

Fix Your Mistakes

'When you've made a mistake, fix it.'

That's what my father always used to say to me. I made plenty of mistakes when I was a kid, and whenever I would go to my father for help, that's what he would say. *'Becky, you made a mistake. So fix it.'*

I remember one time when I was about seven, my friend and I went into the little hardware store down the street from our house, determined to steal something. Don't ask me why ... I'd never stolen anything before. It was just something that came into our heads. Something to do for fun, on a long summer afternoon.

I came out of the store with one of those tiny padlocks, hardly bigger than my thumbnail. I'd never seen one that small, and I thought it was cool. But I didn't feel right about having taken it. Its presence in my pocket ate away at me. Later that afternoon, not knowing what else to do, I confessed to my father. He told me to fix my problem, and suggested exactly what I should do.

I returned to the store and showed the owner the padlock and explained to him that I had taken it without paying for it. He was very kind. And he told me he respected my honesty. I think my father had phoned him to tell him what I was going to do.

So here I am all grown up. I'm on my own now. My father isn't around to help me solve my problems and fix my mistakes. And as a twenty-three year old beginning teacher in charge of my own grade six classroom, I really need his help.

I think I've been doing a good job in my classroom. I'm keeping up with the work, and while all of my lessons aren't spectacular, most of them are good, and the kids are learning things. And I'm enjoying every minute of it. I don't think there's a better career in the whole world than being an elementary teacher.

I'd originally hoped to teach grade one or two, but jobs were scarce, and I'd been lucky to get this one. And I'd come to realize that I really *liked* teaching grade six. They were still full of enthusiasm for learning, and hadn't yet learned the phoney cynicism that older students display to help them 'fit in'.

But I'd made a mistake. A bad one. And I wanted to fix it, just like my father would expect me to. I just didn't know how.

It started with Alysha, one of my grade six students. Alysha is tall for her age, and blonde, and all the boys in the class adore her. I'd gotten to know her fairly well because her parents are friends of mine. Alysha would often stay behind in my classroom to talk, while waiting for them to come and pick her up.

"Miss Jackson, do you think I'm too young to go out with boys?"

I was flattered that Alysha trusted me enough to ask a question like that. I hoped she'd trust me enough to accept my answer.

"Yes, Alysha, you're too young. There'll be plenty of time for that when you get to high school. What's the rush?"

"It's just ... there's this boy ..."

"Oh oh! Do your parents know about him?"

"Are you kidding? Like, they'd ground me for the next six years! I haven't told anybody. Well, I told Sandy, but that doesn't count, 'cause she's, like, my best friend."

"So why are you telling me, Alysha?"

"Well, I just wanted ..." She paused for a moment. "I wanted to know if you thought it was OK to, like, go out with him and stuff. I trust you ... you're my teacher."

From my own experience growing up, I knew that 'going out' for someone Alysha's age meant talking to the boy on the phone, and discussing him endlessly with her friends. And knowing her parents the way I did, there wouldn't be any 'stuff'.

"I'm glad you trust me, Alysha. Who's the boy?"

"It's Bobby. Bobby Sampson. He's in ..."

"Grade nine. Yes, I know him."

Bobby Sampson wasn't my idea of a suitable boyfriend for any girl, let alone a grade six girl like Alysha. I'd heard the Junior High teachers discussing him. There had been problems with alcohol, although no-one had ever proven anything. And apparently he had a pretty foul mouth, even for a grade nine student.

Of course, all the girls in my class were in love with him.

"Alysha ... how well do you know Bobby?"

"Well, we've talked on the phone a few times. And he says he likes me. And I really like him."

I had to think for a minute. I really wasn't sure what to say. So I just told her the truth.

"It's OK to talk on the phone, Alysha. But you know you're not really old enough to have a boyfriend, right?"

“Yeah, I know. My parents would kill me!”

“Speaking of your parents, I think that’s them now just pulling up. Don’t forget your book bag.”

“I won’t. And thanks, Miss Jackson. Don’t tell my parents what we talked about, OK?”

“I won’t, Alysha. See you tomorrow.”

Trust is a funny thing. It takes a really long time to earn it, but it can be lost in an instant.

As a new teacher, I’d spent the past few months showing my students that they could trust me. They knew that they could say anything to me, in class or in private, and I would never make fun of them, or talk about what they’d said to others. I think eventually they’d all come to trust me. I know Alysha did.

Trust is very important to a teacher. My students needed to feel safe in my classroom, and they needed to know that they could talk to me any time, about anything. That trust would help me to get to know my students better, and would help me to help them learn.

Alysha had trusted me. And I threw her trust away.

I was worried about Bobby. Despite the innocence of their ‘going out’, I thought that Bobby wasn’t someone she should be getting to know better. So I mentioned it to Alysha’s parents.

I know Ken and Danielle quite well. Ken had been my teacher in high school, and Danielle my soccer coach. Now that I was a new teacher myself, I’d been over to dinner a few times, and both of them had been full of advice about how to set up my classroom. We often talked about my students, and I made sure to keep them up-to-date on how Alysha was doing.

