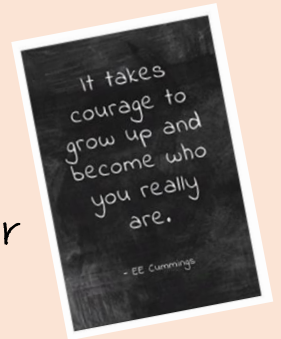


Will This Be Graded?

Reflections on Accidentally Becoming a Career Teacher



The Secret

I have a secret... I am an English teacher, and I have been trying to convince my students for over 20 years that writing is easy if you learn some basic rules, but that is not true. Writing is hard – especially when you allow others to read what you have written. You open yourself up to all kinds of criticism and misinterpretation, but those burdens are ones that courageous writers must bear. Those burdens and the fear of failure may be at the root of why I have avoided embracing the “write life.”

In his collection of essays, New York Times Bestselling author, Ta-Nehisi Coates, describes his journey and the angst of hanging one’s head and confessing to others, “I am trying to be a writer.”

Writing with my students and sharing these pieces is the lifting of my head as I attempt to walk toward fulfilling my purpose and passion.

Strike Two

Today I sat quietly as I watched a substitute librarian venture into a crowd of restless teens.

She walked with a slight limp – probably from years of carrying prejudice and fear on her back.

I was the official library monitor – my assigned duty each day – but she was anxious to make her presence known, so I didn't get involved.

The tables were filled with teens exchanging Snapchat pictures and highlights from the latest updates to their Instagram pages or planning outfits for the upcoming homecoming week.

She went directly to the table filled with brown boys.

Even though there were only three of them at the table, she warned them that no more than four would be allowed to gather there.

I wondered if cataracts had caused her to see double. Or maybe it was just hatred.

She disarmed them from any potential threat, demanding that their backpacks be placed on the floor in plain view.

My spirit wrestled with the unmerited chastisement, and I felt myself rising out of my seat. But just as my fists tightened around the arms of the chair, she pronounced her final razor-sharp words before turning her back on them:

I don't want any problems!

MY RULES!!!!

If you don't like them, you can GET OUT!

Meanwhile, at a table much closer to her desk three white girls chatted and laughed the minutes away. When their conversation reached its peak, the substitute screamed out, "Gentlemen!!!!"

I pointed to the girls and said, "The noise is coming from this table." The substitute softly apologized, and the girls kept chatting.

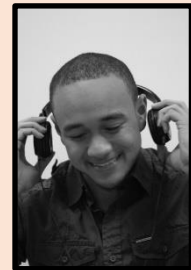
The least brown boy – sensing guilt by association – moved away from the table.

I guess I could have made more of a fuss.

I could have demanded justice, called out her bigotry by name, or loudly asserted that BLACK LIVES MATTER.

But I just sat like a bird keeping watch over her unhatched babes.

Hoping and praying for their strength, courage and endurance to just keep flying higher and higher.



The Most Important Question You Will Ever Answer

I saw the family sitting across the room while I was waiting to board the plane. There were four adults and three little girls. Even though most of them were sitting down patiently waiting for the boarding process to start, the movements of the littlest one, in her pink dress and white sandals created a swirling type of energy around the others.

After I boarded the plane, I didn't see the family again for several minutes. They all had different numbers on their boarding passes, and since the seating on the plane was open, it was up to the grandfather, who had the lowest number, to save seats for the rest of the family. He managed to save six out of the seven needed seats, and if they moved quickly, only one unfortunate person would end up sitting between two strangers in the row behind the rest of the family.

A quick game of Musical Chairs ensued as the family members scurried to place their belongings above and below their chosen seats. Usually the game ends when the music stops and one person is left without a seat. In this case, the littlest one was the loser, but instead of an ending, her grandmother's pointed finger commanding her to sit between me and the other stranger marked the beginning of her ninety minutes of agony. Even the flight attendant, who was conveniently oblivious to the boarding commotion, looked up when the grandmother commanded the little one to "Sit! RIGHT THERE!"

Every ounce of the little one's disposition protested her grandmother's directive. After she sat in the seat, she jumped up – almost in a panic – and ran back into the aisle. It was as if she was trying to say something that should have been obvious to the adults in her family. I'm just a little child! Shouldn't I be sitting next to someone I know. Something is wrong! But the adults were too absorbed in their own settling-in to pay attention to good sense. I thought that maybe once things calmed down and the grandmother did her own final assessment of who was sitting where and with whom, she might rethink placing the small child between two strangers, but when she saw the little one, anxious at her side, she insisted with an abrupt "HUMPH" and pounded her finger through the air in the direction of the seat, cutting off the little one's pleas. Her word was final, and the little one knew it. Before I could get up, the

little one scurried over my feet and angrily slammed her back into the chair. I tried to break up the tension with a smile, but the little one had already started crying – a continuous flow of big teardrops that almost seemed too big for her little face. I looked to her grandmother for guidance; surely she wasn't going to let the little one sit there crying between two strangers without offering her something that would comfort her for the next ninety minutes. The grandmother had turned her back for the moment to retrieve her iPod from her bag, but she did turn around briefly to offer the little one something just before the plane took off: she offered her one more threatening look when the little one fumbled while putting on her seatbelt – the moisture from her tears must have made the buckle slippery. During the first thirty minutes of the trip the little one cried and cried. She had buried her face into her knees, but I could tell her distress was real each time her shoulders jumped up in a synchronized motion when she heaved.

