

A Change To Heart

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I used to think that teaching was like a well-planned work of art
But now I understand the truth - it's a beautiful work of *heart*.

It's the last day of class, 7th period. I begin to read. I fight back tears. The opening stanza of my poem causes me to think about the one boy who brought about this "change to heart." I glance up briefly from the paper trembling slightly in my hands. I meet his gaze. He looks happy. "Yes," my heart whispers, "beautiful."

Adam was a sweet, sensitive 7th grader who was well-behaved and a great student. I remember how surprised I was the day he lingered after class and asked if he could change seats. "We don't get along," he said of the person who sat next to him.

Who couldn't get along with such a sweetheart? I had wondered, but I could see in his eyes how important this was to him. The next day I made a change to the seating chart.

Months later I was perplexed during class when Adam's head remained, for the most part, down on his desk. The one time he did manage a quick look toward the front of the room, the despair in his eyes alarmed me. This was not the polite, happy student I had come to know.

During a quiet moment, while the class was busily drawing lines from pronouns to antecedents, I tapped Adam on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow me out to the hall. Outside the door I asked, "are you okay today?"

Those four words opened a floodgate and tears began to flow. I placed a hand on his arm and waited a moment or two for him to speak. He told me he was tired of being bullied and tired of having people treat him so badly. His words tumbled over each other in their attempt to get out. But when he said, "I just want to quit," my heart stood still.

Quit what? I thought, *English? School?* But I felt that what he really meant was that he wanted to quit life.

I felt completely unprepared to deal with this situation. None of my past experience or education covered what to say when a miserable, broken-hearted twelve-year-old boy tells you he wants to quit living.

A metamorphosis began in me that Tuesday afternoon. My focus shifted noticeably from teaching grammar to teaching kids. *I may only see them for five hours a week, I thought, but that has to be enough to make a difference in their lives.*

An idea for a lesson plan formed in my mind that day, and by Friday another colossal shift in classroom atmosphere would occur. I put together a slide show about hanging on though the tough times in life. I prepared a mini-lesson about bullying that I knew would strike a chord with nearly every student. I searched the internet for inspiring stories of people who had overcome their painful past and became successful adults.

Because I wanted the students to have a personal interest in the topic on Friday, I introduced an invented advice columnist to them on Thursday. I had written a heart-wrenching letter to “Dear So and So” from “A Sad Student.” As I read the letter to each class that Thursday, I asked them to become Dear So and So. I asked them what advice they would give to their best friend if that friend wrote them a letter like Sad Student’s letter.

Pencils immediately touched down to paper and began to scribble furiously. The room was silent and all brows were furrowed in concentration. I was relieved when Adam was absent during 7th period. Although I in no way would have implicated him as my inspiration for Sad Student, I didn’t want him to feel uncomfortable.

When the final bell rang that day, I sat down with a pile of 150 responses from 150 So and So’s. Tears streamed down my face as I read those anonymous replies. They had really allowed themselves to write from the heart. Nearly every letter began with the words “I know how you feel...” then went on to describe the most tragic, heartrending, painful situations. Dozens and dozens of these bright young people who sat in my classroom every day had gone through beatings, homelessness, hunger, abandonment, handicaps, bullying, indescribable grief, and worse.

I didn’t need those inspirational internet stories anymore. I had classes full of success stories. Kids who kept putting one foot in front of the other, day after day, even when it should have been nearly impossible for them to find the strength to do it. That realization both humbled me and made me incredibly proud to be able to associate with such amazing people every day.

That Friday turned out to be one of the best days of my life. In every class we dimmed the lights and got serious. At the end of each class, the unwelcome bell interrupted our moment and found hardly a dry eye in the room. We all

understood, even if just for those few brief moments, that life was hard, it would continue to be hard, but that none of us had to go through it alone.

When Adam's 7th period class filed out the door, wiping their eyes, I began to straighten up the room. There, on Adam's chair, sat a folded piece of paper:

Dear Mrs. Hansen,

Thank you so much for what you did today.

You not only touched my heart, but probably everyone else's.

Now, I'm not sure that when my students celebrate their thirtieth birthdays they will still remember how to match pronouns to their antecedents. And, frankly, I don't really care if they do or not. But what I really hope they will keep with them throughout their lives is the knowledge that they are beautiful, wonderful individuals who are capable of great things. If I can help in some small way to instill in them a sense that they can accomplish anything they set their minds to as long as they refuse to give up, a sense that they are valuable and have the potential to change the world for the better, then I have done my job. And that job is, truly, a beautiful work of *heart*.