

## CHAPTER ONE

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# *Becoming and Celebrating Yourself as a Grounded Teacher: Five Requisite Precepts*

**O**n solid ground! Now there is a wondrous feeling, when we take time to reflect on our life paths. Each of us feels like a work-in-progress, in process, on a journey. Most times of our lives we feel we are not quite yet there, wherever there is in our minds. We feel that we have so much to learn, a long way to go. Most times we are just overwhelmed by exhaustion, the effort to exert consuming our energy.

What time could feel more like this than the first year of teaching? Do you remember that blur, that slap-in-the-face, the extent of the learning curve? Recall the days prior to your first year in teaching. You prepared as best you could in college. You had your plasticine student-teaching experience in which everything felt as if it was not yours: neither the text, nor the wall decorations, nor the lesson planner, nor the very chair upon which you sat. Soon, you hoped, all would be different. Soon you would be walking into your own assignment, your very own students, and all the stuff—*your stuff*—that would go with that responsibility.

Then you got the job! You partied and toasted the upcoming unknown. You practiced your route to work, you fretted over

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clothing selections, you took a deep breath, you walked into your own classroom. Little did you know the vortex you were entering upon the first day of the first week of your career.

You started to teach, and soon you thought, “*Yikes! I was not prepared for this!*” What happened to the angelic kids who bade you a sad farewell at the end of student teaching? Who were these new children? And why were they behaving so badly? With the laser precision of video game experts, your students sensed your weakness, your lack of confidence, and they *pounced!* Well, I assume they did not all fling themselves in your direction in slow motion, but some days it felt that way. And some days it was worse! The billion-decision day that is the teacher’s life caught you off guard. You had no plan. You had no strategy. You had no clue. Do you remember the misery? And the weeping! Do you recall the weeping? In school, you had few people from whom to seek counsel: maybe those your age also swirling in that vortex, maybe those wizened veterans next door with the sad, condescending eyes who took kindly to your plight and offered advice or a test or a sounding board to your ideas and problems. But in the main, you suffered in silence, noting with new-found eyes that teaching is seven hours on the job and five or more off-hours in planning, reading, reflecting, ruing, and stewing. It never stops. That is the trauma you report to your friends. This teaching thing never stops!

Little wonder at the attrition in teaching, where, as University of Pennsylvania researcher Richard Ingersoll (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2005) noted, nationwide 12.4% of teachers (15.2% of teachers in schools with a high concentration of poverty) leave *each year*.

But do you know what? You were one of the 87% plus of teachers that returned after the first year. Something brought you panting out the door in mid-June through sweaty August into the next year. You came back! Bless you! And as many teachers note, the next year was better. The second year provided you with glimmers of hope. The days went less raggedy, the situations were less fractious. You sensed that you were developing an instinct. Like musicians who do not focus on where to put their hands for each note they play, else they mess up the piece, you noted that you no longer had to teach by numbers. It started to come to you, in fits and starts at first, but then almost predictably. You began to notice your students, maybe for the first time, as your teacher vision stopped being so self-focused. You began to move out from the center of the class to those students in the periphery. You noticed a gradual sense of anticipation. You saw

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what was coming; you cut off disobedience before it escalated into “def com” proportions. You felt the class moving along from your set tenets through the curriculum. You suddenly felt able to teach well with no memory as to where you acquired the technique!

No longer is your school year the blur of perpetual crises and buffeted self-esteem. You no longer dread Sunday or look upon August with disgust. You are a *bona fide* American educator. Being grounded is wonderful.

There is little evidence to suggest when this grounded sense will be achieved. Some of my colleagues argue that five to seven teaching seasons must pass before one can truly feel that he or she can be called a veteran. Other teaching colleagues have argued it occurs at the beginning of the third school year; others still say they are perpetually learning about teaching, so to feel truly grounded is difficult! But whether you are there, on the way there, or feel close to being there, what follows is for you.

Unlike other professions, such as, say, auto mechanics, where after course work and training and inspection one can proudly wear a label or emblem indicating areas of expertise (air conditioning, brake systems), teaching does not have similar symbols for accomplishments (differentiated lessons, question asking mastery, group learning) we can wear on our lapels like a Mr. Goodchalk. We are adept at knowing when something has gone well, and we certainly know when we have flopped. The difference is, as grounded teachers we have more frequent experiences with the former and do not become unraveled as much with the latter. It would be helpful, though, to know some of the signs that indicate grounded teaching is nigh.

