

The Buffy Factor: What Educators Should Learn from the Vampire Slayer.

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If you're not lucky enough to have ready access to any teenagers, you've probably never heard much about Buffy the Vampire Slayer. On its surface, the show seems at best implausible and, at worst, ridiculous. A young girl "chosen" to rid the world of vampires, demons, and general baddies, all while maintaining the "normal" life of a high school student. After many hours of listening to my students discuss the relative merits of this episode over that episode, I finally tuned in to see what the fuss was all about.

What I got was a lesson in why schools are failing to do what they want (and need) to do.

While living in a small town built over the Hellmouth- literally, the opening to hell- Buffy faces a constant onslaught of new evils. One week a demon, the next week a werewolf, the next week a well-intentioned spell gone wrong; each week she must look at the new problem, research (or, more likely, ask others to research) the causes and possible ways to solve the problem, and then face the baddie in order to kick it's literal or not-so-corporeal ass. Problem solved, though not as neatly as one might expect from television. The costs are high. People are wounded, even lost, in the fight. Scars remain and each battle takes a little from all involved. Equally, though, all are made a bit more confident by each battle, becoming that much more sure that just about any problem can be met head-on.

I would like to imagine that this is the way that educators view their work. New problems arise, we face them together, we trust one another to do our parts, and we kick their theoretical asses. Unfortunately, we aren't so much with the Buffy worldview. Oh sure, we may do the research, know the answer, even try to solve things in our own classrooms, but we aren't willing to take on the Big Bad lurking in our lounges, district offices, and statehouses.

Buffy et al recognize that they have no choice but to face the problem and solve it. We as educators believe that we want to solve the problem- need to solve the problem- but also that we are essentially powerless to do so. We choose to hide in the refuge of "they won't let me," without questioning who "they" are and why the hell "they" have the right- the imperative- to do anything.

What's missing? What's the difference between the (real world) educational community and the(fictional) Buffy? Bravery. A moral imperative to push back against those who insist upon "reforms" that are actually steps back from what we know to be true about what kids, schools, and communities need. A sense that we have been "chosen" to save the world day after day, week after week- no matter the cost.

The cost is too high, we explain. I need my job. I have bills, children of my own, no other options but this. I must keep my head down, make no waves, toe the line and do as I'm told. I don't have the luxury of bravery. The obstacles are too many, too powerful, too much.

Not enough money. Too many standardized tests. Dissolving communities. Injustice and inequity. Poverty. Apathetic parents. Drugs. Pregnancy. Increased government intrusion. Decreased government support. Special education costs. These are the demons we face, the demons we blame for the chaos on our personal Hellmouths. Can we defeat them? That depends on what we mean by defeat. We may not be able to solve the big problems in our world, but we can work around them. We can save kids- and save the world- by refusing to allow them to beat us.

The work of world saving isn't to be undertaken in isolation. Just as Buffy relies up on her friends- her "Scooby" gang- to fill the gaps of her own weaknesses, we must recognize the importance of collaboration to our mission.

Cooperation- a tacit agreement not to get in one another's way- isn't enough. Collaboration- a sense of shared responsibility, shared purpose- among all shareholders including parents, students, and educators, is key. Just as Buffy's survival depends upon others, our survival is ensured only if we recognize that no one gets anywhere important alone. Asking for help, however, admitting to our own weaknesses and failures, requires more bravery than even our heroine has displayed. I would sometimes much rather face the nastiest demon than admit to a colleague that I simply don't know how to fix the problem I'm facing. Brave teachers nationwide- worldwide- are willing not only to admit it, but to shout it in the hallways until someone shouts back a response. They are few and far between, working in isolation or in rare educational communities made up of similarly brave educators. Those of us who wish to be brave, who don't know how to brave, must seek them out. We must learn from their work, adapt it to our students, our communities, and our needs. How will we know them when we see them? They are the teachers who take risks, who push back, who say "no" to district and state mandates that make no sense. They know the data and history of their schools and their communities. They serve on committees, participate actively in conferences, and admit to confusion and difficulty. They talk about their students and their classrooms at every opportunity. They are constantly seeking better ways to teach and to learn. Sometimes they get fired. Sometimes they win teacher of the year. Some are the old salts and curmudgeons of their communities, while others are fresh-faced and youthful. They are all colors, all sizes, and often don't fit the mold of what we expect from teachers. They wear jeans and suits. They are our allies, the educational Scooby gang of the educational community. We have the luxury of being one of many "chosen" to save the world. We're part of a team. Buffy is all alone. Surely we can do better than a fictitious 17 year-old girl.

