

CATE PROFESSIONAL WRITING CONTEST

Second Place 2011

Five Jobs in Five Years:

Joy, Pain, and Academic Optimism

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Yes, you heard me. I'm one of those overqualified teachers in the state of 21st Century California who's held five jobs in five years. (Really four jobs, since my present position is actually a call-back. *Thank you, Santa Monica-Malibu Unified.*) How it is that a California teacher with multiple and single subject credentials, a master's degree in education, twenty years of good reviews, and a sense of gallows humor that rivals Sidney Carton's as he adjusted the hangman's blindfold in *A Tale of Two Cities*, finds herself looking for a job five years in a row?

Is it society's fault, meaning that abstract blanket of a blame-it-all place where we love to throw life's foul balls? Does the working world's corporate hierarchy no longer value the trust and constancy employees faithfully place with their employers?

Is it me, personally? Have I lost my golden touch in the classroom and am no longer capable of being of service to the most important stakeholders in our academic community: the students? Have I served my time and should now just fade into the classroom sunset, retire early, and live in a small shack down by the river, tutoring a parade of students, wandering from book club to book club, hoping someone still wants to listen to my interpretation of the symbolism of the blue mustang in *The Outsiders*?

Or is it just the fickle finger of fate, as impersonal as a high five from a total stranger in the second block of the unemployment line, as anonymous as a random pelt of buckshot at the lower rungs of the gainfully employed?

At this point, the question in my mind is no longer how did I manage to lose five jobs in an equal number of years, but in this “you’re all expendable” life of a 2012 professional educator, how in the world did I manage to continue being hired five times in a row? And, going further, what might there be to celebrate in the midst of this vocational chaos? What exactly is it that inspires me to stay in this, the third oldest profession (after hoochie and baby mamas) where, come spring, it’s probably going to be open season on teachers again?

Ah. Let’s go back to the beginning. Toward the end of my first year teaching, I recall writing in the self-reflection portion on my first annual review that it didn’t matter what subject I taught because in reality what I was really teaching was “joy.” At the time, I taught second grade language arts and every day of the week was a “feel good” sandwich with reading and writing always on the daily menu and “author’s chair” winding up the day like the cherry on top of the rather butterscotch sundae. Who was that person who wrote about teaching “joy?” Did she still dwell inside me or was she now buried in paperwork, whether assigning or responding, wading in a sea of contracts job anxiety so deep you could cut it with a machete.

Still, I wondered aloud if joy was contagious and, if so, could my former self reach my present and extend that rush of optimism? How was it possible that, after weathering some serious bumps in my professional and financial profile, my voice still raced with excitement while discussing strategies for lesson planning, ways to teach abstract thinking, to probe for specific language, to hook a cynical audience, and to end with significance? Why did this unquenchable joy inside me refuse to just roll over and head for a very early and unanticipated

retirement? Instead, why did I still feel like I could teach anything, even computer lab—yes, computer lab--since my love for what I do constantly overshadowed my content knowledge? (And, mind you, my content knowledge could fill way more than a thimble. Way more.)

Fifteen years of successfully scaling a vocation is enviable in any profession so what would be the point in just focusing on the last five? Why or how was I able to continue to get up and do what had to be done? One explanation came to me some years back when Frances Gipson, the Director of Professional Development at UCLA, asked our coaching network to read an article entitled, “Academic Optimism” by W. D. Hoy. When we finished reading and were well into a Save the Last Word discussion protocol, Frances stated that, when hiring her staff of literacy coaches, she looked for the same defining characteristics of academic optimism: Collective Efficacy, the belief that the faculty can make a positive difference in the student learning; Relational Trust, where faculty trust in one another, in students and parents fostering cooperation to improve learning; and Academic Press, enacted behaviors focused upon student success, valuing hard work learning and achievement (Hoy, 2006).” For the first time in my coaching career, I actually understood why she hired me: quite simply, I believed student achievement could improve. And, when I think about successive employers hiring me, I can’t help but wonder if the optimism I hold for my students is really the same on I hold for myself.

My joy, or enthusiasm for learning, helped me walk into intervention and honors classes, not at all convinced that I knew my subject better than anyone, but with a rock-solid faith that fifty-five minutes later, we would all know more than we did before the lesson began. My joy helped me earn a warehouse of salary points and graduate credits as I took class after class, conference after conference, workshop after workshop and, when asked, even taught a few. Joy helped me laugh at my mistakes while embracing Richard T. Elmore’s simple yet all

encompassing definition of professional development as “the practice of improvement.” My dedication to improvement instills a joy in me that evidently is powerful enough to withstand five job start-over’s, each very much like the first year as far as the initial workloads, something so painful and unflinchingly exhausting that I would not wish it on another living soul yet also so humbling and redemptive, it keeps me on that joyful path of continuous improvement and constant, life-affirming learning. Where does this joy come from and, after five years of relentless ego stomping, how does it manage to be constantly renewed?

Some things only God can answer but I still wonder, why am I not only still here but actually thriving in this rocky version of the vocation we call education? I suppose I’m like Woody Allen’s narrator in *Hannah and Her Sisters* who, while pondering his relationships with two of the sisters, wonders why he needs to love yet another sister. “Why do I do it?” he asks in a voiceover. “I guess I still need the eggs.”

Evidently, I, too, still need the eggs and the eggs need me and, as long as that lasts, I’ll still be in the classroom, teaching. You can call it language arts or you can call it English or you can call it English-language arts. But I’ll call it joy. Joy of discovering another facet of ourselves in great literature, joy of discovering another piece in the eternal puzzle of knowledge, even if it all adds up to “How to Burn a CD.” It’s all about joy. Yes, I’m one of the lucky ones. I go to work every day and I teach joy. It may not always be joyful to do so and I may not always feel joyful but I really do still need the eggs. And, if you’re reading this, I imagine you do, too.