

"You are who you teach." Parker Palmer (1999)

What does it mean to be a 'good teacher'?

I have often asked my students this very question. Usually, they are divided into small groups and asked to write their answers in colored markers on great big pieces of chart paper. The lists invariably include the following:

Well organized	hard working	considerate
Like children	prepared	flexible
knowledgeable of content	fair	creative
Engage students	good managers of classroom	
use variety of teaching strategies	understanding	good listeners
Enthusiastic		

And that's just a partial list.

When they are finished we all step back and look at their chart papers posted along the always sterile and uninviting university classroom walls. I usually ask "What do you notice about these lists?" It doesn't take long to realize that our collective criteria for 'good teaching' would require the skill of a veteran teacher and the dedication of a martyr to fulfill. It is the quintessential "Leave it to Beaver" stereotype wife and mother who answers the door with pearls, always impeccable make up, perfect hair, heels and a welcoming smile-- Unconsciously embraced by the media and the masses and impossible to maintain.

What does it really mean to be a good teacher? Do we have to martyr ourselves in the classroom in order to pass through the proverbial 'eye of the needle' to attain teacher nirvana? Do we have to give up the better part of our social and financial lives in order to be considered in the running for excellence?

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More often, standardized test scores are the standards used to measure the success of a school and an individual teacher's success. Yet, in all of my years of asking students and teachers to define 'good teaching' I have yet to encounter 'high test scores' as a response. It has never shown up. Not once.

The longer I teach, the more I am convinced that good teaching is oftentimes just getting out of the student's way and letting them explore and reveal their own brilliance. Every person comes to class with their own set of experiences and talents and I worry that schools and how we try so hard to fit our knowing in checklists and boxes eventually and inevitably leads our students to keep their best thoughts, their most creative and profound work- suppressed and underground. Every body has knowing. The knowledge and the talent is already there. It is in the cells of their body, If we can just coax and honor and cajole what is already there, then magic happens. My favorite part of being a teacher is watching this happen. It allows us to witness and learn from each other's transformations and renders us cheerleaders.

"I am a teacher at heart and there are moments in the classroom, where I can hardly hold the joy." (Parker Palmer)