

The Sensitiveness of the Soul

by Thomas Peterson

Love is freedom: it gives us that fullness of existence which saves us from paying with our soul for objects that are immensely cheap.

—Rabindranath Tagore (1961, p. 57)

Most of us notice that when we pay attention and simply open ourselves to the person in front of us, we come closer to understanding his or her experience. This is simple enough, although it can be easily forgotten when we are caught up in agendas and the hurry of daily activity. But when we really meet another, we begin to “feel into” his or her world and perspective: in other words, we empathize. When this occurs there is often a feeling of really having met the other person: “Oh, this is who you are. I didn’t really see you before.” The person in front of us begins to take on a new dimension, like a cardboard cutout coming to three-dimensional life. The person has depth and substance, meaning and complexity, value and beauty beyond what we had seen previously and beyond what we had projected onto them.

In this way, empathy and understanding provide a powerful experience of self-knowledge as well as knowledge of the other. Because of the profound importance of this kind of meeting, empathy has been described as the basis of moral development (Hoffman, 1990), and it may even be the trait that makes us most human (Azar, 1997). It can assume its rightful place at the heart of education for understanding and character.

In order to cultivate empathy and understanding in students, teachers must first experience empathy toward students. How do we create opportunities to learn the lesson of understanding?

In one project in my graduate education course, each teacher enrolled was invited to form an intentional relationship with a “difficult” student. Specifically, the assignment was to “connect with a student whom they see as especially disconnected.” In response, most chose low- or

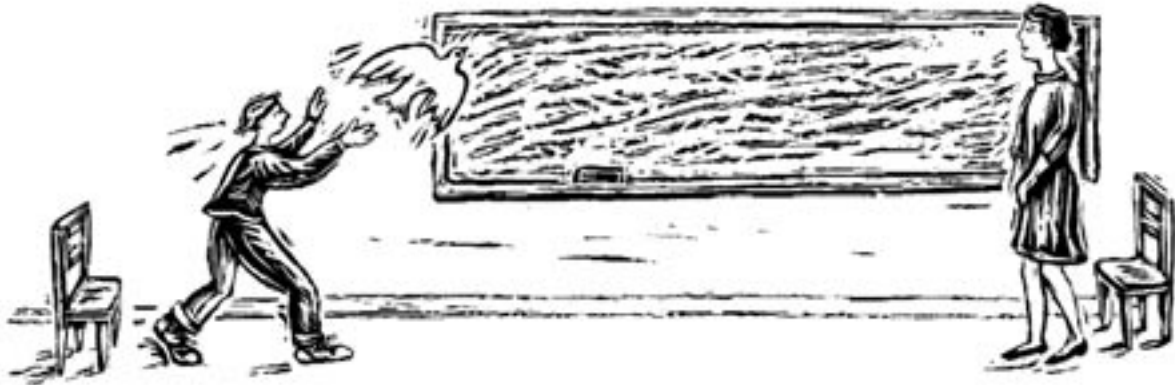
underachievers and students who particularly challenged or even intimidated them in some way. What teachers described, following their own initial reluctance and fearfulness and the understandable wariness of the students, is something important.

This intentional relationship may begin when the teacher simply asks if he or she can hold an interview with the student. The teacher may ask something so simple as “Please tell me about something you like” or take the time to sit with a student and see what conversation arises. Instead of simply disciplining him yet once again, Lawrence decided to sit down with seventeen-year-old TJ, described by his teacher as “a loud, cocky, and obnoxious seventeen-year-old who I would regularly have to reprimand and remove from class. He had a way of just getting under my skin.”

As Lawrence pulled TJ aside and sat down to talk, he asked, “What can I do to help you and what can you do to help me?” He says, “I did not think any real progress was made, but the next week I did notice that he was a little quieter in class and actually brought his book and a notebook to class.” This following week TJ asked, if he remained quiet, whether he could draw a picture in response to a group project that required students to read and answer questions about their lesson on the Middle Ages. Lawrence agreed and it turned out that this unruly student communicated with clarity and virtuosity through his artwork. TJ ended up drawing a creative and accurate solution to the question posed. Lawrence’s simple attempt to make contact with TJ had resulted in an opening and softening.

