On Leave, day 175.
Back to the classroom in 55 days.

I have been on leave from teaching for the last one-hundred and seventy-five days and have been surprised at how difficult it has been to walk away, but at the same time, I acknowledge the conflicting outlook I hold about returning to the classroom, which I’m scheduled to do fifty-five days from now. Some days I think I want to go back. I miss the kids and some of my colleagues, but mostly when people ask me what it is I do, I miss saying, “I’m a teacher” without any qualifying statements about why I’m not teaching right now, even though I am working on a Master’s degree.

Teaching is a part of my identity, and I’m loath to let it go. Some days I think, forget it...I’m never going back there. Now that my jaw has stopped clicking and I don’t have a constant headache and I get exercise and eat real food that I had time to cook and am not constantly trying to come up with essay-marking innovations that might be more effective for the learning of my students while saving me time, why would I even consider going back? But this part of the story starts a long time ago, and starts again some time before that, and again, for real, some time before that. Perhaps I should start closer to the beginning.

It’s May of 2007. Early morning. I am sitting at my desk in room 210. The fluorescent lights are off. I’m not ready for anyone to know I am here. Secretly ensconced in my high-gloss, cinderblock palace, I survey the surroundings and the day ahead. A glow from the library is coming through the windows of my classroom, lighting a tame flurry of unmarked novel-study projects. Report cards have been recently submitted and I’m only behind in marking one assignment. There is some garbage on the floor, a pop can and some crumpled up papers. A few report card slips are poking out from under the register. On the chalkboard, I see that all but the letters P.L.O. have been erased—I guess there was a rotation in the non-unionized contract cleaning staff our school is piloting for the system. I’m sure I have the notes somewhere.

The day begins with my prep followed by my thirty-dash-twos, a ten-minute lunch break, and two ten-dash-one-two-split classes in the afternoon. To be honest, the only thing I’m looking forward today is meeting a small group of colleagues after school in the local pub.
The four-sometimes-five of us have been meeting there religiously every Friday since the year began and I’ve come to think of these little gatherings as my own, personal floatation device, fashioned to get me through the next week.

This is what I’ve become as a teacher and I hate it. How can I be five years into the profession and looking only to get through, Friday-to-Friday (Phew—It’s Friday), and Summer-to-summer (Only a month-and-a-half to go)? This is how people begin countdowns to their retirements (Twenty-seven more years).

I have become my worst fear.

When I was a student teacher in 2002, I was tasked to determine what my hopes were for myself as a teaching professional. At the time, I had two:

1. To make a difference.
2. To have the courage to recognize when it was time to leave the K-12 classroom and the strength to act on that conviction when it came.

Sitting at my desk this May morning, flooded by the memory of that assignment, I cannot help but laugh at the naive best intentions of my younger self in coming up with the first list item, while wincing a little at the likelihood that I have butted up against the second well before my time. Actually, it’s not fair, you know. I am very good at what I do. Why should I have to leave? But, at the same time, how could I possibly stay? It’s not fair to the kids if the highlight of my day has switched from my interactions with them to a glass of red wine on the couch at home.

I am now, officially, in crisis.

My response to crisis is a twofold path, which is far less Zen than it sounds on paper. I tend to get hysterical, and I assure you, with regard to the wall I hit in teaching, hysterics were had. I traded sleeping for wrestling angels as I debated leaving the profession I had worked so hard to establish myself in. Why, as things were finally getting a little more predictable, could I not find a way to make teaching work for me? From that May morning on, everything in my life became a Sign. For months while teaching, I smoked the entrails of pros/cons lists, and then during the summer months after, I decided to delay my decision. Maybe I’d just had a stinker year. Maybe things would get better. Maybe I could just wait and see. I’ll teach for one more year while I work on the decision; yes, that’s what I’ll do.

