

An Open Letter to Teachers (from a troublemaker)

Kevin Kvalvik

I am obligated to tell you a story: this is the story of me. Not my son, about whose success we are both concerned. This story is about me, when I was his age and when I am my age and all those years in between. His weaknesses are mine, or I suppose I should say, in light of chronology, that my weaknesses are his. If you think that I am projecting or transferring or whatever the appropriate psychological referent is, I suppose that you are right.

When a father describes his son he is describing an infant and a child that he sees carries his face and his temper and his will and his laugh. Fathers cannot help but project. If a father whose son is so like him, is having similar troubles in school, is there any situation in the universe that calls more for transference than this? I (*From a Biblical perspective there is some precedent. You think about the ills that you had, or caused, and you want your boy to fix 'em.*) Still, I see this boy's weaknesses like none other ever will. I teach and I have spoken to countless parents whose own commitments vary from overly supportive to "I wish he were dead." (their child, not mine), yet I found in my conferences that I was professionally disengaged from all these other parents emotionally. Now of course, this is not so. Every conference I have about the kid who does not fit in is about my own child at some level. This is indeed a much better model for these meetings: each child as though they were your own.

Conversely, inasmuch as I have a parent's perspective as a teacher, I have a student's perspective as a parent. I can't think that I am alone in this. Every parent-teacher meeting where I hear that my son is distracted I think to myself, "*we sure are.*" Each meeting where I hear he is a mess (which in teacher jargon is "disorganized") I think yeah, I wish we were as tidy as Robert Deghabob, my fourth-grade nemesis. I know he doesn't concentrate because I did not. I know his penmanship is two steps ahead of Picasso's Guernica. Just sort of representative on a literal level, with most of the symbols subject to interpretation by the viewer. I am sensitive about the handwriting issue. I have notes sent back to me from his teachers still, asking "Did you sign this note? Was that mark really your signature?" Er, yeah, sorry, that was it...

My only memorable achievements in grade school were that I had a poster of Paul Bunyan selected to be on display in the library during some parent's night thing and I was in the Bluebirds reading group. Bluebirds were the smart kids, and the Robins were the average kids, and Crows were the idiots. They didn't categorize that way then but kids still do.

My spelling is now slightly better than when I was in fifth grade, but only slightly. Microsoft Word is to thank for my looking like I finished sixth grade. Although I knew a great many words, I was and am hard pressed to keep that odd and seemingly random order in my mind. The difference between right and wrong is

subtle. It just all looks right to me. After winning the class spelling bee in seventh grade, I missed "showmanship" in the school spelling bee. Apparently important to me as I remember this but not learning to ride a bike. In fifth grade my dad, an ardent champion of studying and discipline, kicked me over the coffee table for misspelling the word volcano. (As I write this I have to stop and think hard how it's spelled, all the while knowing Bill Gates will whisper the answer to me if I miss.) As for penmanship, arrrgh. How in the world can I convince myself to have fine motor skills? Well this is a fine how-do-you-do. I try to write well and can draw better than my peers but cursive eludes me. At forty I find that my cursive is identical to my skills in fifth grade. Pretty sad. But unchanged.

My whole class in fifth grade was told that we would have a party on the last day if we all learned our multiplication tables. The day before the would-be party I was the lone test taker. It was a verbal harangue, a nightmare. You do OK till after the sixes and then, look out. Slowly you find that you cannot add fast enough in your brain to feign multiplying anymore, and the likelihood of your brain just coughing up answers as though it would remember these bits of numeric trivia is laughable. Well, laughable until the day before the whole class hates you for being stupid. Of course, teachers have an abundance of words for "stupid" that are still "stupid." You knew this in first grade and you recall it in fifth.

As to behavior, I was aware as a particularly small, pretty, and bright kid that compounding these faults with good behavior would leave me no reprieve from the bullies. Yet, I discovered if I were a "Smart Aleck" I could turn these deficits into plusses. One particularly industrious day I was sitting in my desk far from the teacher while she began another lecture with chalkboard visual aid. With her wide outline covering the majority of the board she reached high and drew a large oval. After a moment's pause, she pronounced loudly, "The Earth." From my secluded desk wedged against the back wall, I heard, along with my peers, as my mouth said with equal emphasis, "The egg." Moments like these are the reasons we live: thrust forward from ignominy into laughter and acceptance, yet suddenly the room grew quiet. Her form slowly turned from the board. She carefully negotiated her way to the offender's desk as we all watched. Looking up, I realized that the desk was my own. She escorted me to the hallway to stand and consider my transgressions.

Hallway discipline was then, and still is now aimed at taking "Mr. Wise Acre" and showing what it is **not** to be the center of attention. All things considered, it was not too troubling. You had the new surroundings and the new sounds, and... Well, actually not much more. While languishing in the hall, I leaned against the narrow window by the door. These windows are unique to institutional settings. They have that thick foggy glass with wires running at diagonals inside. As I stood there leaning against it, I pressed my mouth against the glass. Then as my mind was elsewhere, and I was, after all, in fifth grade I began moving my lips and then tongue against this virtually opaque surface.

The glass was smooth and cool and as inviting as any pump handle ever was. Then it happened: the class erupted into laughter. I was a celebrity twice in the same day. I realized moments later that my mouth, against the "virtually opaque" surface, was causing the appearance of some jellyfish or giant slug to roam across the surface with pink underbelly exposed. Then, what I knew would happen did. The short, stocky, foggy figure approached the door. It swung open to reveal the now livid face of Mrs. Gallup. She took me, as was her practice, with upward pressure on the left earlobe, lifting me with a deceiving dexterity until my weight was tilted to my right leg only, hopping to the principal's office. There I do not remember the penalty weighed against me except that she paused for a moment and said, "Someday, young man, you will thank me for this." Oddly, at forty, that day has not yet arrived.

At this point, it seems unlikely that I will forget what it is to be ten and hate school: The kids, the work, the recess, each with its own peril. This is not overstatement to anyone who remembers being the smallest and victim to the ill will of big kids and the good will of the teachers. By elementary-school standards I was a lousy student. I could not sit still, write or color inside the lines; I was always more amused than inspired by lecture. I could not memorize nor even stand in line without bouncing around, but I remember that I was not angry, nor particularly mean-spirited. Just bored. I was terrorized by kids bigger and meaner because I could not keep my mouth shut. Recess was a series of indignities until, after middle school, when we could hide in the library. Fitting in was not a conscious choice then. How could it be? At ten we followed our own internal drum. We did not decide what we wanted to do or who we wanted to be. We watched as *who we were* succeeded or failed. Being different was bad, but how to control it?

All of what I was then I am now. I liked that kid. I liked him when he was punched while breaking up a fight between two bigger kids. I liked him when he got in trouble, and when he won his class spelling bee. My son is a lot like this guy. I like him too. I have the advantage of time and the self-confidence of succeeding in school after the rules changed. I now teach, and still have a bad attitude about school. We all should. My son does not yet know this, but he knows that I think that he is great. Good grades or bad he is who he is. He does not have character flaws. He is ten. He has character traits.

My son is not what prevents you from teaching well. My son is your trumpet to excel. Trouble is his name and he does not demand decent: he needs excellence. My son and me (yes *me*) need teachers to love us and care for us. Patience is required and a short temper is for those who are not professionals. We are bad, but we won't stay that way. We will be excellent and we will look back someday to find where we found it.