In a subsequent conversation, Lawrence asked TJ to describe the most important person in his life. He spent several animated minutes

Thomas Peterson, Ed.D., is an assistant professor at the University of West Georgia.



describing his young brother. “He even said that keeping his brother safe and cared for is ‘my only goal in life.’ I asked him why he felt this way. ‘My brother is the only one who loves me just the way I am. [My mother] loves me because I bring home [money]. My grandma loves me because I help pay the bills. Tommy, he just loves me because he wants to.’” In Lawrence’s eyes, this hardened and “obnoxious” individual became a tender brother. His teacher began to understand him for the first time.

A relationship may shift through an unexpected opportunity. Megan, an elementary teacher, knew who the most disconnected and frustrating child in her class was—seven-year-old Kendrick, whom she described as extremely disruptive and uninterested—but she was uncertain about how to approach him. When a dove got out of its cage in class, Megan specifically gave Kendrick the responsibility to capture, hold, and care for the dove before placing it back in the cage. She says, “When another student came up to my desk and tried to help he politely told them it was his job and he could finish it on his own. He had rarely spoken politely to adults before that moment, much less to his classmates. For the first time I saw a loving and caring side of [him]. Up to that point, when I had tried to hug him, he would freeze up, as if he did not know what to do. Now we can’t get him to stop giving us hugs. At the end of the next day he approached me and said that he wanted to come back to school the next day. Previously he would only say: ‘I hate school.’” She goes on to say that Kendrick’s school performance suddenly exploded. “When asked to describe his favorite teacher he wrote, ‘Mrs. Partain I like.’ I was amazed to have gotten that much structure, since most days I just received a conglomeration of letters copied at random;

often I could not even read them. Now, he had not only written words that were not displayed on the word list but had organized them into a phrase to answer the question. A few weeks later, after some help with a volunteer, he read his first book. I was so proud of him that I started crying as he was reading to me.”

Through intention and effort to meet the student, a bridge is built; a new level of connection, compassion, even love—understanding—can be created. This new connection often results in a student’s improved attention and attendance, learning and performance, as well as peer relations.

Kelly, an eighteen-year-old tenth-grader, did not attend school regularly, and when she did come, she laid her head on the desk, covered her head with a coat, and went to sleep. After a few brief “interviews” conducted after school, in which her teacher simply tried to invite conversation and ask about Kelly’s life and interests, her teacher says, “I noticed that Kelly began to take more of an interest in her studies. She started listening in class. She didn’t go to sleep. She participated in class activities and discussion. When the six-week report cards were issued, she was passing all of her subjects for the first time. I feel differently about her. I have more compassion and a genuine affection toward Kelly.”

Six-year-old David never spoke to or interacted with other children. He walked into class with his head down and responded to the good-morning greeting (and nearly every other comment) with “I hate school.” Terry, his speech teacher, decided that she would place David in a small group for their twice-weekly meetings. She also decided to pick up David personally from his classroom. “I made an extra effort to reach out to him in the hallways, as he was getting on the bus,

and in our sessions. By the end of April, he began shyly waving and saying, in the lowest voice possible, 'Hi, Miss Davis.' He began eagerly wanting to do activities in class. He began interacting with the two other boys in his group. He began talking with them, asking them questions, even arguing with them."

Mary describes her experience with Jane, a hearing-impaired student from a family of ten children living in a federal housing project. Mary had first attempted to make an effort to communicate with Jane (who seemed entirely isolated) by speaking through her signing interpreter and then by learning some sign language herself. "Jane, who never communicated with anyone in class, started to come to my homeroom before the other students and talk to me about her family and her schoolwork. She acted very shy in class around other students in the beginning, but as she and I began to communicate more she became more involved with the other students. One day after we had been meeting for a few weeks she came into school quite upset and I learned that she was menstruating for the first time and had been unprepared for this by her mother. She was very fearful and upset. We talked about it and I assured her that it was normal and that everything would be fine. I hugged her. When she left she said, 'I love you. Thank you for caring about me.' When she left my room, tears rolled down my cheeks and I felt very happy to have had the opportunity to know this child. I felt a sensation of love vibrate through my body."

We know that these relationships are not magical cures; students may fall back into a disconnected life, one overwhelmed by poverty and violence, conflict and alienation, disappointment and dispossession. Students drop out. TJ says, "I can't quit work [forty hours a week] to go to school regularly or my little brother Tommy won't eat regular. Martha [his disabled mother] doesn't get enough money to support us on her own." Cultures like TJ's affect us to our bones, but often one real and dependable contact, a "leg-up" person, may be sufficient to catalyze success and resilience. The resilient child almost invariably has an adult who understands him or her in some way.