There are some requisite indicators that you are a well-grounded teacher. These attributes can be present to varying degrees, and some may be felt more strongly than others. But if you have each of these five in your teaching pocket, you have reached a definite plateau.

**PRECEPT 1: RECOGNITION AND BELIEF  
THAT THE QUALITY OF YOUR WORK IS  
A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH TO YOUR STUDENTS**

You have achieved grounded qualities when you accept that the single most important factor in your students’ future is not the extent

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and depth of the machinery in your class—though machinery in all its forms is wonderful and amazing. But nothing you have to plug in or turn on means a thing compared to the quality of your work. In working with students from challenging schools, the stakes are truly life and death. Teaching done poorly or ineptly consigns our students to a kind of life—the life of limited opportunities and lowered expectations, and the kind of death hopelessness can engender. The toxic quality of poor teaching brings generations of students to the outer edges of society—closer to the alternative society, where business acumen of the street is valued and the rewards of mainstream society, material and financial, are possible through other paths. This is the path of the gang member, the drug lord, the criminal, and the shady. Inept teaching drives students closer to that dark side of life. You have been thoroughly frightened by the prospects that your work quality has the potential to create so much ill that you focus with laser-like precision on making your work ever better. In my travels and talks, many people I speak with react with horror when I relate that in Chicago, authorities have examined the failure rate of Chicago Public School third-grade children on Illinois’s reading exam to predict what percentage of that population will require incarceration. Read that last sentence again—reading test failure rate equals prediction of incarceration rate. Grounded teachers know in their bones that their work has value, animated with a “not on my watch” quality that keeps it keen.

#### **PRECEPT 2: IMMUNITY FROM THE TOXIC CYNICISM OF YOUR COLLEAGUES**

You have seen the enemy and it is truly within us, in those who have given up, concede defeat, admit weariness, and most of all, blame others for the limitations of their students. You have heard that the ills of the schools are seated in administrative laxity, or dean indifference, or counselor coddling. You have listened to their tired theories about the root causes of it all—parents not parenting, televisions not silenced, music videos not banned. In addition to these tangible elements, the toxic cynical blame the ephemeral. It is, after all, poverty that is to blame, society which is the culprit, or, deep in the inner recesses of the most cynical, color which contains the cause. Every group of teachers I have ever spoken to in my professional

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career begin to nod their heads at the mention of the toxic cynical. They lurk in every school building, their negativity an open fester, looking for the young and energetic, hoping to lure them into their ennui. “Why do so much, and make us look bad by comparison?” is their mantra. “I will be paid whether you learn or not” is their club motto. Their passwords are “they can’t” and “they won’t,” and they lie, they lie, they lie! You have seen them and you have learned to either nod without listening or find somewhere else to spend your precious planning time. If you have noticed these cynics that drag education down and you avoid them, you are certainly grounded. If you have a sense that they speak with the wisdom of the experienced, please read on, and continue to reflect on whether you have already been infected with the virus that will permanently remove your potential to be a force for good in this business. If so, quickly look for something else to do before you feel trapped by age and salary into a life that perpetuates misery for young people and makes it so much harder for the bright and the committed near you to improve the educational experience for others.

**PRECEPT 3: RECOGNITION THAT YOUR WORDS MATTER**

I have written at length on this subject in *Teaching from the Deep End*. You have learned enough to know that you can, by the very words you use, create a future for your students that they can see only dimly. You have seen and can recognize how powerful your words can be to them and how they can receive hope from them. You can see the brighter tomorrow your students miss through their myopic misunderstanding of the present day. As a grounded teacher you know and need not be convinced.

**PRECEPT 4: RECOGNITION THAT YOU MUST HAVE  
A REASON TO BE IN FRONT OF YOUR STUDENTS**

Your work is seated on a set of principles—tenets I have called them—that you have articulated to your students. These are not laws of student order—the ubiquitous Hammarabi Code now seemingly posted on every classroom wall in America, filled with the “Don’t Ever Do’s” of student behavior. Teachers everywhere seem passionate

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about listing their “rules of the road.” (My favorite one cautions, “No Horse Play!” which fills my mind with so many images, none of them harmful, a few quite bucolic actually.) But I have been struck by the fact that I have never seen one poster board of rules in a classroom listing one sentence on what the teacher promises to provide for students. Instead, I have seen a litany of no’s: no talking, no pushing, no gum chewing, no food throwing.

