Are You All Right Dear?
The Writing Teacher as Mother Hen

by

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"Do you remember the first time you were introduced to someone who became very important in your life?" I asked my students. "Today, we are going to write about that person!"

"Maybe an old-fashioned great-aunt came to visit. She pinched your cheeks and cuddled you to her and forced you to eat an ethnic food. Maybe you liked it and her and will miss both.

"Maybe you went to Maine on vacation and a long-lost relative your age showed up, and showed you up, and was better at water skiing than you ever thought possible. Maybe you'll never see him again, with a little luck."

I enjoyed the results of this assignment: reams of paper producing anecdotes galore. I especially was pleased by Jeff's paper which was written about his nephew who came into the world in Atlanta, "...A three day ride from our apartment in Boston. I was eleven and he was newborn. I thought he was going to look like a baby, but when I first saw him, he was all bundled up tight like a red hot dog. He was lying on a vibrating chair and was crying. I did learn to love him, though he cried a lot that week."

Lionel's paper crossed my desk next and changed my mood. He has lived all over the world and has adjusted well to many different schools and environments, probably because of a genuinely sunny personality.

He had once written a composition entitled, "My Career Choice." In it he said, "I'm going to be a military man just like my dad. I like the uniform, meeting new people, and seeing new places. I like the privileges we get, and the life we live. I love Admiral Peary Drive where my house is now, and I like my friends, but I won't mind it if we go somewhere else and do something different."

On this latest paper he had written another clear message:

A Brother I Just Met

One time my mom and dad came into my room and they said, "How would you like to meet your half-brother?" I didn't know I had one, so I said, "What's this all about?" and they told me that my mother had a fiancé before she met my dad and they had a baby together. They gave him up for adoption when they broke up. That baby found my mom. After a month or two, we went to meet him. My mom went first. That's how I met Edgar K. He's 19. He's OK.

My heart went out to Lionel and the following day I asked to speak to him after school. He smiled his usual braces-filled grin and said that he didn't under-
stand participles and would stay if he could get some help on them. Agreeing, we parted with that plan in mind.

During lunch break I practically ran to the copy machine to make a photostat of Lionel’s composition for the school social worker. I showed it to her. Now the two of us worried about this young boy and his traumatic encounter. She suggested that I advise him to speak to Ms. Brenner, his guidance counselor, a warm and compassionate person the whole class liked and respected. She’d give good advice and clearer thinking to this issue.

“Lionel, you wrote a very moving and sad paper about ‘A Brother I Just Met.’ Are you all right, dear? Are you thinking any funny thoughts about what happened to you or your family?” My words were spoken in a choppy manner, too fast, and forced. I hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“Sad? I didn’t think it was sad. My mother’s still in therapy over this, and that bothers me, but she’s getting better and better all the time, and my father and I are doing OK.”

“Would you like to talk to Ms. Brenner, the guidance lady?” I asked, using parallel conversation instead of responding directly to what he was saying.

He smiled so enthusiastically that I was sure I had indeed said and done exactly the right thing.

“Sure if you think it would help her,” he said, catching me totally off guard. “I’d be glad to. It can all work out. We’re picking up Edgar at the train station later today and we’re going out to a restaurant, so I’d rather not stay too late. But any other time would be fine.”

If he was waiting for a reply from me, he didn’t get one, for I was speechless, something that doesn’t happen to me too often. He filled the lull by rustling through a messy notebook of drawings and passed-back quizzes. He pulled out some dog-eared papers and said, “Brought my participle worksheets. Should we go over them now?”

Time went by, three-fifths of the school year, then half, and then spring break. Hundreds of compositions were composed. Most students wrote interesting little plots, because seventh graders have lots to say and are open people who like to talk about their experiences. Many papers are sincere, but few are as moving to me as Lionel’s.

I continued to worry. I had lunch with the guidance counselor. She worried too. She suggested keeping an eye on Lionel to see how his adjustment to his new problem affected him. But as he never mentioned Edgar K. again, neither did I. But I kept watching.

As the year went by, his notebook became messier but his personality remained the same. He still had a

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million friends and kept a steady stream of characters alive and well inside the pages of his notebook.

In one cartoon, a teacher was standing in front of her class, also featured in the cartoon. All the students, save one, were in a frenzy, standing on their heads, poking each other, tossing pencils, out of control. The teacher, however, had her eyes glued to the one student who sat picture perfect, hands folded. He was a self-portrait in Lionel's seat. Watching him had become my Olympic Spectator Sport, and Lionel knew it. Only I was not aware of exactly what I had done.

In my career, I have taught over 2,000 pre-adolescents. I have recognized problems as they come and go. I have dispensed advice as well as information. I have done my best to be calm in the eye of a brewing storm and grandmotherly-like in the face of a tragedy.

But in this case, I had made a mountain out of a pimple.

I had obsessed about a well-adjusted child whose parents had obviously dispensed sensitive facts in a clear, understanding and loving way. They had mastered a potential problem and, as only parents can, had nurtured this child through a difficult experience.

Sometime during the spring, I was sad (and pleased) to hear that Lionel would be moving. His father, the Navy officer, received a promotion, a commission, and a new assignment, far away from here (and probably far away from Edgar K).

I will miss Lionel's sweet smile and some of his drawings, but I will not worry about him. I hope that I taught him the basics of English and literature in return for all that he taught me. I wish him well, and I will not forget him.

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