

The Fear of Something Different

As a teacher, people occasionally ask me “did you always know you wanted to be a teacher?” The answer is no, I didn’t. When I was little I wanted to be a professional ice skater, and then I wanted to be a pediatrician, but being a teacher was never on my radar. Even when I went to college and majored in Writing and Literature, I still didn’t realize. I’d tell people my major and they’d go “...so, you’re going to be a teacher?” and I’d answer: “no.” They’d usually walk away confused at that point, unclear about what on Earth I was going to do with a degree like that. It wasn’t until my senior year in college that it finally clicked.

I was laying in bed considering graduation, which was just a month or two away, wondering what would come next. As most minds do, my thoughts vacillated, also thinking about a book I’d recently finished: *The Great Gatsby*. I had spent over two months rereading and analyzing this book from multiple perspectives, and grew to appreciate its complexity, richness, and value it offered. It was at this moment that something clicked: I wanted to share my own enjoyment and love for this text with other people. With other kids.

From there, it felt like that scene in the tween television shows where the characters fake shock by hitting their hands on their foreheads, mouth agape. I realized how much previous teachers had an impression on me: my band teacher, who was always there and taught me to value intelligence; my senior English teacher, who taught me I could actually be a writer if I wanted to; and then my college professors, who got me to see the world from a different point of view and recognize that writing is a process, and you can’t just stay up until 2am cranking out an essay and expect a good grade (but boy did I try). It was then that I decided I wanted to become a teacher because I someday hoped to make an impression on another person like these people did me.

Fast forward 14 years later from that moment, and I’ve now been teaching for 11 years. Has it been as magical as I’d imagined? No. I’ve had students cuss at me or tell me I’m awful and that I don’t care about kids. I’ve had parents question and micromanage how I teach, oftentimes insinuating that I put little to no thought into what I do. But for all the bad, I only have to look behind my desk to remind myself why I do what I do. There is a sea of student photos, of kids who have told me I made a difference. Some even still

text me, wishing me Happy Birthday or Merry Christmas. Despite how easily we can fixate on the bad, I have to remember that day-in and day-out students blow my mind with their thoughts, their humor, and from time to time, their ridiculous antics, like toasting and burning a bagel in the middle of class.

But for all this good, I am a little worried about my future. There is a recent wave of concern from parents, state leaders, and congresspeople, concerned about the choices teachers make in their curriculum. Headlines around the world read: “New Indian Textbooks Purged of Muslim History and Hindu Extremism,” “A Florida School Banned a Disney Movie About Ruby Bridges. Here’s What That Really Means,” or “Book ban attempts reach record high in 2022, American Library Association report says.”

What troubles me about this wave of rewriting or banning our history and storytelling is not that it perpetuates a particular agenda. I am not solely interested in “wokefying” education, like some believe, or “whitewashing” our past so we look squeaky clean. What bothers me is the elimination of a perspective, a point of view that offers us something new or different to look at.

If all I ever do is read or learn from a perspective that confirms mine, then what real learning am I doing? Yes, I may be bolstering and growing my own perspective, but what good will that do if I know nothing about another? How can I speak to my students, to my parents, to the world, if all I know is myself and my own perspective?

Does this mean I have to agree or enjoy everything I read or learn? Absolutely not. Am I allowed to have opinions on the information I receive? Of course. But seeking out alternate points of view allows me to see that we are all 100 percent unique, bringing a vast complexity of experience and belief to this world. To exclude a perspective or belief is to exclude another person’s identity, to erase them from the conversation. To exclude a person of color’s perspective from the story is just as dangerous as erasing a white person’s. To exclude a Christian’s perspective is just as troubling as excluding an atheist’s. All are valid, all add to the conversation.

There is a book I recently read called *Our Missing Hearts*, where American officials formed the Preserving American Culture and Traditions Act (PACT). On paper, this sounds great, but in reality, there wasn’t preservation of all aspects of American culture. Instead, there was an erasure of cultures and traditions

that “seemed threatening.” What resulted was a mono-culture. A culture in which you could only be one thing; anything else was a threat. Within the book, the main character’s father says “If we fear something, it is all the more imperative we study it thoroughly.” The father doesn’t state what should be feared. He leaves that up to the reader to decide. Nonetheless, it is a call-to-action for all of us to face what we fear head-on and study it: look at its ugliness (or beauty), look at its flaws (or perfections), and seek to understand it. To know it. Once we know it, it loses some of its power over us.

I try to teach my son, who is especially fearful these days, to look under his bed. Look in his closet. Stare at the shadow on the wall. He looks at it and realizes it was just a blanket, a pile of clothes, or his own shadow. We turn on the lights and realize there’s nothing to fear. For a split second, we just looked with a different set of eyes.

Let us not allow our history, stories, or words to scare us. Instead, face them head on and study them. Seek to understand them. Allow them to add to our ever-changing, vast conversation of the world around us.