

## Least Expected

"I don't know what to do, Sandy! Nothing is working!"

"Well, Melissa, I guess all you can do is just keep trying. I know you can do it."

Sandy and I were in the staff room discussing my latest attempt at teaching a class. I was a student teacher on my first practicum, and Sandy was a first year teacher here at the school. I'd known her in college.

She was listening to me lament the problems I'd been having in the grade three class where I was a student teacher .

I wasn't doing a very good job. But I wasn't sure what to do about it.

"How is your supervising teacher? Mrs. Carruthers, isn't it?"

"Yeah. She's OK, I guess. She's certainly a good teacher." Sandy was drinking coffee while she listened to me. "But after every one of the lessons I've taught so far, she's told me that 'I'm teaching, but the kids aren't with me'. I'm not sure what that means".

"Well, do you think they're learning anything?" Sandy was trying to be supportive.

"I don't know, Sandy. I stand at the front of the room and deliver my lessons ... Mrs. Carruthers says my plans are excellent I ask lots of good questions. . But the kids don't respond. They're not very enthusiastic, and getting answers from them is like pulling teeth!"

"Well, I think you need to take your mind off it. Let's go out to dinner!"

Sandy was a good friend. We'd been out to dinner together a few times. I usually let her pay, since she actually had a job. I was just a struggling student. She didn't mind.

We ended up at the Chinese place we usually ate at. It was cheap, and we both liked Chinese food.

Over dinner we talked some more.

"So tell me more about the lessons you've been teaching, Melissa. How did they go?"

"OK, well, like I said, I stand there and deliver a perfect lesson. I have all the questions I want to ask written out in my plan, and I usually have everything memorized, in the right order."

“That sounds ... umff ... good”. Sandy was trying to talk and shovel Chow Mein into her mouth at the same time.

“No, not so good. The kids are distracted. I have trouble keeping their attention. It’s like they don’t want to get involved!”

“Are they like that with Mrs. Carruthers?”

“Not that I’ve noticed, no. And the kids are really good. When she’s given them an assignment and I’m just helping, they respond to me really well. I get through to them then! I don’t understand!”

“I don’t either, Mel”. She put another forkful in her mouth. “I guess all you can do is keep trying.”

We both finished our dinner. The server brought us mints and some fortune cookies.

“There you go, Melissa! See what your fortune says! Maybe it will be good news.”

I didn’t believe that anything written inside a fortune cookie would do me much good, but I opened one just for fun. So did Sandy.

“What does yours say?” I asked her.

‘*Rocky roads ahead*’. Hah! You’re not kidding!”

Sandy was thinking about breaking up with her boyfriend. She didn’t like the fact that he was drinking so much. Or at all, for that matter. Sandy was a Christian. So was I.

“OK, Melissa, now tell me what yours says!”

I thought it was silly. But I read it. ‘*Someone you least expect will help you*’.

“See? There you go! Your problems will be solved by someone. You just don’t know who!”

I wasn’t very hopeful. While we were waiting for the bill, I opened another cookie and read the fortune inside. This one said ‘*The best path for you is the hardest one*’.

Sandy laughed when I read it to her. “Isn’t that always true? That’s not very helpful!”

I didn’t think so either.

The next morning I was scheduled to take Mrs. Carruthers’ Social Studies class. She wouldn’t be sitting at the back for this class; she had a meeting with a parent.

I'd made a good plan, and had written in a lot of thought-provoking questions. As far as I could see, the lesson should be a good one.

But it went the same as always. I talked and asked questions. They responded listlessly. They would answer questions when I asked them, but I could tell they weren't with me.

I gave them their assignment and let them get to work, while I wandered around, looking over their shoulders, crouching beside them to give them pointers, laughing with them at their spelling mistakes, and generally having a good time. This was what teaching was all about. Why couldn't I get this feeling when I was teaching the lesson?

The bell sounded, and all the students left with their books. All except Dwight, who was still working on a question. I was helping him.

"So, Dwight, I think you understand now. Good work!"

"Thanks, Miss Cook. You're a good teacher!"

Something made me ask Dwight a question.