Prior to the unfolding drama, the stranger sitting on the other side of the little one had clearly let me know that he had no desire to communicate during the plane ride. When I sat down, he looked out the window, and quite frankly, that was fine with me. But once the little one sat between us, our plans to politely ignore each other were interrupted by her sobs. We exchanged a few pitying glances before he asked me if she could have some candy. I laughed as I said defensively, "I don't know her!" He laughed at himself, probably for assuming that all black people are related, but I was embarrassed to have been associated with such poor treatment of a child. I wanted him to know that I would never have placed my child between two strangers if I had a choice. Nevertheless, we both understood that we had become surrogate parents for the next hour or so, and we worked together to comfort her, being careful not to make her even more fearful. He offered her a carton of milk, and I asked her if she wanted to play games on my phone, but she shook her head no refusing to look up. The only time she peeked up was when the flight attendant came by with peanuts. The salty treats may have soothed her, but before she could respond to the offering, her grandmother reached back and took them, saying, "She doesn't need any snacks!" Her abruptness made me think that the little one had done something wrong and was being punished, but she didn't seem to consider the possibility that the punishment had already gone too far.

The little one eventually fell into the kind of deep sleep that only a child could access in that situation. She stretched out her little body without inhibition or any of the instinctive apprehensions that an adult would have. At different points throughout the trip, the other stranger and I had to manipulate our books around her head and feet. Even though she was sleeping peacefully, the wild hairs that had escaped her braids attested to the earlier trauma.

The grandmother only checked on the little one once during the trip. Her whispering tone made me think for a moment that she had a softer disposition than she had displayed earlier, but all she wanted to know was if the little one's feet on my knees were bothering me. I'm sure if I had said "yes," she would have used it as another opportunity to chastise the little one into obedience.

This school year thousands of students will be challenged to answer millions of questions. I'm sure some of the questions may seem irrelevant to the students who often just want to know what they absolutely need for the test. Nevertheless, there is a single most important question that students are asked in nearly every class from kindergarten to 12th grade. The question might be asked in a variety of ways, but it is easy to answer, and only requires one word. Not being able to answer the question may very likely result in future failures, both in and outside of the school building. The question is, "Are you here?"

If we can accept the importance of students being present at school, then we should also consider the importance of being present long after the final school bell rings and we are dismissed into the real life for which our teachers have endeavored to prepare us.

As a close-up observer of the treatment of the little one on the plane, I could easily come up with a list of mistakes the family made that day, but the one that is most prevalent is the mistake of not being present. Not being present, and therefore aware of the little one's circumstances, feelings and surroundings potentially put her in harm's way, and at the very least created a situation that caused her to suffer in a way that could have been completely avoided.

I am as guilty as anyone of not being present. It is easy to not "show up" in our world that often demands that we multi-task our way through the days. In fact, my most productive times at work are usually a result of my ability to complete many different tasks during a single 42-minute period. And

technology is my number one “ride or die” companion in every endeavor to be productive. My phone has allowed me to leap over many tall buildings in a single wireless bound: with a touch of my thumb, I can connect with friends, pay bills, listen to music and even catch up on my favorite TV programs without actually paying close attention to any specific task.

During the last year of my mom’s life, everything I had come to accept about being productive was challenged. As her memory declined, I was forced to become more present in her life. I thought it would be easy to be at her side and grade papers and respond to texts and emails, all while I was eating dinner that I had picked up on my way to visit her. I discovered very quickly that being present demanded that I be fully present or not at all. What she needed more than my body in the room was my full attention. Sometimes that meant brushing her hair in the quietness or holding her hand as the cool air followed the sunset. Other times it meant making sure that she chewed and actually swallowed an evening snack (a few times when I wasn’t watching, I discovered – the next day- that she had packed and stored food in the back corners of her mouth). Being present made all the difference between what we came to identify as good days and bad days, so ultimately when I spent time with her, I simply left my papers and phone in the car. I learned that nothing I could carry in her room with me would help me to be present more than my hands and arms that were prepared to give lots of hugs, my warm lips that were ready to consume her with kisses, and my ears and eyes, listening and looking for every sign that she was still with me in so many ways. My willingness to be present wasn’t only for her. The memory of those quiet, still times I spent with her are a great comfort when I am missing her the most.

This school year when I use my Chromebook to take attendance, I may not always verbally ask students to respond as I look around the room to see who is present. After all, they will have plenty of opportunities to prove that they have been in class, taking notes and participating in ways that good students do. What I really hope is that somehow, between the lines of Hamlet and the Help, I can inspire them and myself to provide the correct answer to the single most important question that they may ever answer.

Are you here? Are you really here?