

Striving to be THAT Teacher



I volunteered to substitute teach the other pre-calculus class at my school last March. Towards the end of the class and after a scintillating discussion on using an area model to solve polynomial division, one of the students asked if it were possible to request teachers for the next year. To me, the clear underlying message was, “I like you,” “I had fun this period,” and/or “You are a good teacher.”

Maybe even a great teacher. I was feeling good, and my confidence got a little boost until I read “[The Great Teacher Myth](#),” written by Knowles Fellow Erin Marron (2016). She notes:

Depicting a past teacher as the lone teacher bucking the system is subtly couched in a larger assumption—that the surroundings are bleak and uninspired. When we glorify our own inspirational teachers, we quietly assume that our other teachers who came before and the teachers who came after “The Great Teacher” didn’t really do their jobs; we quietly assume that the other teachers who worked alongside our “Great Teacher” were just going through the motions.

I started thinking about how this small interaction with a student after one lesson made me feel so good and why. Erin’s message makes sense to me. I totally agree that glorifying teachers, whether from movies or our own experience, does more harm than good. I know this, and yet, I still want to be *that* teacher she describes. This student’s tiny comment was quickly absorbed by my ego as evidence that I belong with *those* great teachers. I know it’s not true that there are two categories of teachers, great and other, and yet I want to be in that non-existent great group. Why do I feel the need for external validation of my practice?

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The teacher I was subbing for is a person I truly respect. He and I are both Knowles Fellows and, as such, have devoted a lot of time and energy to bettering ourselves as teachers and teacher leaders. I have learned so much from him: nuanced mathematical content about independent and dependent variables, how to emphasize the importance of active learning in our students, and how to elicit high quality work. If I took his student’s question as praise for myself, am I inherently simultaneously putting this other teacher down? Is teaching really a zero-sum game where my “winning” means that others “lose”? How can I

understand intellectually that the “Great Teacher Myth” is destructive while still striving for and seeking some validation that I am *that* teacher?

It must be partly because I don't get validation through monetary compensation or social status in this country. But, I tell myself, those aren't the reasons I went into teaching anyway. I went into teaching because I thought it was good for my soul. I felt like I was supposed to teach, like it was and is a calling, and I made life changes from a previous career to make that happen. I teach because I want to make an impact on students' lives and matter to them. What's the point of sacrificing monetary wealth and social status if not to be *that* teacher for as many students as possible?



Perhaps there is an underlying fear that I am not good enough, and that the only way to be good enough and make teaching a worthwhile profession is to be *that* (non-existent) teacher.

I'm not sure of the answer to this internal struggle, but I think that Aristotle might provide a good starting point. In his *Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle explains that happiness involves a state of being-at-work; that “virtues are formed in man by his doing the actions” (trans. 1951). By being-at-work and doing our typical daily actions in thoughtful ways, we strive towards being virtuous. It is not enough to merely understand what is good and want it; we need to do good actions.

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As a teacher, this idea is relatively easy for me to understand because there is plenty of hard work that goes along with teaching. Earning tenure or teaching a class for many years does not reduce the number of tests there are to grade or reflections there are to read. There are always more student misconceptions to understand and points-of-view to take into account. Still, like Aristotle understands, we can find happiness as we work towards achieving some good.

This work can be seemingly small: this year, my colleagues and I have made more space in-class and out-of-class for students to complete test corrections. We have reworked how we give feedback and our grading scale to reflect the value we place on learning from and correcting errors. In this way, not only are we as teachers working to become better at our craft, we are also showing that anything worth learning will inevitably involve error and correction.

While there is no way that I will ever achieve perfection and no way to be *that* teacher for every student, I do enjoy trying for the ideal and helping my colleagues try too. Instead of winning and losing, I need to remember that it takes a village to raise a child. All their teachers, family, coaches, clergy, etc. have a small hand in shaping who they become.

I will not be remembered by all students I teach. Whether or not students remember me as being an integral part of their development will depend on so many factors, including their maturity, their preparation from previous teachers, and their lives outside of class. But it shouldn't matter. I should remind students that growth is slow and riddled with failure and that they should not attribute their own growth to any particular teacher, whether it is me or someone else. Students themselves should own their growth, and I am happy to help them to work to take ownership of that growth. I enjoy talking about teaching and getting better at my practice with my colleagues such that collectively we can be the best possible part of the village working to encourage these students.

This internal struggle rages on as I try to simultaneously strive for the best and remember that it's not about landing in a mythical great teacher land. I also want to be aware of taking this too far such that I do not celebrate successes in my colleagues and in myself. I think it is OK to say that *sometimes* for *some* students

we can be *that* teacher and hope that *sometimes* for other students, or the same students, my colleagues can be *that* teacher too.

If I'm not going to earn power or money, I want at least a shot to be a part of the group that molds someone's growth. I want to take part in the betterment of our society. This may indeed be an unrealistic ideal and may be an unachievable goal. But I'm okay with unrealistic as long as I am continuing to strive for something individually and, more importantly, collectively. The long game is also important to me. If I tip the balance and start to give too much of myself and my time to striving to be *that* teacher, as is portrayed in the most popular teacher movies, surely I will burn out. I envision teaching for decades and to have some small influences on many students in that time. To survive as a teacher that long, I certainly cannot devote all of my time and energy to the classroom. But I can and will devote some time, and that is the being-at-work through which I find happiness.

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