

Chapel Talk  
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Good evening. I'd like to talk tonight about teaching. Although I am only in my third year as a teacher, I know that this is a profession that I hope to be in for the rest of my life. There are so many things that I love about it. I love going into the classroom with a plan and then watching that plan go in a completely new direction. I love when a student stumbles onto the most brilliant idea and isn't even aware of how insightful it is. I love the triumphs and the challenges - that first hand raise of a shy freshmen; the final exhibition of the sophomore that shows me they are ready to move onto junior English; the moment when students begin to talk to each other rather than always talking to me. I love when the students begin to look at a character in a story as a real person with real struggles.

But there are also so many surprises in teaching - things that I didn't expect or understand when I first went into this profession, but things that make me love it even more. Topping that list is my realization that students watch and listen to what I do, even when I am not intentionally teaching. I once casually told my class in response to their complaining about a paper that, "Excuses are like armpits. Everybody has them and they all stink." Later, in between a tough swim set, Lucy popped out of the water and said to me, "I don't mean to be an armpit, Ms. Demers, but I'm having some pain in my shoulder." Huh. She was listening. And when, in the middle of a gripping discussion with my freshmen last year I was clearing space on the board for more notes, Julio raised his hand and said, "Ms. Demers. I love that when you erase the board, you miss huge chunks of it." Huh. He was watching. Or during my time teaching in an inner-city charter school this past summer, I called on a student in the middle of my lesson on how to make a paragraph. Denise had her hand up for almost the entire lecture on how topic sentences and concluding sentences were like the buns on a hamburger and the middle sentences were like the meat, lettuce, tomato and cheese. I finally called on her, expecting a clarifying question on structuring a paragraph or something. Instead, Denise said with great

purpose, “You have pretty hair.” Huh. She’s checking me out. My analogies, my chalk board erasing skills, my hair - who would have thought that these things mattered in teaching? But these moments when students are watching and listening to what I do when I am not planned, when I am not “teaching”, are perhaps the most special and thought-provoking moments in my career. I have found a job that doesn’t feel like a job - a job that tests me and inspires me and surprises me and perhaps most importantly, it is a job that makes me laugh. So I want to talk tonight about what it means to be a teacher and what we do when we come across a teaching moment.

One thing that I have noticed about all of the people that I admire in the teaching profession is that they all claim to be students first. Learning is never done, they argue. You must be constantly and insatiably curious and passionate about what you are teaching to truly understand what it means to be a student. Only then can you become a teacher capable of true teaching.

Tonight, though, I want to turn that theory on its head. Yes, I believe that it is deeply important to understand how to be a good student in order to become a good teacher. But what if we all begin to look at ourselves as teachers? What if we begin to believe that, although we may not all choose to pursue the profession of a teacher by title, we can all choose to be a teacher by action, spirit and heart? Do we really need the title to call ourselves, to look at ourselves and to think of ourselves as teachers?

In order to more fully understand this idea of what it means to be a teacher, I want to take you back in time to my sophomore year in high school. I somehow ended up in a religious philosophy class full of seniors. No really. I was the only sophomore. How I managed to do this I still do not know, but trust me when I say that the teacher was all too aware that I did not belong there. I was a mute in the class, feeling totally out of my league every day. Whenever I did volunteer myself, the teacher simply looked at me with what felt like a glare of burning disgust and then moved on to a far more insightful and important senior to make a point that would inevitably trump mine. I showed up everyday though. I stayed on top of my work and made it to the final project, a group

project on the Bible. I was put with three seniors and at that moment I made a promise to myself that I would more than pull my weight so that none of them felt short-changed by having the stupid sophomore in their group.

We met constantly for weeks to prepare for our presentation. I made this elaborate poster with pictures and diagrams, and I rehearsed my portion of the speech repeatedly in front of the mirror in my bedroom, so that I would look like the most composed and capable member of the class come presentation day. When that day came, I was ready. We took our place in the front of the room and began, my two partners delivering their portions of the speech expertly.

Now my turn. I stepped up, cleared my throat and began a compelling and captivating lecture that would win the class and the teacher over. I...was...gripping. I made it through the bulk of my speech and came to the final paragraph. The class was riveted - hanging on my every word. All eyes were on me as I launched into the homestretch. I confidently concluded, "Therefore, when the genitals entered Jerusalem...." My voice caught in my throat. Panic. Did I just say, "When the genitals entered Jerusalem?" Oh...my...God.

