

## Becoming a Teacher

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For years my mother told me I should be a teacher. She said I would be good at it, and it turned out that she was right: I had many qualities that would serve me in the front of a classroom. I loved language, information, and learning. I enjoyed being around kids. I was a good communicator—patient, perceptive, and articulate. Give me a concept and I could explain it in ten different ways until anyone and everyone understood it. Among my friends and between my siblings I was always known as the “smart one” who used big words, analyzed everything, and liked to hang out at the *library*, of all places. Having been a sedulous student all my life, I had the whole “school thing” already figured out.

Yet I was not unlike many young adults of my generation: the last thing I wanted to do was whatever my mom thought I’d be good at. Moreover, I didn’t want to do anything ordinary. I didn’t want to *be* ordinary.

Now that I am a teacher, it’s strange to consider how I could ever have thought teaching was an ordinary profession. I can see, looking back, that I certainly had a narrow understanding of what it takes to do this job. Also, I’m sure that back then I was confounding “ordinary” and “ubiquitous.” (Teachers are ubiquitous). I also made the mistake of equating “extraordinary” with “famous.” However the biggest flaw in my thinking back then was underestimating the gratification that comes from making a difference in other people’s lives—thinking, instead, that my only joy could come from being glamorous or bohemian.

Thus, I used to suffer a lot over the question of what career to choose. Often I was paralyzed with indecision, spending hours pondering the various paths I could take.

*If I become a journalist, I’d wistfully pine away, I’ll never get to be an actress or a dancer. Even if I’m a journalist who covers the arts, writing about dance could never replace that experience of standing in the wings listening to the audience file in and the orchestra warm up.* Then my reverie would be interrupted by reasons why one career or the other was not, actually, the one for me: *But dancers and actresses are such over-dramatic, competitive, self-centered people—the irony isn’t lost on me now—I could never stand to have them be my colleagues.*

Then it was on to other options: *And if I became a performer, then I could never be a whitewater rafting guide. There’s nothing like floating down the placid corridor between red-rock canyon walls, pulling up on a sandy shore to cook the fish you just caught. I want to live the hippie lifestyle: quit shaving my legs and live off of the land!*

Of course there was a drawback to that option too: *But I probably won’t be intellectually stimulated by life on the river. Besides, if I become a rafting guide, I’ll never pursue my dream of becoming a great chef, or opening a bed & breakfast in France, or making documentary films, or...*

Thus I tortured myself as I dabbled in college majors, transferred universities, and traveled great distances looking for the place that would allow me to *really* begin my life. All the while I waited tables for a living and was often miserable. Limitless were my career options, and sound were my reasons for not pursuing any of them.

A few weeks before my twenty-second birthday, I gave away all my furniture, packed my bicycle and clothing in the car, and headed west in a six-week soul-searching road trip that covered more than nine thousand miles, taking me through sixteen states

and more than forty cities. I lived and worked in a youth hostel in Ohio, meeting travelers from all over the world. While there I fell in love with a Turkish man, a painter, with whom I lived for three years. During that memorable and enchanting time, my abilities to see nature, to understand fine art, and to accept myself were all transformed. I lived in the South of France for five months and traveled for ten days alone through Italy with nothing more than *grazi*, *prego*, *cappuccino*, and *ciao* in my Italian vocabulary.

Oddly, as edifying as these experiences were, I often didn't allow them to be much fun. From one moment to the next, I was driven by a sense that there was something wrong, that I wasn't doing enough, or that I could be doing it better. I wasn't cool enough to have a great group of friends to accompany me on my travels. I wasn't open-minded enough to accept the painter's invitation to move to Turkey and teach English. To me, there was something wrong about living with a Swedish roommate who speaks perfect English when I could be living with a French family and getting fluent in French myself. I let my expectations and worries undercut my passion and curiosity.


I'm not sure how it was that I began to give serious consideration to teaching as a career, but I'm sure it had something to do with reasons. It had been reasons that blocked me from any course of action in the past, and it was reasons, namely not wanting to be a waitress or live in my mom's house forever, that prompted me to action now.

But, since no list of pros can ever make you completely forget the list of cons, it was not without resignation that I embarked on the path toward becoming a teacher. At first, I wanted to do it in the most impressive way possible. I sent away for the catalogue at Columbia's Teacher's College—the most prestigious school of education in the country. I applied to the University of Michigan, another school that I thought could somehow make me extraordinary. Throughout I told myself I'd just teach high school for a few years until I had enough experience to justify becoming a professor of education, training other people to do the job that, after a few years, I would have mastered.

My arrogance would be laughable if it weren't so deplorable. Luckily, my bank account was also so empty, and my love for living in Chicago so strong, that I ruled out a move to Ann Arbor and took the advice of an astute therapist who said, "Your objective right now is to start teaching. Find the cheapest and fastest route to certification, and get started right away." That advice represented an approach to life that has served me well ever since. Whenever I am stuck, mired in my own thoughts, the best and only thing for me to do is to take action. When a friend of a friend fortuitously recommended that I put in an application to be a substitute teacher at the school where she taught, I acknowledged my numerous fears and accepted her invitation anyway. A few nights later as I spoke on the phone with a sick teacher whose classes I would be taking over the next day, a million questions ran through my head about how I was going to do this, and the world of teaching, with all its joys and challenges, slowly began to come into view.

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Sometimes I just want to implant the lessons I've learned directly into the minds of my students. One day last year I had my soapbox out in eighth period with a bunch of fourth-quarter seniors who were inspired by nothing but thoughts of graduation. We had an okay discussion about how freedom can come from taking responsibility for one's own life, but only a handful of students seemed to get the ideas I was trying to communicate.