The second half of my response to crisis is writing. That morning in May of 2007 I revised my list. Here are the things I should have been asking for, in addition to the original two I had put down:

1. Effective and efficient marking abilities;
2. Surer classroom management techniques;
3. Clearer subject knowledge;
4. The ability to run for days on end with little-to-no sleep;
5. Friends and family members who understand that my social life exists only in the months of July and August;
6. The strength to withstand the bureaucratic assault of The System for its more visible arbiters: senior administration and high-stakes standardized testing;
7. Expertise in working with students who have ADHD, ODD, OCD, Asperger’s Syndrome, mild and severe emotional disturbances;
8. Expertise in working with students who have addictions to substances and dangerous lifestyle choices;
9. Expertise in working with students who are coming-out;
10. Expertise in working with students who have blind and aggressive religious intolerance;
11. Expertise in working with students who use self-aggrandizement to mask deeper feelings of self-loathing;
12. Expertise in dealing with blatant, genuine egoism;
13. Expertise in working with students who are cutting themselves; who are abused; who are neglected;
14. The ability to handle communicative impasse;
15. Expertise in working with students who are learning English as a Second or Foreign Language, and in working with students who are gifted.
16. The ability to survive on the fastest food I can forage.

Don’t get me wrong. Even as a student teacher I knew I would eventually need all the above-listed skills, but between my paraprofessional role in the classroom and university papers, I didn’t have the time to do more than I did to get ready. I knew the two years spent in the teacher-prep program I signed up for were not enough to lead to any sort of mastery in the above-listed areas. I knew, given the nature of the teaching profession, the only place I would gain those skills was in the classroom. I figured I’d learn the necessary knowledge and skills to be an outstanding pedagogue along the way. I was prepared and even excited to do so.

What I didn’t realize during my student teaching days was that experience with—even repeated experience with—every skill-developing situation I could think of wouldn’t lead to expertise in the area, only to more questions. I didn’t realize I would not have the time to handle many major incidents with the care they deserved. I didn’t realize how limited I would come to feel most of the time. I thought that since I enjoyed teaching and experienced fairly regular success in terms of student outcomes, academically and otherwise that my experience of the profession would get better and better. But that’s not how it went for me.

Throughout my career in teaching I have run the gamut of emotions when it comes to my experiences with students and the work we do together everyday. I’ve been worried about them, I’ve been proud of them; I’ve been humbled, humoured, annoyed, thrilled, amazed and amused by my students. But that day in May, after I flicked the lights on, and opened the door, and stood in the hallway with my mug of tea greeting kids as they entered my classroom, I looked at my students and didn’t care. I didn’t feel a thing.

This is the part of teaching I know I’m not supposed to talk about. This is not what I want to be remembered for. But it is what happened.

In what seemed like an instant, my students went from being living, breathing, valid individuals to a depersonalized mass of mess that I had to sort out. My incredible vocation turned into that-thing-I-do-in-order-to-pay-the-bills. I had a job to do and I was here doing it, but something was lost. One day became a week that turned into a month and then became the remainder of the year. I didn’t care. It’s not that I was giving up, I still taught to exacting standards using the widest range of techniques available to me; there was laughter and a few tears in the classroom, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong. My sense of non-caring slid into dislike and outright anger at the idea of having to go into school or plan lessons or fulfill extracurricular obligations. The end of my semester
with the kids was reduced to a negative anecdote about a student who tried to light a desk on fire.

The next year, my trial year, didn’t pan out so well either. I’ll spare you the details, because, really, this isn’t a ‘poor me’ story. You should know, I guess, that I burnt-out: insomnia, dizzy spells, cold sweats, irrational anger at the sound of the alarm clock in the morning, the whole nine yards. But you probably saw that coming. I didn’t, because I didn’t know what to be looking for. In fact, the whole experience came as such a surprise; I was motivated to spend my insomniac nights searching the Internet for anything I could find on teacher attrition and burnout.

"Stress, by and large, involves too much. Burnout, on the other hand, is about not enough. [...] If excessive stress is about drowning in responsibilities, burnout is being all dried up." (http://www.helpguide.org/mental/burnout_signs_symptoms.htm)

“I don’t know what it was that prompted my Google search of burnout, but I came across that help guide page early on in my experience and have been returning to it ever since. I suppose that’s because it was the first thing I read that articulated exactly what I was going through before I was able to put a finger on it myself. At some point I went from “AHHH! Too MUCH!” to “I’m not enough!” and didn’t realize the path of destruction I had unwittingly unleashed. It was as though I’d fallen down Alice’s rabbit hole and was unable to pull myself out. In some ways it still is like that. I feel like I have to keep checking over my shoulder to make sure the bitterness isn’t following me.

