

CATE PROFESSIONAL WRITING CONTEST  
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"You There! Yes, You!"  
or, What Inspired You to Enter the Teaching Profession?

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I was lucky. A giant hand came out of a big puffy cloud and pointed its giant index finger right at me. Then a voice so deep it shook the ground said, "You there! Yes, you! Become a teacher."

I was standing, when this happened, in the office of my daughters' soon-to-be elementary school. The roof must have suddenly parted so I could see the finger pointing down from the sky, but otherwise it was just your average elementary school office. Lots of beige. A tissue box. Some flowers that looked confused about where they were. But I was not confused. I was where I wanted to be, among the helpful ladies in a room full of paper with a counter in the middle so you knew which side you were on.

The office ladies' kindness appealed to me because this was a time, Spring 2001, when my happy career as a writer and editor for a hyper-booming internet company (which I'll call I4M) had turned, upon my promotion into middle management, into a ping-pong marathon between isolation and redundancy. The less creativity I got to express at work, the more energy I put into volunteering at my daughters' school. I felt appreciated there, especially by Claire's kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Beckett. The reason stars appear to twinkle is not because of atmospheric conditions, but because of the radiance emanating from Mrs. Beckett's teaching.

I did a lesson involving drawing a barren tree from standing at the trunk and looking straight up. This was during my last winter at I4M, when I had the feeling that all of the trees with no leaves on them would never have leaves on them again.

"Bravo!" said Mrs. Beckett. "These kids need to learn how to look at things differently."

I read Degas and the Little Dancer to the class, and then had the kids pose for one another and do observational drawing. How they teetered on their toes! The seriousness of a first grader drawing a classmate who has one arm akimbo, the other arm gesturing off, off to the future, a future that must remain benign for as long as they can hold that pose: that was seriousness far more riveting than anything I encountered at work. Mrs. Beckett told me, "You should be a teacher." I took this not as an off-hand remark, but as necessity.

I was soon propelled towards this fate by being let go at I4M. My wife took it well. She was certain I could find another great job within the month of severance allotted me. Her confidence might have been oppressive if I did not have an equal confidence of my own, powered by two clear goals. One, to prove to my wife I could not get any job other than becoming a teacher; and two, to not just sit around feeling it was my destiny to become a teacher but to actually become one.

To fulfill the requirement of seeking a non-teaching job, I asked my daughters what they thought I should do next. Claire said I should work at an art museum; Lilly proposed an amusement park. I networked in those fields, the result of which was an essay I sent to The Wall Street Journal.

It did not publish the essay but did include me in an article about non-traditional job search strategies. A few months later, Oprah's producers got wind of it and tried to get me on the show, but by then I had already gotten a teaching gig and was way too busy to return their calls until they had already booked the segment on Dads Who Live Vicariously through Their Daughters.

I got my first teaching job so quickly because this was the second-to-last year of anyone who wanted to become a teacher being able to go right ahead and do just that. Imagine going to the airport and deciding, "By gum, I have had it with the same-old same-old of merely being a passenger. Today I have a notion that I would like to try my hand at flying one of these impressive machines." Immediately, along come representatives of the Aviator Induction Commission in their blue blazers and shoulder epaulettes, hustling you through security and into a cockpit, where they point out many of the buttons to you before wishing you good luck and reminding you never, never, never to push the red one. Or is it the blue one? You'll find out soon enough.

Such a thing could never happen. And yet: that method was good enough for the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing. I got three weeks of cramming on classroom management (Post the classroom rules where everyone can see them!) and lesson planning (Do lesson planning!) And that was pretty much it, except for three days when I watched some experienced teachers treat their students thoughtfully.

One of them in particular, Ms. Leonard, sat a frightened-looking boy in the front row and whispered encouragement to him. Whenever I have had a child in my class who either looked frightened or who frightened me with the notion that I would not be able to reach him, I have sat him in the front row and tried to whisper to him like Ms. Leonard. Sometimes these whispers are just thoughts in my head, but they echo her inspiration to be a thoughtful, caring teacher. I wish I had had more time to observe her.

I'd like to say my mother inspired me to become a teacher, because it's true that her thirty years as a much-decorated elementary school art teacher do inspire me. However, it's even more true that my mother was specifically set on warning me against something I was just as specifically set on ignoring.

She kept saying, "Teaching is very demanding." It's not really like her to speak in such short sentences, unless there's a lot she's not saying. I listened with my "What she's really saying is that she loves me" translator turned up full blast, so that instead of picking up on any nuance hinting that I might not be up for some or all of these demands (as it turned out I definitely would not be, try as I might, for at least five years) – I just heard the Paul Simon song, "Loves Me Like a Rock."

This overabundance of confidence and optimism is one of my favorite personality defects because it comes from a lifetime of basking in my parents' love. A big reason I became a teacher is to be an aqueduct of love, passing it along from my life into the lives of my students. This is a nice idea; however, in practice, love in teaching is like meat in sausage, requiring extensive processing -- reflection, assessment, planning, collaboration; as well as personal attributes such as stamina, consistency and self-forgiveness -- before it can be safely consumed. Otherwise, you're just sitting up there at the front of the classroom in your altruistic broth, and to your students, you look just like a giant clam, something seemingly inanimate, with a big smile, easily broken.

The extent to which I have figured any of this out, I largely owe to my father, who has passed along to me at least some of his formidable power of not being a quitter. This was most

impressed on me when we did yard chores together and he came in an hour after I did. It was further impressed on me by the boxes of carbon copies I recently sorted through, containing eloquent, succinct letters to companies he wanted to hire him after he got let go from his job the year before my older sister started college.

It has always seemed to me that having made the mid-career switch, I was also responsible for making good on the decision. While I do think that sense of duty comes from my father, I also feel, when I look back on the moment the finger pointed down at me from the sky, that the deep voice wasn't telling me to be like my father, or mother, or any other teacher I had ever known.

It was telling me to be like myself, the way I was in the fifth grade, working at my desk, getting gold stars from Mrs. Carson. She had a chart showing everyone's gold stars. I don't recall having the most, but I do remember having a lot of them. I was a presidential biographer in the fifth grade. I could tell you what Tippecanoe and Tyler Too meant, who Lemonade Lucy was, which presidents were famous for failing at other jobs before occupying the Oval Office. Reciting their names in order, from Washington to Nixon, gave me a feeling of the scope of history. In the fifth grade I could know, do, be -- anything. What inspired me to enter the teaching profession is to feel that way again.