I have written elsewhere about the value of giving your students one sheet of paper with your teaching tenets upon it—a set of statements that indicate to them this is why you teach. I claim one page will suffice from my years of working with the Illinois State Legislature. No matter how profound the idea is, or how valuable and worthy the cause or complicated the mechanism, it **MUST** be rendered on a single sheet of paper, else it be consigned to committee. If our values must be concise for our civic leaders, so too must they be concise for our students. The practice is invaluable for our work.

### **PRECEPT 5: GIVE THEM HOPE, RATHER THAN LOVE**

The conversation is always heated when I suggest to new teachers it is far better to give their students hope than love. Grounded teachers recognize the intrinsic value hope plays in giving students the belief that their lives have meaning and their presence on the earth is valuable. The essential limitation of love is that it ends on the last day of school. Hope carries further in the student and is eminently more valuable to them because it has a longer shelf life and can be activated by them in later years. Hope is far more useful a gift. Love gets messy. Love can be confusing. Love invites error. You may love your students, but give them hope. That is the true sign of the grounded teacher.

These are all necessary broad strokes, but broad strokes nonetheless. There is a need to define the techniques and decisions grounded teachers make to use as a template and a barometer for measuring the further growth of teachers.

To reflect on those qualities, I researched and reread the seven years of letters I wrote to my colleagues during my tenure as English department chair at York Community High School in Elmhurst, Illinois. While we had the usual arcane evaluation system to evaluate teachers, I preferred writing letters to my colleagues detailing what

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I observed and hailed or witnessed and rued. From rereading those letters, which brought me great nostalgia and some tears as they either exposed my naiveté as a young administrator or, in the case of reading my appraisals of the work of colleagues now deceased, brought me back to happier times and deeply appreciated friendships. From those years to the years of working with prospective teachers, a set of truisms emerged that I believe indicates the grounded qualities of the grounded teacher.

Please read on for a set of fifteen grounded indicators that I have witnessed by watching hundreds and hundreds of lessons unfold magically or bomb massively through my association with York High School and the Golden Apple Foundation in Chicago. I follow these indicators with some dynamic lesson structures I have observed from the excellent teachers I have come across in my work. I conclude with a discussion of four major challenges to the energy and growing strength of the grounded teacher: tragedy, burnout, testing, and bridging the achievement gap in minority students, and I offer perspectives on compartmentalizing those vexing issues so your deep work in teaching as a form of social justice can continue.

Many of you, my fellow teachers, have worked in challenging school settings, under conditions from palatial to absolutely tragic, under the cloud of almost constant national suspicion and mistrust from legislators, bureaucrats, and citizenry. Elements of the recent No Child Left Behind law (which I, from its beginning, chose to call “No Teacher Left Alone!”) seem barely disguised indictments of teachers and an attack on American public education itself. The belief that teacher effectiveness can be categorized by student performance alone has tempted many of us in the profession to abandon our instincts in favor of teaching to the test. But I believe we have turned a corner in this national examination of teaching, in favor of recognizing the heroes in teaching who, day in and out, bring out the latent talent in their students, and who instill in them hope for a better tomorrow. This they do without resorting to the mind-numbing dumbing down of curricula in the vainglorious sole pursuit of stronger regional or national test scores. These teachers of hope realize that strong, effective teaching covers all the necessary bases of test taking without abandoning the art of giving students a love of learning and a passion for succeeding. While problems within our profession remain, more and more I see firsthand excellent teaching—good people becoming more proficient, and more

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proficient teachers become distinguished. As we continue to bring outstanding young people to the blurry start of teaching, you more grounded teachers need to continue developing into distinguished teachers.

How do you know when you're getting there? Examine the following fifteen examples of grounded teaching and see how far along you are in those areas. Consider also other aspects and avenues of grounded teaching I have not thought about, and teach me about them at [belmonte@goldenapple.org](mailto:belmonte@goldenapple.org) so we can expand our understanding about teaching in a way that will best help kids learn and become decent people in an oftentimes indecent world. The dialogue about how to best do teaching is endless, just like talking baseball strategy! Let us become like that bevy of great old baseball pros with expanded waistlines crammed into pinstripe uniforms talking about the endless circumstances and collective wisdom of our national pastime. Together, let us help each other understand more of the nuances of our fascinating work with children. Let us consider the grounded qualities of teaching.