I needed a certain type of information and couldn’t find it. I found documentation citing studies which showed that fifty percent of teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching [1]; but I found nothing regarding the process of leave-taking that the studied teachers underwent, and certainly nothing about things I could do to make my
situation better. [2] I found nothing of the new practicing teacher voice, only article after article full of numbers representing real people who had walked this path before me. This happens to half of us and no one is talking about it?

I couldn’t understand why until I tried to articulate my own experiences to others and myself. This is not an easy subject to talk about. How does one describe the best and worst part of one’s life wholly and honestly? My descent into the statistical dark-side of our profession coincided with an email from a former professor I’d had at university who was guest-editing an issue of an academic journal and asked if I had anything I could submit on the subject of “academic pathology.” Life is not without a sense of irony.

So, I began writing a paper on teacher attrition with a focus on my experiences of burnout—what could be more pathological than a twenty-nine-year-old rendered useless in the academic workplace by the academic workplace? It gave me something to do with those sleepless nights that no amount of advice could get me out of. I was literally using that paper as a way to keep my head above water. I was heartbroken and upset and wondered what I could do differently to survive the profession.

Knowing I was past the point where I could be good to anyone—including my students—I chose to leave teaching out of respect and my deep love of it. But I wasn’t ready to give up entirely. I’m still not, as it turns out. I began looking for options. I’d heard the board has an opportunity for teachers to take home a percentage of their pay while undertaking professional improvement, such as full-time post-secondary education in exchange for a two-year commitment of continued service after the fact, with a program called “Professional Improvement Fellowship” (PIF). But I was discouraged to discover that the option is only available to teachers who have been on a continuous contract with the board for seven years (which usually happens in eight-to-nine years). Without the PIF, I was left with few options: I could apply for general leave without pay; I could get pregnant, wait nine months and go on maternity leave; I could go to my doctor and get the documentation necessary to go on medical leave due to stress-related injury; or, I could quit. Only two of these options felt viable at the time.

Well, I’m wasn’t ready to be a mom; and I certainly wasn’t going out on medical, although I would have easily qualified; I didn’t want to give up the continuous contract I’d worked so hard to gain to only find myself at the beginning of the lengthy school board application process again, but I would have if necessary. At the time, I was shocked by the fact that quitting had become my second best option.

After extended conversations with my partner, who would ultimately end up being my sole source of financial support if I decided not to go back to work in the fall, I asked my principal to sign off on a one-year general leave request to the board that employs me. Slipping the request form as well as an early draft of the burnout paper I was working on in her mailbox along with a letter of explanation. Before doing so, I’d debated for a long time about whether to be honest with my principal about what I was experiencing, she had, in the past taken many small risks on my behalf—all of which played out to mutual benefit, and I did not want to ruin the image I thought she had of me by admitting a need to step away. My principal supported me without hesitation. The next day the leave form and paper were back in my mailbox, signed and with a small note that said, simply: “Of course.”

A few months later, I received a form-letter rejection from the board stating that my
request for leave had been denied and that if I was going to resign without breeching my contract, I would have to do so by the close of May. That letter was disappointing to say the least. I could not understand why my application, which had the full support of my principal, had been turned-down. I followed up with a phone call to the folks at leave administration. As it turned out, they had rejected my request for leave because of an unwritten policy that dictates that no one who has been on continuous contract for less than five years is eligible for general leave. And no, they wouldn’t put that in writing. I did, however, ask how it was possible for an institution to govern its decisions, ones that affect the lives of its seven thousand teachers based upon unwritten policies. The only response forthcoming was, simply, because that’s how things have always been done. At the time, I couldn’t help but feel the centre of some sort of comedic sketch. Here we are in capital-e Education, careening around blind corners, full-steam ahead, responsible for equipping a new generation with the tools and critical thinking skills necessary to be active, vibrant citizens in an unimagined future, and we are doing so with our eyes firmly fixed on the rearview mirror.

