Thursday Mornings

Taking a hard look at her chosen profession and the demands it places on her and her cohorts, Tina Humphrey—now in her fourth year of teaching—both reevaluates the profession and her role in it. The honesty of her words will inspire readers, passing on hard-earned wisdom in the process.

TINA HUMPHREY

It's midnight on a Wednesday in the middle of April. My two best girl friends are sitting next to me at the outdoor patio table. We are holding red drinks with little yellow umbrellas, and multicolored tortilla chips fill the clay bowl in front of us. We toss our heads back effortlessly as we snort like teenagers about the days in school when we used to introduce ourselves as “Trixie, Roxie, and Lulu” when meeting strangers.

I am incredibly happy here in this scene. On this night, I am not “Ms. Humphrey.” I am Trixie. There are no papers in front of me waiting to be graded, and my sacred lesson plan book is tucked safely away at home, far from these stories of our past. My biggest worry on this Wednesday night is that my feet are getting a bit chilly in the cool Colorado air. Otherwise, I feel good.

Finally, I say good-bye to Roxie and Lulu, and I head home to crawl into bed at 2 A.M. As I glance at the clock, I quickly do the math and discover that in three and a half hours this alarm is going to go off, and I will need to get up and haul my aching head into classroom 134 of Cresthill Lane Middle School where I am expected to make a difference in the lives of seventh grade children.

In what I'm sure is a romanticized view beyond the classroom, I cling to the belief that in some professions, when this type of Thursday morning hits, one can simply call in sick. In teaching, this is not the case. No, in this profession, you must provide a lesson plan for days when you'll be at home tending to your aching head or sore throat rather than those needy children.

When you write your first lesson plan to be left for the warm body who will take your place for a day, you're reminded of the “How to Make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich” paper you had to write when you were in eighth grade; the one where the task was to write out directions for how to make this basic meal. You remember that when the teacher took your written words and attempted to follow them (in front of the entire class, of course), you suddenly and miraculously learned about including precise and to-the-point details in your writing.

Writing a lesson plan for a substitute teacher is even worse than this; especially when the only thing that you feel like doing is tucking your head under the pillow for at least fourteen more hours. You must explain to your substitute what to do, how to do it, where to find it, and how much time she'll have to get it done. You'll also need to point out where the faculty restrooms can be found, that the microwave is in the lounge down the hall, that the pop machine is shut down from 10 A.M. to 1 P.M., and that the teacher next door doesn't like to be disturbed. Don't forget to inform your sub that Becca and Michael in your first class can help take attendance and lead the class reading, but Robby and Sam in your last-hour class need to be split up and shown who's in
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I would not recommend making the “Wednesday night with your friends” a weekly tradition. You chose the teaching profession to make a difference, and nearly every single day you will do just that . . . even if it’s just because you show up and you smile at your students. However, I do endorse the occasional spontaneous night out playing cards with your buddies or attending the local basketball game where you yell until you’re hoarse or sitting in on the late night poetry reading at the café that goes on forever. Stay until the end. Don’t leave before you throw the last card, see the last shot, or hear the last line. It’ll be tough—perhaps really tough—to get up the next morning, but it’ll be worth it. I promise. You’ll probably even be able to drag yourself into school and smile at your students after you’ve had a pot or two of coffee. And the best part is that if your mind begins to wander, it’ll slip back to the night before, and you’ll feel warm and fuzzy knowing that you have a life beyond teaching. That is a good, good thing. In fact, it’s vital.

Teaching forces us to grow up immediately. College is over. No more after-hours parties on Monday nights or watching The Godfather trilogy straight through on a Sunday night. No, this is one of those professions where during the first year on the job you are expected to be as knowledgeable and as productive as the veteran teacher next door. It doesn’t matter that you still haven’t found a dentist and that you can’t fill out your tax return documents correctly. It doesn’t matter that you’re still single and trying to find a date and that you can’t even keep a cactus alive in your tiny studio apartment. It doesn’t matter that your friends are still acting like college students and going to after-work events with all the “twenty-somethings” with whom they work while you’re attending a Building Accountability Committee Meeting in the school library. You’re a teacher now.

And so, take this one little nugget of advice from me. Don’t lose yourself. Every once in a while, remember who you are—the you who deserves to be pampered and nourished. Leave school at school and enjoy a late night on that patio. Even on a Wednesday night.

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