Suddenly the classroom was 500 degrees. Sweat began pouring down my face. My heart started trying to break free from my chest. I wanted to run to the corner of the room, pull up the carpet and burrow deep into the floor, but my legs were rooted in place. I looked wildly at the teacher for guidance. There she sat at the back of classroom, staring at me sternly with not an ounce of compassion for her flailing and mortified student. "How dare you make a mockery of the Bible, Sophomore!" she seemed to say. I looked around frantically for help, but all I saw was a sea of seniors muffling their laughter. I was lost, drowning in my own embarrassment and totally unsure how to proceed. Do I apologize? Do I laugh? Crumble to the floor in a pool of tears and crawl out of the room on all fours? Then the final member of my group, who now had the very unfortunate position of following me in our presentation, leaned over, put his hand on my back and with a

reassuring nod that managed to show that he was the only one in the room on my side, whispered, "It's okay. Just keep going."

In that moment, he became my teacher. He was not a fellow student anymore. Beyond being my savior, he taught me two things. One: It's okay to make a mistake and Two: I would survive. Despite my crippling mortification, I would just have to keep on going. So I finished the speech. And while I didn't manage to show my intellectual parity with the rest of the seniors, I am pretty confident in saying that I did deliver the most memorable presentation. But that day I also realized something perhaps even more memorable and important than The Great Genitals Slip of 2001: the student next to me was more of a teacher in that moment than the teacher was.

It has become clear to me that a teacher is more than a title. It's a way of carrying yourself. It's a way of behaving, a way of supporting, coaching, pushing and inspiring. I have decided that we all can become teachers - not necessarily of books and problem sets and equations and history, but of life. We learn from each other, yes, but we must teach each other too.

Do you sit in class and teach others to take risks because you volunteer your ideas, even though you may not know if they are right? Do you go to your lunch table and teach others that every person sitting there has a fascinating story - you just have to engage with them to find it out? Do you run harder in that suicide after practice or push through that tough interval in the pool to show people that no matter how tired you are, you have that extra store of sheer determination that will carry you through? Do you teach that you would rather be positive and hopeful than complain? Do you teach that mistakes and failures will not cripple you? Do you teach that being nice to another doesn't cost you a penny? That you include rather than exclude? That you value and champion others? That you can see beyond yourself and keep perspective on your life?

If we can begin to think of ourselves as teachers, we can begin to think of what our lessons will be. We can start to evaluate what we are teaching and how we are teaching

it. We can learn that every day is a classroom and every moment can become “a teaching moment.” So seniors, what will you teach when you leave here? Juniors, what are the lessons you’ll demonstrate when you become leaders of this school next year? Sophomores. Freshmen. What’s your message?

In the locker rooms of both my college swim team and lacrosse team, the same quote covered the walls: “The Vision of a Champion is someone who is bent over, drenched in sweat, at the point of exhaustion, when no one else is watching.” Every day for four years I read that quote as I suited up for practice. I loved that message: your truest self is revealed when the only person you have to prove anything to is watching - yourself.

What stands out to me now though is the part that says “when no one else is watching.” It’s ironic, because when I first started teaching in college, in an inner-city program for middle-schoolers, we were told in our training that the students are always watching. Mr. Wright, the teacher who told us this, described the day he learned this lesson. He was in the grocery store one weekend debating between two loaves of bread. Feeling some sort of presence, he looked up and caught a glimpse of one of his 8<sup>th</sup> graders ducking out of sight. Mr. Wright decided on a loaf of white bread and then moved to the dairy aisle. As he placed the gallon of milk in his cart, he looked up and there was his student again, now standing in the middle of the aisle, staring at him wide-eyed. “Anthony. Hey. How are you?” The boy looked at him a moment longer and scurried away without a response. In the Produce Department, Mr. Wright looked up again, this time from a head of lettuce. There was Anthony. “Hi Mr. Wright,” he said. “Anthony. Good to see you.” Same thing at the Frozen Foods Section over a pint of ice cream. “Mr. Wright. Hey”. “Anthony. How’s it going?” It was like the student had caught Santa Claus at the beach or something and he was trying to confirm his sighting. Anthony couldn’t believe he was seeing his teacher outside of school, where of course, all teachers lived. But what Mr. Wright couldn’t believe was how important it is as teacher to always be aware that someone might be watching you.

Beyond feeling suddenly incredibly paranoid by this story and finding myself stealthily scanning the bushes for little pairs of eyes spying on me, I understood the intent of that message. Once you decide you are a teacher, to become a great one, you must always be teaching. You are not limited by the four walls of a classroom. The opportunity to teach others is everywhere and tonight I want to remind you that the greatest lessons don't always come from that figure standing in front of the classroom. They come from right alongside you, they come from within you and they come from the places you might least expect. The Vision of a Teacher has to be someone who is standing tall, full of passion and lessons, living as if every one is watching.

So...what will you teach?