomplishments. Both actions will bring you to tears. Unfortunately, the first time you cry won't be from pride in their accomplishments. Their thoughtful actions bringing you such hope for our future generations won't be the cause of the first tear shed. No, the first time you cry will be from the bitter realization that you are not being true to yourself. Such a realization will come in the form of a nasty piece of correspondence from a parent. The only purpose of this correspondence is to cause you extreme emotional pain. He will succeed and it will change you. But it will change you for the better.

His words will be so hurtful that I can't read them now, even all these months later, without becoming emotional. And while I hate to reflect on this moment in our first year of teaching, it is the single most impactful event of the entire year. It is at this time, when the first quarter is not even over, that you rely on amazing mentors, colleagues, and administration, and you see firsthand the love and support they have to give. It is at this time that you reach out to your family and loved ones and they share your pain and offer praise and love and support. And despite the pain from these words, it is this moment that you realize how much you love teaching. This painful email will prompt the best advice you have ever received, and this is the time you will hear it repeatedly from everyone who cares about you. Your husband, your mentor, your principal will all agree: it's time to just be yourself.

You'll spend hours in discussion with the principal, hours more with your mentors, and still more with colleagues and family, gathering ideas and learning who you are. You'll re-write your disclosure statement, and re-teach procedures with your classes, and you'll slowly begin to figure how to be you. You'll listen to your students and

figure out its okay to take an extra day to teach a lesson even if it means falling behind because it means your students are learning. Soon, your students are smiling, and you're smiling too...and it isn't even Christmas.

In the beginning of the year, a veteran teacher with more years of teaching experience than you have years of living will poison your opinion of collaboration. Under the guise of collaboration, he'll steal your prep hour and ask for your advice, your plans, and copies of your work. This is not collaboration and his skewed sense of collaboration will influence your own. This will be another hard lesson to learn. You'll become upset that you, a first year teacher, cannot rely on the experience of this veteran teacher, and instead feel the pressure to create thoughtful lessons for him to duplicate. When other teachers offer to share their ideas in a true collaborative spirit, you will be stubborn, not wanting to seem an unproductive first year leech, unable to provide anything constructive, you'll politely decline and fight the lonely battle of unnecessarily creating everything from scratch.

I am telling you now, this is ridiculous. Don't be silly like I was. Your most successful lessons will come from the collaboration of the entire team. Their experience is invaluable, their ideas and insight are truly helpful. Despite how you'll feel in the beginning, collaboration isn't being a first year leech or even a 30 year leech. Collaboration is meeting together and having thoughtful discussions, forming plans as a team, writing common formative assessments, and communicating often to adjust plans based on the collective experiences of the team. Most importantly, I hope you realize that even you, a first year teacher, can be a productive member, offering ideas and insight appreciated by the team.

Your first year will not be easy. You'll feel guilty for the financial difficulties that are a result of your decreased income. You'll stay late nearly every night and cause your husband to wonder if you're having an affair. And nothing is quite as difficult as the weekend grading marathon that comes before midterms and finals. Unless of course you count the emails or visits from parents upset that their child is failing, or the days when homework percentages fall below 30%, or the nights you're up until past midnight just planning the next day's lesson, or when a student transfers out of your class simply to get away from you, or when you have to repeat instructions for the fourth time because the students are zoning out, or maybe even the realization you have to re-teach a topic because the entire class exhibited their complete misunderstanding on a test. Yeah, there's always that.

But there's also nothing quite as great as seeing an entire class pass a test. Unless it is getting a Christmas gift from a student showing they are thinking of you during such a meaningful time of year, or hearing from a parent thanking you for your time and patience, or a parent telling you she sees her child understanding math for the first time, or students hanging out after class because they are comfortable with you, or seeing students exceeding their own expectations when they get a perfect score on an exam, or watching students improve two whole proficiency levels on state tests, or when a student asks you to read her poetry diary because she values your opinion, or getting a note from a student thanking you, or watching as a student has an epiphany so strong it's as if the light bulb exploded from her head instead of just turning on inside her head. Yeah, there's always that too.

It's not easy. But it's definitely worth it. And even at your lowest point, despite the stinging words, you have never once questioned that this was the right move. You were born to teach and you are strong enough to survive the first year, so you'll survive the second and third too.

Sincerely,

(end of first year) Me