Luckily, my principal and a system assistant principal I had been working with that year went to bat for me, writing letters and making phone calls downtown. Eventually, the board agreed to a compromised leave; I could have three-terms, nonrenewable and would have to return to the classroom in mid-April to “demonstrate my commitment.” I was so relieved and grateful for the opportunity to take a break without losing my job that I accepted the conditions—even though I knew in every part of my being I needed a whole year. I wasn’t willing to accept leaving the profession out of defeat. Teaching is the greatest and most honest thing I have ever done. I couldn’t walk away; but, while trying to tiptoe out the back door quietly, I tripped over a clattering crisis of conscience.

My sense of self-preservation and of justice, both grossly trespassed against during my few years of experience with the teaching profession, collided strongly against my sense of commitment, of obligation, and of honour that I associate with being a teacher. I needed to go on leave—that was clear—and I would ultimately use some of my time away to decide whether or not I would actually return. But, at the same time, upon having won the small victory of my three terms away, I felt terribly guilty. And I felt this way not only when talking to the students who would approach me in the halls or in my classroom after hearing the rumour that I was leaving, but also because I knew that there were other new teachers who had applied for leaves, and got denied, having had no one in their corners making phone calls downtown.

I taught the year out, accepted a parting gift from my department in June, and walked through the doors of my school at the beginning of summer feeling lighter than I had in years. At the time, I thought the ‘ordeal’ part of my struggle, with the burnout and the subsequent scuffle to get the support I needed to move forward with dignity, was over. But in fact, it had just begun.
According to that same website, Ruth Luban recommends that people suffering from burnout first recognize the loss that burnout brings. She lists the following six losses, in the hopes that acknowledging them will lead to healing from them:

“Loss of the idealism or dream with which you entered the career.
Loss of the role or identity that originally came with your job.
Loss of physical and emotional energy.
Loss of friends, fun and sense of community.
Loss of esteem, self-worth, and sense of control and mastery.
Loss of joy, meaning and purpose that make work—and life—worthwhile.”

For myself, I was surprised to discover how profoundly each of those losses, and the fear that came with them, hit me. The more I experienced work-related burnout, the more introverted I became and the more fearful I became—not just of work or the thought of returning to it, but of many things in life that I’d never been frightened by before. Paramount among these newfound fears I was experiencing was the fear of starting again. The idea that, if I left teaching, then there would be nothing in the world for me. So, I clung. I clung onto the idea that I had to make teaching work, that I needed the security and salary and benefits. That I would never be able to find those things elsewhere.

February 18, 2009

On leave, day 176.
Back to the classroom in 54 days.
When I was in university, learning how to become a teacher, I remember that a number of professors, instructors, and teachers would talk about teacher dreams. They would laugh together about the nightmares they would get around the August of every year that they were teaching, no matter how many years they had been doing so. When I was fine in teaching, mine came like clockwork, exactly three weeks before I was to step into the school. They were fairly innocuous: mispronouncing names, having no students in class, or the students staging a revolt in class; that kind of thing. When I started to burn out, the nightmares came all the time, and they were far more surreal and violent than the ones I had come to accept as a sort of rite of passage for teachers.

Every now and again while on leave, a teacher dream creeps into my mind. I had one last night. A bad one. I know I’m not supposed to say this after the luxury of all this time off, but I’m afraid of what might happen when I go back.

February 19, 2009

On Leave, day 177.
Back to the classroom in 53 days.

More than anything it’s the questions that get to me. The first question I asked myself in the midst of that dark hour when I finally admitted to myself something needed to change was simply, “Has my time come?” The ‘stay or leave’ question was and is primary and constantly on my mind. Asking it has led to a host of other questions that ripple to the surface with surprising and relentless frequency.

