

More and More Often The Power of Hindsight

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I remember the first conference I attended of the then California Council on the Education of Teachers; I was still a graduate student, and brand new in this field and naively expecting to find the conference to be a somewhat larger version of a graduate seminar. It was 1976 and we had gathered at the Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite National Park for the Fall Conference (ah, those were the days!). I don't remember the conference theme, nor even if there was one; but I do remember the keynote speaker—Gary Fenstermacher, the then-director of teacher education at the University of California, Los Angeles. And I remember how riveting and provocative his keynote address was. Gary had just recently read Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and used it as a metaphor to challenge us to think hard about the sources for quality in our work as teacher educators. Wow! I thought. At Cal Council, professional education meets American popular culture and an icon in popular literature! This career is going to be some ride!

Ever the philosopher, Gary relished Pirsig's explorations of the meaning and concept of quality; he recounted Pirsig's musings on the

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relationship between rationality and romanticism in practical everyday events in the conversations between a father and son on a 17-day motorcycle journey from Minnesota to Northern California. Pirsig centers these conversations on the philosophy of how to keep a motorcycle working well on a long road trip and sprinkles into these conversations a good dollop of wisdom about life: “The real [motor] cycle you’re working on is a cycle called yourself” and “Is it hard? Not if you have the right attitude. It’s having the right attitude that’s hard.”

So pay attention, Fenstermacher warned us on that day in 1976, to both the art in teaching and living, and to the science of problem solving skills in diagnosing and shaping the technical skills of teaching. He foresaw the coming press for rationality in teaching and called us to remain strong to a perception of the education of teachers as one that balances both pulls. Fenstermacher had us buzzing about the Zen-ness of our work as teacher educators, holding a perspective of our field that isn’t dualistic (that is, avoiding either the claim that it’s art or that it’s science) and holding the tension between art and science in teaching.

I remembered all of this in thinking again recently of my 30 years of active participation in Cal Council. If Fenstermacher’s quality and Pirsig’s attitude were the seeds that began my life as a teacher educator, had they shaped equally robustly my living both the art and science in teaching? Or had my hold on the art of teaching loosened over the years as I spoke more frequently about data-driven decisions in what is known about teaching and learning? Were there things that, in hindsight, I wish I had said, and had said more often, to colleagues and students?

So while other past presidents of Cal Council may offer you insights about accomplishments and challenges of CCTE during their leadership or offer suggestions for the future of this organization, my observations from serving as CCET President from 1994 to 1996 are of a much more personal nature. Or as Pirsig states it: “The place to improve the world is first in one’s own heart and head and hands, and then work outward from there.” The present gives me an opportunity to pay attention to both head and heart.

Ten Comments

So here are ten comments that I wish I included more often in my CCTE years and my years as a teacher educator; I wish I had paid more attention to them or had modeled them more regularly or had said them more often.

1. “Thank you.”

Expressions of gratitude, they say, are good for the soul. I wish I had expressed my appreciation for my students and colleagues more—how they took care of things, how they continued to show up, how they care about their students’ learning, how they shared and cared for me. I wish I had regularly thought about three things each day that moved me to gratitude—even when it was the Peet’s latte that was the highlight of my day!

2. “Wow! That’s amazing!” and “Pay attention!”

I wish I had taken more time to appreciate the mystery of teaching, the ways in which it is wonderfully non-linear, unpredictable and delightful. I wish I had more regularly noticed those small incidents of the good and the beautiful, of change and growth and learning, and of wonder.

3. “Wow! It must be hard!”

I wish I had taken more time to deeply listen to students and colleagues and to acknowledge the complicated lives they have in addition to my assignments and expectations. I wish I had acknowledged more regularly the deep transformations that happen during a year of teacher education, as a novice becomes a teacher. I wish I had acknowledged how vulnerable one is as a teacher and how that vulnerability can lead to incredible self-understanding if one has the courage to notice what happens.

4. “Hold paradox gently.”

