

A PERSONAL MOMENT LEADS TO A PROFESSIONAL AWAKENING

This morning, Harry wept as I dropped him off at kindergarten. These were not just garden variety, “Mommy, I want to stay with you, but I’ll try to be brave” tears, but “Mommy, how can you abandon me here?” wails. Normally he loves school — maybe he’s coming down with a cold.

Then his little sister Molly repeated the theme at her drop-off. Same wailing, same clinging, same wrung-out mama trying to get to the parking lot without dissolving into a weepy mess of my own.



Laura Thomas with Harry and Molly

As I climbed into my car, I counted myself lucky. I don’t have to go into a classroom and teach five periods of English, followed by a faculty meeting or, worse yet, a workshop during which I would hear the howls of my children echoing in my ears. My students might find me short-tempered. My peers might

assume me to be unsupportive. To many, I would epitomize what is wrong with education today. In reality, I would just be one of many who are stretched too thin by a world that requires all we have, plus 25% more.

How different would things be if I were able to share my early-morning drama with my colleagues before class started? How much would I gain from one simple sentence — “I’m in a tough spot today because Harry and Molly both had horrible drop-offs and I’m feeling really guilty?” Just the words, spoken aloud to a supportive community of my peers, would allow me to move beyond my morning experience into the work of teaching other people’s children.

We are all overextended. We manage our children, our parents, our homes, and myriad other daily demands. We are increasingly isolated, finding less energy and time to connect. Our support systems are disappearing at the same time that demands upon us grow. Is it any wonder that we burn out? That, with no means for refilling our own tanks,

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educators, like everyone else, find it difficult to pour energy into our work day after day?

There are educators who manage to thrive. They remain excited by their work. Their tinderboxes continue to refill themselves, providing not only the fuel necessary to continue the work, but also to enkindle their students. They offer support without being asked and remain intensely committed to their work. What’s their secret?

For some, the need for spiritual fulfillment is quenched by organized religion, by gardening, or by NASCAR. Some of our colleagues recharge their batteries by creating personal space for meditation or ballroom dancing. However, as the drive to improve achievement rises, as the pressure to raise test scores increases, as new initiatives pull us toward more time spent in our heads grappling with new ideas and philosophies, or with our hands building and applying new tools and strategies, we lose time for our hearts in both our professional and personal lives.

Professional learning for many teachers focuses on one of three things: the development of new skills, the acquisition of knowledge, or the building of learning communities. It is centered in the hands (skills), the head (knowledge), or the heart (community), drawing on a paradigm of educator-as-craftsman. Craftspeople are typically required to perform tasks as designed, with a high degree of skill, but always in similar ways. They need not love the cabinet or the plumbing on which they labor, they must only be sure to construct it correctly. This model should be replaced by that of educator-as-artist. An artist must access a high degree of technical skill, but cannot plan in advance for the moment of creation. He must be able to draw upon techniques depending on the medium, the subject, and the message to be conveyed. Most importantly, however, she must be passionate about what she is trying to say — passion that must be drawn from reflection. An artist must constantly be developing his head, his hands, and his heart.

The end of my day was exactly what any experienced parent would have predicted. My children were happy to see me but not unusually so. The tears of the morning seemingly forgotten, they chatted happily about the events of their days and the likelihood that I would cave on my school-night rules and allow a bit of television. I was relieved, of course, but the nagging faces of my imaginary English students remained as I sent up a silent prayer for those who remain in the classroom, teaching other people’s children — including my own — every day.