I told them that Alysha was interested in a boy. I told them about Bobby.

Ken didn’t take it well.

“I think I know the boy you’re talking about. There’s no way I want Alysha having anything to do with him!”

“I think it’s pretty innocent, Ken. I just thought you should know. I like Alysha a lot.”

“I know you do, Becky. Thank you for telling us ... we really appreciate it.”

I thought that would be the end of it. I was just trying to look out for Alysha. There was no real reason that I had to tell Ken and Danielle about it ... but I did. I'm not sure if it made me feel better, or not.

But I'd made a mistake. Alysha had asked my not to tell her parents what she's told me. And I'd agreed.

The grade six class and I had had the usual discussion at the start of the year about confidences. I was trying to gain their trust, and I'd told them that anything they told me would stay between us. And I'd told them about the exceptions. I told them that if I learned anything that suggested someone was in danger of abuse of any kind, I would have to report it. We talked about all the kinds of abuse. They accepted that, and agreed that it was something that I should pass on, if it ever happened.

What Alysha had told me wasn't in that category. I shouldn't have passed it on.

I knew there was a problem the very next day. Alysha, normally a good student, wouldn't answer any of my questions. She was sullen, and unresponsive. She wouldn't look at me when I asked her a question.

At the end of the day, I told her I wanted to talk to her. She threw her books onto a desk and sat down. She glared at me.

"What's wrong, Alysha? Are you upset about something?" I was pretty sure I knew what the problem was.

"I trusted you." That's all she said.

"Alysha ... I did it for your own good. Bobby isn't a very nice person ..."

"It's my life!" She was really angry. "You had no right! And you promised me you wouldn't say anything to my parents!"

"But ..."

"I trusted you, Miss Jackson. And now I don't any more. You lied to me!"

I was still trying to think of something to say when she grabbed her books and stormed out of the classroom.

'You made a mistake. So fix it!'

My father's words came back to me as I sat there at my desk. It was like he was looking over my shoulder, waiting for me to say something. But he was no longer there for me, and I didn't know how to fix it. I didn't know how.

That evening I thought about my problem. There were a lot of things I could do. I could just ignore it, and eventually Alysha would start talking to me. But I didn't think she would ever trust me again.

I also considered making up a story about how things might turn out if Bobby really wasn't a nice person. But I didn't want to do that. Bobby probably wasn't all that bad, and Alysha would see right through any attempt on my part to make excuses for what I'd done.

Eventually I asked someone for help.

I've been a Christian for almost two years now, and knowing God has made a big difference in my life. I'd always been a good person, but with God guiding me, I knew that my life was in His hands, and it had always given me comfort.

I asked God for help.

It didn't take long to get an answer. The next day I knew exactly what I had to do to regain Alysha's trust.

She was still sullen for most of the day, but I tried to ignore it. I went out of my way to smile at her whenever I could. She just glared back, or ignored me.

I asked her to stay after school. I could sense that she didn't really want to, but she did. She sat down at a desk in my now empty classroom.

"Thanks for staying, Alysha. We need to talk."

She frowned. "It's all right, Miss Jackson. I know why you did what you did. Let's just forget about it, OK?"

"No, Alysha, I need to talk to you. First of all, I need to apologize to you. Telling your parents was the wrong thing to do. I'm really sorry ... I shouldn't have done it."

"No, really, it's OK ..."

"I'm not finished Alysha, I want to ask you to forgive me. Everyone makes mistakes, even teachers. I made a mistake. Can you forgive me?"

I don't think she was expecting that.

I'd asked God to forgive me for the mistake I'd made. And I knew He wanted me to set things right with Alysha.

"Uh ... Miss Jackson ..." She still wasn't sure what to say.

“Alysha, I made a mistake. I’m sorry. I would like you to say that you forgive me. I hope I can earn your trust back. I know that will be hard. But I really like you, and I couldn’t bear it if I thought you couldn’t forgive me.”

I was saying exactly what I felt. But I’d never apologized to a grade six student like this before. It felt strange. But at the same time, it felt like the right thing to do.

“Miss Jackson ...” It all came out in a rush. “Of course I forgive you! I was just so upset that you’d told my parents. I was so mad at you!”

“I can imagine. Did your parents ground you?” I tried a smile. She smiled back.

“No, but my father says I shouldn’t talk to Bobby on the phone any more. He was pretty mad.”

“I know. Be’s just being protective, Alysha. That’s what fathers do. It’s because he loves you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Would you like me to talk to him again?”

She thought for a moment. “No, that’s all right, Miss Jackson. I promised my father I wouldn’t talk to Bobby on the phone any more. I won’t.”

She grinned. “But he didn’t say anything about texting ...”

“Alysha ...”

“You won’t tell him, right? You promise?”

We looked at each other for a moment. “I promise, Alysha.”

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This story is fiction, although the incident with the padlock is true. And I miss my father’s advice so much! I also realize that not all teachers value trust and confidentiality this way. I think they should.