"Dwight ... if I'm such a good teacher, how come everyone always seems so ... bored ... when I'm teaching the lesson".

I immediately regretted the question. I shouldn't be asking a student this.

But Dwight wanted to answer. He looked hesitant at first. But eventually he said: "Miss Cook? When you teach the lesson part ... it's like ... you're up there, and we're back here ... and ... it's easy not to pay attention. Like, you're 'teaching', not helping us learn".

I wasn't sure what he meant. "You mean, because I'm at the front ..."

"Not just that. It's like you're a different person when you're up there. Not friendly like when you help us after."

"Uh ... thanks, Dwight. I'll see you tomorrow."

I stumbled over to the desk and sat down. Mrs. Carruthers had a free period, so I'd have some time to think about what Dwight had said.

'*A different person*'. I think I knew what he'd meant. When I taught my lessons, I always did it from the front of the room. And I was still pretty nervous. I tried to speak clearly, but I knew my delivery was a little formal. Maybe too formal. I didn't move much, and I didn't smile a lot. I was too busy thinking about what to say next.

Maybe that was the problem.

I was teaching my lessons *at them*, instead of *with them*.

I thought I knew what I had to do.

When Mrs. Carruthers returned, I sat down with her to tell her what I wanted. It wouldn't be easy.

"Mrs. Carruthers, I think I can be a better teacher. I know I can. I want to start over!"

"What? I don't know what you mean, Melissa. You've been here two weeks ..."

"I know. And I know I have to teach a certain number of lessons while I'm here. I know that. But I want to start over!"

It was a four week practicum. I only had two weeks left.

"I think I've figured out what you meant when you said the kids weren't with me."

"But, Mel ... you'll have to do a *lot* of planning and teaching in the next few weeks, if you want me to not count what you've done already ... it will be hard work!"

"I know. But I can do it. Will you let me?"

I think it was the enthusiasm in my eyes that won her over. I was really excited.

"OK. So take the rest of today's classes off and go make some plans. Take my plan book with you so you can see what we'll be doing. I'll 'wing it' for the next few classes.

I wondered if I'd ever be a good enough teacher to teach without plans ... 'wing it' ...the way she would this afternoon. I hoped so.

So I loaded up with textbooks, her plan book, and my laptop, and went to the library to work. She was right. I had a *lot* of planning to do.

The next morning I took the second period Social Studies class again. And I changed my teaching style completely.

What Dwight had been trying to tell me was that when I was helping the kids, I was myself. Friendly, laughing, comfortable with the students ... and *with* them.

Oh, I don't just mean beside them. That was part of it, of course. But when I was helping them I was *with* them ... experiencing the lesson *with* them. I was making eye contact. I was talking *with* them about the lesson... it was like we were having a conversation about what we'd learned, one student at a time.

Somehow I had to teach my lesson that way. I had to make it seem as if we were experiencing the lesson together.

I'd thought about what I was going to do the night before, and had written out a plan. It had taken a long time. I was trying it out now for the first time.

Instead of standing at the front of the room and teaching *to* them, I walked around and talked, asking leading questions, and making as much eye contact as I could. I think the questions were the key. I was doing a lot less *telling*, and a lot more *asking*. I tried to make it seem as if we were trying to learn the material together.

It's hard to explain, I know. But it felt like we were all learning together, instead of me just telling them stuff and asking questions.

But I think it worked. They were with me. We had a good time, learning. Together.

When the lesson was over and the students had left. Mrs. Carruthers called me over. The first thing she said was "Melissa! That was a wonderful lesson. I was so caught up in it, I forgot to write anything down!"

We both laughed.

"Well, Mel, if all the rest of your lessons go the way that one did, you're going to do just fine!

I had to say something. "Mrs. Carruthers ... teaching that way is much harder. It's not enough just to write out some questions ... you have to plan them carefully so each question leads to something we can discuss, and then I have to steer the discussion ..."

She interrupted my enthusiastic rambling with a laugh. "I think you've figured it out, Melissa. I wish I'd been able to steer you in that direction ... I just didn't see it. Why did you decide to change your approach?"

"Oh ... I had some help from someone I least expected ..."