What if...
1. What if I didn’t have such a good working relationship with my principal?
2. What if I wasn’t living with someone who could support me financially?
3. What if none of that burnout stuff had actually happened? What if I just wimped out because the work is difficult?
4. What if I had paid more attention to assessment as a student teacher?
5. What if I had taken my first Canadian assignment in a different school? A different system?
6. What if I did everything differently?
7. What if I didn’t get so deeply involved in the politics around contract negotiation?
8. What if I taught more hands-off students?
9. What if I’m not ready to go back in April?
10. What if I go back in April, excited and ready, and then start to crash-and-burn again?
11. What if I don’t know how to connect with students anymore?
12. What if when I go back, I’m really effective at communicating the boundary line between what I can and cannot do, but am still expected to contribute hours outside of my teaching time, even when teaching a course I’ve never taught before along with an English class I’ve heard through the grapevine I’ve been also timetabled for?
13. What if I can’t find anything as meaningful to do with myself outside of teaching if I end up having to resign?

Often I second-guess myself. I know what happened was real, but being now so far on the other side of all that pain, I find myself forgetting the visceral intensity that came with it. Instead there exists a long, dull ache, a sadness just below the surface. My personality is far more mercurial than it was in the time before. I wonder if that will go away eventually. My partner says that we are biologically programmed to forget or lessen or dampen pain with time in order to reproduce. Often I wonder how other teachers who have experienced the
same things I did have managed to let go. I wonder if they ask themselves the same questions. I wonder what their lives were like then, and what they are like now.

When I first began my leave, I had no desire for reflection. I felt that I was reflecting myself into hysteries. I wanted options. Either a way to sail through teaching that I could unquestioningly count on, or an out to teaching I could embrace. Plus, I felt the need to legitimize the time off.

Now, this is embarrassing to admit: I am a busy person. I like being busy. I like that I am generally thought of as a person who gets things done professionally and quickly while I’m doing a million-and-one other things. The thought of not being busy come September was too out of character for me to accept in myself and I didn’t want to be seen as weak by anyone else—even though the purpose of my time off was primarily one of recovery; so, I enrolled as a student in two full-time programs: an MFA in creative writing, and a diploma in baking and pastry arts through my local technical college. September came and after emailing a few well-wishes to my teaching colleague friends, I hit the ground running.

Between the mental demands of writing and the physical demands of commercial baking, I had absolutely no time nor energy to consider anything that had happened the previous year, nor how I felt about it. Anytime my mind wandered over to that other life, I dismissed all thought with genuine feelings of relief at not being there doing that. As such, I effectively created a schism between the self that teaches and the self that lives. The self that lives noticed that even though I was a full-time student in two programs, I was happier, healthier and living a more balanced life than the self that teaches. Life on the other side of the desk was good.

That lasted for a while.

But, as with all things, my post-teaching glow was temporary. While sitting in ingredient function classes, drawing carbon chains and in sanitation class learning about \textit{clostridium botulinum}, I began to think of ways I would deliver the material, I began to question the sorts of assessment strategies being used by my instructors and professors, I began to imagine teaching. The barrier I’d placed between the part of me who identifies as a teacher and the part of me who would like to be anything but a teacher broke down. One morning in late November I woke up early, well before my partner—who happens, also, to be a teacher—to work on an assignment. In pastry school, we had a large cake project coming up and I wanted to practice a \textit{petit four} I had designed as part of it. I remember standing in the kitchen of our apartment squeezing mint whipped cream and chocolate ganache from a pastry bag into candy cane-shaped \textit{pate a choux}, thinking: my life has become a cream-puff. I make very delicious pastry, but I knew I would never become a pastry chef and I’m not the kind of person who can separate what I spend most of my time in a day doing from who I am for very long. Once again, I found myself lost and searching.

The part of my experience that I did not address overtly has to do with the mostly physical symptoms of prolonged exposure to stress and the mostly psychological symptoms of the burnout that results from prolonged exposure to stress. Prolonged exposure to stress causes one to ‘be on’ all the time, to hyper-engage with every situation, resulting in a constant rush of particular types of chemicals through the system that often make sleep (thus my insomnia) and digestion (thus my cranky guts) difficult and can lead to experiences of anxiety (thus my rapid breathing and sweaty palms). Burnout, on the other hand, is characterized by disengagement (thus my inability to care for my students that fateful May morning, in keeping with all the other parts of my life where I seemed incapable of feeling...
much of anything at all).