While we may have an impulse to scoop up a poverty-stricken child, or to make a project of saving a gang member or a social outcast, the point of meeting is not to rescue but to understand; to care, not to cure (see Montgomery,

1991). Understanding or empathy, which implies knowing, may stimulate an impulse for mercy or service, but the center of what it does is to open our hearts. It helps us avoid molding the student into what we think the student should be. Simply from this meeting, both lives may be changed.

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As significant as the changes in students can be—better attitudes, cooperation, performance, social engagement—the changes that teachers describe in themselves are just as noteworthy. Mary says, "I began to develop closer and more meaningful relationships with my students as a result of this experience and I see students in a different light. I have also learned to be more patient with my own daughter." Katherine says, "This experience changed me more than it did [the student]." Teresa, who interviewed a dispossessed, "counter-culture" sixteen-year-old girl, reports, "After being around Ann I realized that maybe I only take time with the 'good' kids, the students that seemed more like I was in school. I now wonder how many like Ann there are in my classes. How many children just want one person to ask them a question about themselves?" Terry, who met with six-year-old David, says, "I realize that I am in a position to change lives. On the other hand, I am in a position to have my life changed." Lawrence says, "I can never go into a classroom again without seeing TJ in the faces of each of my students. Each will have a story to tell from now on. When you start to see students as people with real needs beyond the sphere of typical education it becomes very difficult to stay focused on the task at hand. I felt that it was my responsibility to stay within the guidelines and focus on how I could help them through the curriculum. Now I have to rethink that position. The boundaries have become fuzzy and the zones of black and white have become gray. Maybe I am learning what good teaching and the truth really are."

When the heart opens, boundaries do grow fuzzy. No longer are we left with subject versus object, task versus relationship, but we see through the eye of the heart. As already mentioned, an understanding relationship develops

not only the “soft” noncurricular areas (social skills, feelings of connectedness); they are also directly bound to how we behave and perform in school. Our self-discipline, motivation, attention, and performance are tied to this relational domain. If we want to improve performance, especially among the most difficult students, understanding and relationship are essential.

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Stuffing in more information or binding the student with more external controls, as in the typical modernist, objectivist prescription, does not address the heart of what vitalizes learning and engenders character. If teachers’ and students’ hearts are not in the room, there will be only superficial learning. Teaching for understanding means not only that we teach students to understand, but that our explicit task is to understand the student. It does not mean that the teacher must have a tear-evoking relationship with every student, but it does mean that the teacher is willing and available to meet and understand the student. This does not make “mushy” or overly sentimentalized teachers (or students); it invites them to meet the world and themselves directly, honestly, and openly.

I remember attending a memorial service for Jim Dahl, a retired English professor. He was a rumpled fellow who drove a somewhat beat-up car full of all sorts of debris—mostly old English papers, it seemed. He had an irreverent sense of humor and an extremely honest and playful pres-

ence; under it all, there was a radiant warmth. A woman stood up at his memorial service and recalled her basic composition class with him many years before. He had failed her twice, and she wanted to express her gratitude. More than any other event in her academic life, she said, it was this honest, unsentimental feedback that stretched her as a student and especially as a person. She passed the course with a “B” on her third try, and came on this day years later to thank him. Simply giving an “F” wasn’t the key; it was giving it in the context of an honest relationship. The real function of a friend (and a teacher) is to be honest with us in a way that encourages our growth.

The most important capacity in a teacher may be his or her willingness and effort to understand and meet the student. Carl Jung tells us, “An understanding heart is everything in a teacher, and cannot be esteemed high enough. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child” (Jung, 1977, p. 144). And Krishnamurti (1974) says it simply: “First of all you have to establish a relationship with the student. . . . First have affection.” (pp. 158, 138).

Why not start each school year with an explicit goal of understanding? When we do, we cultivate an atmosphere “for developing the sensitiveness of the soul, for affording mind its true freedom of sympathy” (Tagore, 1961, p. 64). And like anything else we try to teach, first and foremost we teach by demonstrating it ourselves.

Portions of this article are drawn from Hart, T. (2001). From Information to Transformation: Education for the Evolution of Consciousness. New York: Peter Lang.