

LOVE YOU. MEAN IT. MAKE GOOD CHOICES: LESSONS MY STUDENTS TAUGHT ME

February 9, 2021

Originally posted at www.pluckyreader.com
(content warning: adult language)

“Love you. Mean it. Make good choices.”

I tell my students this every day as they leave my class. I am actively and acutely aware that I may be the only person who tells them that they’re loved, so I make sure to say it every day. And it makes a difference. Even I didn’t know just how much of a difference it made in the beginning. Not until one day when a group of my students lingered after dismissal.

“Did y’all need something?” I asked as I packed my stuff and prepared to leave for the day.

“You didn’t tell us you love us,” one of them said, expectantly. “We can’t go until you do.”

I could feel a broad smile spread across my face. I honestly had never realized just how much it meant to them. It was just something I started saying—and very recently at that. I meant it, of course. Every single time, I meant it. I did love my students. I still love all of my students. Every single day, I say a prayer for all of my students, past and present. But I never realized my saying it made such a difference to them. Not until Gabby spoke up.

She didn’t know it then, but she changed my life that day. She made me realize just how much power my simple words have. She made me see what a difference I was able to make in somebody’s life. Gabby helped me see how small gestures can add up to great things.

Gabby also helped me to realize what an impact teachers had on my life. Throughout my own time as a student, I had several teachers who made incredible impacts on me. But not all of those impacts have been positive.

In that moment, I thought of the teachers who had made it clear that I was not loved, not appreciated, and not valued. I had teachers who made no effort to hide their disdain for me. And for whatever reason, those are the teachers from whom I draw the most inspiration.

When Gabby and her friends refused to leave, I was drawn back to high school.

High school was not a great time for me. I had untreated ADHD, I was acting out for attention, and I was struggling in a lot of my classes. Add to that the fact that my life was crumbling around me, and

it was a recipe for disaster. Around this time, I began struggling with a lot of issues in my life, chief of which being my dad had just made local news for less-than-desirable reasons. My dad was a pretty public figure at the time, so the entire small town I lived in seemed to be abuzz with the news of what he'd done.

Nobody seemed to realize that their gossiping was not a victimless crime; every day that I was subjected to their whispers, I broke a little bit more. But that never stopped folks from talking, never barred my classmates from bringing it up at the most inopportune moments. (Really, is any moment opportune for that kind of torment?)

No amount of inopportune moments, however, can prepare you for the anger and embarrassment of a teacher saying something awful in front of your classmates. And I can say this with a fair amount of expertise and experience.

Sitting in class one day, I was being particularly snotty. I'm not afraid to admit it. I was awful. Every time my teacher opened his mouth to say something, I had tried to disrupt and derail the lesson. My own classmates were annoyed with me. It's not like I was some charming, funny kid who was just testing my boundaries. No. I was obnoxious to everybody—myself included sometimes.

"Paul," my teacher finally said, his tone as even as usual. I never saw what was coming for me. "What do you want to be when you grow up?"

I was honestly very surprised he was asking me that. He had never shown any interest in me or my life before.

"I really want to be an attorney," I told him, smiling broadly. It had always been my dream to be a District Attorney. It was the only thing I could ever actually see myself doing. "But I'm going to get a degree in education so that if I don't get into law school, I can teach and try again once I have a little bit of experience."

I don't know what I expected his response to be. Maybe I expected him to be impressed because I seemed like such a hot mess, but I secretly had a solid plan for my life. Maybe I expected him to have more questions for me. Whatever I expected, it wasn't the heart-crushing, soul-piercing, dream-shattering laughter that came.

I felt my blood begin to boil. I hated being laughed at. I mean, I can't think of a single person who enjoys being laughed at. But this put me in a white-hot rage, unlike anything I'd ever experienced before and have never felt again.

Laughter. The memory still enrages me.

“That makes a lot of sense,” he said, still laughing. Still in front of my classmates. “People who tell me they want to be teachers are just afraid of the real world.”

The room went silent. This was my teen movie moment. Looking back now, I can almost hear some 80s power song playing behind me as the camera zooms in on my face, John Hughes-style.

“So, what the fuck does that say about you?” I knew I was likely getting a referral for the way I spoke. I knew that I deserved it. I knew that I didn’t care. I was prepared for any punishment I would receive for the way I spoke.

What I wasn’t prepared for was what he said next.

“And there it is,” he smiled, just as even toned as he began. “You’re trash, just like your dad, I guess. With a mouth like that, you don’t need to worry about law school. I’ll be surprised if you make it that far.”

This was the defining moment of my teenage years. This was the angriest and most embarrassed I had ever been. And it was caused by a teacher, by a man who was supposed to support and mentor me.

As an adult—with some experience and some distance—I can see my anger for what it truly was: fear. Fear rooted not in the knowledge that he was wrong, but in the belief that he was right. As a child, in my Primal brain, all I knew was I wanted to cause him bodily harm.

Needless to say, the rest of that school year was tenuous, at best. I couldn’t change my schedule without disrupting my music classes, and they were the only reason I went to school every day. I was not going to drop any of them.

It turns out, my teacher was right. I didn’t have to worry about law school. But not for the reasons he said. I didn’t have to go to law school. I didn’t have to chase that dream. Because by the end of college, I had realized that I loved teaching, more than I imagined I could. Once I got a taste of it, I was hooked. I had a knack for it. I loved helping students discover their love of music. And more importantly, I loved helping my students be successful. I loved the atmosphere of a middle school, with all its excitement and big emotions. Why would I need to pursue anything else when I found the place where I belong?

What my teacher will never know is the impact he had on me, and as a result, the hundreds of students I have taught in the past 10 years.

Because of him, I work every day to build my students up, rather than tear them down. I make it my daily goal to never make a student feel the way I felt that day.

In that moment, when Gabby and her friends told me how much my sendoff meant to them, I just had to smile and say one more prayer for my awful teacher and the valuable lesson he'd taught me all those years earlier.

Without him, I may have never wound up in this place, with these kids who were so eager to change my life.

"Love you," I told my students as I grabbed my bag to leave. "Mean it. Make good choices."