The summer in between that last year of teaching and the start of my leave in September, I began to experience natural disruptions to my response to stress (I was able to calm down) as well as the burnout (I was able to look forward to my plans in the fall), September didn’t loom ahead of me the way it had in summers past. I looked forward to the new experiences I would have. It was a good summer. I felt better. I realize now there is a difference between feeling better and being healthy.

By November during my year on leave the stress of my combined programs caught up with me. I wasn’t questioning or in crisis this time, I was sick. I was dizzy and faint. And for a time, I could not stay awake for more than three consecutive hours. A couple of trips to the doctor, some extensive blood work, a lot of rest and the reintroduction of animal protein to my diet had my energy levels almost back to normal three months later. Between the fainting and cream-puff realization, it became clear that I needed to revisit my choices.

In order to allow myself the space and time to recover in all ways, I had to cut back. Feeling already like a failure for not making it in teaching, this decision was especially and unnecessarily difficult. Who was going to think less of me for not finishing a diploma program in baking? Only myself. I couldn’t handle another failure. I guess it was lucky that I really had no choice. I ended up withdrawing from one program and reducing my course load in the other, so for the last two months, I’ve had time for reading and reflection.

I read everything I could find published on the subject of teacher attrition, which isn’t all that much, actually, and in the process found myself angered by a system that “eats its own children,” students and teachers alike. I realized that the whole while I was trying to determine solutions for myself, blaming myself, searching for things I could do differently to make things better for myself, and hoping to outlast it all, that the problem of teacher attrition is systemic and requires a systemic response.

Here are the things I didn’t realise I needed then and know that I need now:

- I need to work in a place that sees humans as the most important part of the human resource equation. I lucked out in terms of getting my leave, and because of that good fortune I am telling this story. I don’t think matters as serious as one-in-two teachers leaving the profession should be left up to luck.
- I needed specific training in my teacher preparation program around how to advocate for the needs that would make teaching sustainable. I needed information and training, both during my teacher preparation program and continuing into early professional development around the issues of teacher attrition, and the signs and symptoms of stress and burnout, so that I would have been able to recognize what was happening to me. I loved my teacher training program, I was deeply moved and inspired by it, however, so much emphasis was placed on assuming the identity of ‘Teacher’ that there was no room for looking at the specific skills necessary to survive and thrive in our profession.
- I need teacher narratives that do not represent teachers as either heroes or villains. Good teacher. Bad teacher. Show me good teachers with all their human fallibility in place. I know I’m no hero, but I spent an unnecessary amount of time worrying that if I didn’t do this or that unrealistic thing I wouldn’t have a hope of becoming a good teacher, or worse, that I would become a bad teacher.
- I needed research-based solutions to the problems I faced leading up to, and as it turns out throughout, the process of recovering from my experience of burnout, which are not about numbers of ‘stayers’ or ‘movers’ or ‘leavers,’ but about what I should have been
looking for, what I should have done when things had gone too far, and how I might recover from what I experienced. Also, I needed that research to come to me. As a teacher I didn’t have easy access to the academic journals I do now, and in crisis, I certainly wasn’t going to seek them out.

• I need to know that there is life after teaching, that if I don’t make it this time around I will not spend the rest of my life weaving wistful anecdotes about the great times I had in the classroom. Or, I need to know that there is a way I can be involved in teaching and education that is sustainable, even for me.

• I needed administrators and veteran colleagues who could have identified that I was struggling and worked with me to find solutions.

• I need to know that there are people who are actively and effectively working to affect real change for teachers—if students really are to be at the centre of everything I do as a teacher, which I think is a good thing, then I need to be at the centre of someone else’s focus.

Crazy idea—
Just because things have always been done in a particular way doesn’t mean they must always be done that way. I’m not suggesting we throw out everything and start again, there are lots of good things going on in schools and good systems for teachers, but now might be a good time for imagining alternatives and implementing a more flexible structure to our educational institutions and systems.

On Leave, day 201.
Back to the classroom in 28 days.