Several minutes after the period ended, one girl from the class was still lingering in the hall, waiting on a couple of her friends who had class in the room next door. This was a bright and enthusiastic student, but not one of the few who had seemed moments earlier to get the points. She said something like, “You really want us to have great morals, don’t you Ms. Bosack?” Or maybe she said, “You really want to teach us how to live a great life, huh?” Whatever it was, she said it good-naturedly, with a smile and a cheerful tone. But she was trying to put her finger on something I hadn’t completely communicated in my barrage of tips and techniques for how to live life. She was present to my enthusiasm, but she couldn’t relate to my ideas. I told her I definitely wanted them to see how they could get the most out of life, and that I hoped I hadn’t been too preachy. “No, that’s okay!” she replied merrily, skipping off with her friends. It was a nice thing she said, but it left me with the realization that kids are most influenced by the example we set, not the words we speak. Since then, I have tried to focus on just sharing my stories, hoping that students can relate now or can at least project details into their own res.

So when I hear kids worrying about what career path to take when they’re only fourteen or fifteen years old, I take a moment to tell them the gist of my story: I didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life until I was 25. And now I absolutely love what I do. When a student is convinced that she won’t get into college if I don’t give her an A on her latest paper, I pause, give up my irritation with the “grade-grubbing” that is prevalent in affluent schools, and tell her another part of my story: Except for a B in the fourth quarter of Economics my senior year, I had straight A’s in high school. That’s not a good thing or bad thing, it’s just what I did. Northwestern considered it good enough to admit me, which was great except that from fall of my freshman year to April of my sophomore year when I dropped out, I was completely miserable. When I transferred to the Ohio State University, an option that had previously been anathema to me because “anyone from Ohio could get in to OSU,” I found my niche and got a great education. And although I failed one of my English classes, it didn’t stop me from earning a master’s degree or getting a job in a school where any teacher would love to work.

I don’t tell them this because I think prestige is good or bad or to encourage them to get a few F’s, but to say that neither my achievements nor my failures were decisive in determining my future. Nothing about my “not-so-perfect” past stopped me from having all that I want in life. I want students to understand that worry is not worth it. What is worth it is being passionate, exploring your interests, and developing your talents.

As a teenager with your whole life ahead of you and a million people who want to know what you’re going to do with it, it’s hard to understand that you *cannot* predict the opportunities that will open up as a result of being true to yourself. Which is why I ask my students to trust me. Trust me when I tell them that the best thing they can do to ensure a successful, stable, and happy future is to focus on *who* they are *being* right now, not on what they are *achieving*.

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It’s October, and the deadlines for college applications are looming large over the seniors in my two World Literature classes. They’ve spent weeks looking at sample college essays and writing and polishing their own. We’ve moved on to reading *The Odyssey*, *Antigone*, and *A Doll’s House*, but I know this decision that seems so monumental is still

occupying their minds. A quiet, studious girl approaches me at the end of the period on Friday and asks me what I think of her college decision. We're less than three months into the school year, so I don't know her well. However, I have read enough of her writing to know that she has a vibrant imagination. She has used every assignment to practice creative writing in some way, incorporating poetry or fiction—or at the very least some unusual imagery—into even the most prosaic literary analysis assignments.

She asks me tentatively, “Do you think I should go into the creative writing program at -----College?” I relish the fact that she's asking me. Maybe she thinks I'm qualified to give advice on this topic. But the truth is I don't really know much about creative writing, the extent of her potential, or the scope of opportunities that such a degree can make available. But she's asking, so I ask her, “Is that what you want to do?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then you should do it,” I declare before she can finish. “I bet you're going to tell me that it's not very practical, that your parents want to know how you're going to get a job after you graduate, and that you don't even know if you have what it takes to be a good writer.”

“Well, I think I'm a pretty good writer, but...yeah, that's pretty much what I was gonna say.”

“I can't tell you that those aren't valid concerns,” I admit, “but they aren't reasons not to pursue what you're passionate about. I *can* tell you that in my own life, doing what excites me and scares me has never been a mistake.” I go on to tell her about how the best things that have happened in my life have resulted from me acting in the face of my fears and how granting myself the time and space to pursue my interests is what has let me enjoy where I am now.

I'm not so bold to think mine was the decisive piece of input in her decision-making process, but I do hope that it was input that will stay with her. She got in to the Creative Writing Program, and she's going. When she's forgotten what happened to Odysseus on Circe's island, and she can no longer explain exactly what Torvald did to treat Nora like his little doll in Ibsen's play, I hope this student will still remember our conversation and be true to herself.

What's great about that moment is that it's what I live for in teaching—those times when they want to know what I think about something that's important to them—because it tells me that who I'm being in the classroom has left an impression and that I've gained their trust.

I wonder if people know they're giving me a gift when they reach out to me for advice or when they are moved and inspired by something I've said. Students often give me books or gift cards or candy to show their appreciation for my having taught them. The real gift or privilege, though, is the opportunity to share my experience and perspective in a way that makes a difference for them.

I've often thought that teaching is sort of like looking in a mirror. Whatever you're projecting from the front of the room is what you're going to see looking back at you from those thirty seats. When they are allowing themselves to be inspired, when they're being themselves, when they're taking on challenges and choosing to work hard and learn instead of trying to look perfect or act like they already know it all, that's when I know I'm getting my job done because that's when *they're* being who *I* hope to be. And at that moment, truly, anything is possible.