It's not coincidence that the role model I suggest is a girl (or, rather, a young woman). Education, a field dominated by women (at least at the front lines), carries with it an expectation of passivity, respect for the hierarchy, and obedience. (All traditional virtues of womanhood.) We are to do as we're told. Those who push back are labeled troublemakers, ignored, ridiculed, or fired. Buffy is atypical in our society in that she is the recognized, unquestioned leader. No one doubts her authority, her right to make decisions when the stakes are high. She is the one who will suffer the most if the choice is a bad one, she must pay the cost of failure, therefore she is given the right- the responsibility- to make the pivotal decisions. Frontline educators, when given the same control and respect, are able to do magnificent things. Why should we wait, however, to be given that control and respect? We must demand it, insist upon it, and expect it.

How can we- those chosen to save the world- do less for those depending on us? How many children have we sacrificed on the altar of passivity and good will? How long do we wait quietly for the pendulum to swing back? At what point do we recognize that the costs of the waiting are too high. Lost children, lost communities, lost opportunities. What will it take for us to tap into our "inner Buffy" and say collectively that enough is enough, that we won't lose anyone else?

I believe the answer lies in being prepared for all eventualities, in having many weapons at our disposal. We must be prepared, with data and history, to refute the standard claim that schools are failing. We must be prepared to discuss the invalidities of the TIMSS report, the problems with standardized testing, and the fabrication of the Texas Miracle. We must know our students and our communities well enough to be able to discuss better options with the parents of our students and the members of our school board. We must question the assumptions behind every decision made in our schools and in our states. We must model the kind of critical thinking we expect of our students. The stakes are too high, and this is no paper and pencil exam. This is a performance assessment of the highest caliber. We must show what we know again and again and again.

The additional lessons are plentiful and clear: Not everyone falls into an easy category. Some demons are good some people are bad, just as some teachers have lost the vision even as some politicians and upper level administrators hold fast. Some battles are more important than others. Not every battle can be fought at the same

time, but those lower-priority demons are ignored at our peril. The demon closest to home is the most dangerous. Some of us will refuse to admit that the demons exist, even when faced with obvious evidence. There is no one-size-fits-all solution- every demon requires a different weapon. The battles will be won or lost, but the war will never end. Hell (and society) will always produce another set of demons with which we must deal. Last time will always seem easier, though it never really was.

The credits of the show always end with the same kind of shot: Buffy, battered but standing tall and looking ready for action. My students tell me they call that the "Champion" shot. My students talk about Buffy as though she were a real person. They envy her strength, physically and emotionally. They want to emulate her, want to be brave, to be champions in their own rights. I wonder at their need to find such a strong role model in a fictional character. I wonder at my own inability to fill that void. I wish that they could find the same strength in the men and women with whom they work every day in school. I wish the same for myself as an educator, as a parent, and as the young woman I once was. I wonder what it would be like if educators everywhere envisioned themselves not as harried, powerless, overburdened, under-appreciated worker bees, but as champions standing strong and ready for action, preparing to kick the ass of whatever demon threatened their children.

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Laura Thomas, 40 Avon Street, Keene, New Hampshire, 03431

Laura_Thomas@antiochne.edu

Day: 603-357-3122 X 362 Evening: 603-242-7786

Antioch New England Graduate School (though the article is based upon students I worked with at Lawrence Academy, Groton, MA and Belton High School, Belton, MO.)

After ten years of teaching high school English, theatre and speech, I am currently a core faculty member at Antioch New England Graduate School, Assistant Director of Education By Design, and the Direction of the Coalition Center for Essential School Reform.

This article has not been published elsewhere.