Four weeks from today I am going to be standing in front of approximately 96 students on my first day back in the classroom, and I no longer know what to feel about that fact. I can tell you, however, what I think. I think regardless of what happens for me in there, what next year looks like, or the next ten years with respect to myself and the teaching profession, I know that there is simply nothing more that I, as an individual, could do to affect change on a personal or systemic level.

Regardless of how I come to feel or what I think about the outcome as it unfolds, this is one of those rare moments in teaching when I feel confident and satisfied in saying I did everything I could. I will continue to raise my concerns as a beginning teacher who has gone over the edge for as long as that message maintains any kind of relevance in discourse about teacher attrition. I will hold out hope that my voice on the subject won’t be alone for long, and that as a group we will be met halfway by the universities that train us, the schools and boards that employ us, the administrators with whom we work, the professional associations we are members of and the researchers who conduct studies on our behalf.

Despite the challenges surrounding my personal experience of teacher burnout, I still want to be a teacher. And you know what? I am the kind of teacher you want your kids to have. I’m still hoping to look back on this time one Friday afternoon from my desk, as I’m getting that last batch of marking done for the week, and be thinking that all of this led to something unimaginably good.

Return to the Classroom
May 12, 2009
After being back in the classroom for fifteen days, I am out on a medical leave trying to figure out my next best step.

I shouldn’t be telling you this.

I remember when I was a student teacher, many people spoke of education as a battlefield, with teachers on the front lines. At the time I deplored the comparison, thinking of that battlefield as one configured with teachers and students on opposing sides—obviously if you’re fighting so hard with the kids, I thought to myself at the time, teaching is not for you, do everyone a favour and get out.

But teaching is war.

Not against the kids, but for them—advocating for the conditions that are necessary for their learning. During my time here, I have tried every battle strategy to meet the objectives of improved student experience while maintaining a healthy life: from aggressive assault, bulling my way through the system, right up to waving a white flag of surrender and trying to fall in line, shoulder-to-shoulder with my colleagues and administrators. After five years in the trenches, I am ready to lay down my arms and admit defeat.

I give up.
I lost.
I know that now.

This began as my story, an intensely personal and private one—as secrets are wont to be—but my secret is yours now; you can share, if you like, or store it in a private place of your own. Just don't go into work tomorrow and act as though you haven't heard it.

Notes


In No Dream Denied, the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reported that, in general, annual teacher turnover (15.7%) is notably higher than the annual turnover of people in non-teaching occupations (11.9%). In addition, the NCTAF identified beginning teacher attrition as a “serious problem” and reported the cumulative percent of teachers leaving teaching each year to be: 14% after one year, 24% after two years, 33% after three years, 40% after four years and 46% after five years.

The report goes on to address the contribution that high retirement rates have on the high rate of teacher attrition, “More people are leaving teaching for non-retirement reasons […]. Teachers leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement (e.g., low pay, lack of professional support, poor school leadership) outnumber those retiring by almost 3-to-1” (27).

At the time, I was not able to find a Canadian statistic and was criticized in some circles for relying upon American data, with people telling me that things simply aren't that bad here. As it turns out, they were right. Things here are worse. According to a recent study published in the Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, Clandinin, Downey and Huber write:

[1] In Alberta, around 11% of teachers leave teaching each year. This percentage includes retirements and resignations. Overall this does not raise concerns. What does raise concerns is that although around 20% of beginning teachers leave teaching after years one, two and three, that percentage rises precipitously to around 46% in year four. We wonder about this very large number of early career teachers who leave after their fourth year of teaching. Were the ways they
found themselves composing their teaching lives so contradictory to their imagined teaching lives that leaving was the most acceptable response? (145)


Resources


About the Author

Nan Nassef is a graduate student in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia and on leave from teaching at Lord Beaverbrook High School, in Calgary, Alberta. Her interests include: creative nonfiction, young adult literature, teacher attrition and burnout, and pastry. Nan is currently looking for a more sustainable career and in the meantime works with the EBS (http://www.ebsinteractions.com) in creating schools that are more teacher-friendly, and teachers that are more self-forgiving.