We all stand in what Parker Palmer calls “the tragic gap”—that place of hard reality between where we are and where we know we want to be (or between what this school is and what I hope and know it could be). To be in this present moment is to stand in our individual and collective becoming, to be patient with the timing of change and to know that transformation and change is what we are made of. I wish I had more regularly acknowledged that the present and the future hold both challenges and opportunities. I wish I had more often noticed where I am in this present moment, to think hard about what in the present I want to hold on to and what I need to let slide through my fingers in order for growth to happen. I wish I had more often taken the time to recognize that both sides need my balanced attention, and to treat myself gently in this space.

5. “I don’t know.”

I wish I had been more willing to admit when I really didn’t really know, to acknowledge that there are times when knowing is impossible, and to invite others to sit with me as we become more comfortable in the uncertainty of not knowing. I wish I had more often been able to view “no decision” or “no decision yet” as action (rather than as evidence of indecision). I wish I’d be able to savor not-knowing as recognition that we can never fully know reality.

6. “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you.”

I wish I had been more ready to admit my mistakes, when my errors occurred (and they did). I wish I had been more willing accept my imperfections, to forgive myself and to see these mistakes as opportunities for learning something—about myself and others. We know from recent psychological research that asking and giving forgiveness is good for the soul of the one who forgives, that to hold on to that anger and pain is to carry a terrible psychological weight, and that that millstone can become an impediment to connection and community.

7. “We are community”

This organization, this department, this program, this class. I wish I had more often entered a room (a classroom, a meeting, a conference) with a willingness to develop “our” agenda rather than my agenda. I wish I could have been more welcoming and inclusive of ideas and perspectives and less willing to jump to judgment. As Rumi says: “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,/ there is a field. I’ll meet you there.” I wish I had been in that field more often, for our work as teacher educators is all about building and sustaining relationships. And community is hospitality. I think of Yo Yo Ma’s approach to each of his concerts; regardless of how grand or humble the venue, Ma approaches each event as one to which he has invited each member of his audience as a special guest for whom he feels a responsibility to welcome with appropriate warmth, grace, and care.

8. “Take care of yourself”

Physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This means the usual advice of plenty of rest and exercise and some time away each day from technology and multitasking. But it also means taking some time each day to marvel at the ways in which language or nature or cosmology can inspire us to be better human beings. I wish I had modeled more often Parker Palmer’s use of poetry and prose as a “third presence” to speak to the soul in the heart of teachers—not to probe those emotions (for

that is not a teacher educator's role) but to acknowledge that teachers too are thinking, feeling individuals who cannot give to others what is not inside themselves.

9. *"Being vulnerable shows great courage."*

To stand up in front of a group of savvy, hypercritical adolescents takes courage. To reinvent yourself as a teacher or as a department chair or as a president of this organization takes courage. To revamp a failing classroom management plan takes courage. To try new things in the classroom, to take the risk that they might not work, takes courage. Above all, who we are as teachers is dependent upon our willingness to risk the new and then to do the deep inner work Pirsig speaks of as "improving the world first in one's own heart and head and hands." I wish I had said all these things more often as together we learned more deeply about the human spirit.

10. *"I hope we laugh together."*

I wish I had laughed more—at the funny things kids say, at the delicious ironies that happen, at the joy of small gifts of caring and concern. Laughter can and does heal. It helps me to not take myself so seriously and to remember my small place in the world, to remember that I am not in charge, to remember that I am only one of many influences in a student's life, and to remember that I may never know when a small act of kindness was just exactly what another needed to hear in that moment.

Small Things that Build Community

Lest you fear that I have become dour from having left the sunny climes of California, I want to assure you that this list does not comprise ten regrets that I have; instead they are ten reminders of the importance of our connection with each other, and of what it takes to build community in schools, departments, classrooms and organizations.

These ten are evidence of the small things that build community. I'll bet they have been patterns in the best of our CCTE relationships for many of the past 70 years. With attention and noticing, I'll bet they may be able to shepherd this organization to 70 more years of collaboration and welcoming for others as we continue to gather together all those who care about the education of teachers, and to share the hospitality of the teacher education tent.

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