

How to Stay in Teaching (When You Really Feel Like Crying)

Exhaustion and frustration threaten many teachers' careers. One veteran teacher shares seven lessons for renewal.

According to statisticians, on the first day of my eighth year of teaching, I substantially increased my odds of remaining in the ranks for a lifetime – or until age 62, whichever comes first. It is the second major cut I've survived, because many new teachers leave the profession after their first year. However, there are seven lessons I wish that I had learned earlier.

Lesson One: Get a Massage

My first and most lasting complaint about teaching is that the high school schedule does not allow enough time for reflection. These are not the halls of academia. Ivy doesn't have time to grow on the U.S. high school – perhaps because it simply can't find something standing still long enough on which to attach. Society's penchant for moving ever faster is mirrored here. We all seem to have forgotten that slowness is natural: Witness the earth turning on its axis, the progression from birth to retirement, the time it takes a student to walk from locker to class.



Teaching beats on both body and soul in ways that most people do not fathom. Our day involves incessant standing, walking, squatting, and kneeling. Students may feel bored and idle; educators are anything but. Consider also the emotional exhaustion that comes from comforting kids in trouble, kids with trigger tempers, and parents without hope. Consider the effort it takes to create out of whole cloth a lesson that will meet the needs and desires of everyone – students, parents, administrators, national critics. It is no wonder that we need the adult's equivalent of pulling out the nap rug: massage.

Massage (or meditation or yoga) is a necessity in the act of self-centering. Anger and frustration dissolve, focus returns, and the world slows down.

And, in a profession as isolating as teaching, where adult contact is far too infrequent, one cannot underestimate the value of the "laying on of hands."

Lesson Two: Exercise

Education is a physically demanding profession. A strong will and a strong intellect are not enough; we need a strong body to support them.

For most of my teaching life I have exercised in spurts. Engaging in constant afternoon napping one week and running 25 miles the next have not been uncommon for me – nor has hitting the couch again the week after that.



Just recently I have figured out the obvious lesson that doing a little exercise consistently is better for the body and spirit than going whole hog twice a year. My dog Moses and I are currently enjoying our best running streak ever – and we owe it all to refusing to go farther than two miles,

three times a week for at least the first month. And I've had nary a sick day since the streak began.

Do what you can – just do it regularly.

Lesson Three: Get a Dog (and some perspective)

OK – it doesn't have to be a dog. It could be a child, a llama, a horse – anything that depends upon your daily, undivided attention to thrive. My husband and I have had a 20-pound tiger cat for five years, but since Ty never seemed to mind what time I got home, I routinely stayed at school for evening meetings. Our dog Moses, though, is a 3-year-old yellow Labrador who lives for the moment when "Mommy's home!"



Initially, his presence required some adjustment: How can I prepare a discussion on *The Grapes of Wrath* when he pulls my pant leg? How can I grade this paper when he whines to play? How can I have a life for myself if I can't even find time to play with him? The progression from question to question was quite natural and surprisingly quick.

A very wise colleague once observed that teaching is like housework: It fills all the time you allow it to fill. If you do not place some limits on how many rooms you clean, you quickly find yourself scrubbing everything from attic to basement. And others will soon come to expect that you'll continually "add on" to your list of chores.

Plants can be replaced (or least in my house); cats can get by on their own; but as a character in *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* points out, dogs do not relish time alone. They do not look forward

to long, quiet afternoons with a good book. They need people. They give their people's lives perspective.

Lesson Four: People Who Say "I wish I'd gone into teaching" rarely mean it

They usually just blurt out this line sometime in July or over Veteran's Day weekend. I have heard hundreds of folks — from close friends to complete strangers — utter that thought. Why? Sometimes, they sense the great satisfaction that comes from having taught, having changed someone. More often, they have no clue how much time the job entails. A colleague of mine and his wife, an elementary school teacher, calculated their "overtime" one year. Actual vacation time: two weeks.

Most people don't buy that though, so I try this response: "It is a wonderful profession. You should enter it. In fact, there's a great teacher education program at the university right here in town — you can matriculate as a part-timer and get certified."

If you can't beat 'em, ask them to join you.

Lesson Five: Don't Expect Outsiders to Understand

It's important to note from the outset that "outsiders" are not just the always-vote-no-any-budget-prop neighbours we've all met. Numbered in this unexclusive club may be your family, school board members, administrators, and even teachers from other departments.

All teachers do not have the same job. The maxim that a good teacher can teach anything may be true, but it does not mean that all assignments make equal demands on teachers. Surround yourself with other people who recognize that an English teacher has tremendous amounts of reading and writing to do, that an unappreciated quantity of preparation goes into a chemistry lab, that teaching 30 sixth graders to navigate a pommel horse is no easy bargain.

Every person who has ever taught anywhere feels qualified to comment on how the business of educating ought to be done. Most are wrong.

When they inevitably say something inane, share it with a colleague. Laugh at them. Suggest that they do student teaching in your area. Do what you can to show them the light, but don't let them keep you from the people you're really supposed to teach: the kids.

Lesson Six: Realize that the Average Building has More Than One Faculty Member for a Reason

One December, exhausted, fried, under-appreciated and ready to quit, I sought the advice of our district's most beloved and influential teacher. He told me many things that day, but the most memorable was that a single teacher cannot expect herself/himself to reach all the children in the building — or even all the students on her class roster.

"You reach Judy," he said to me, "and I reach Sam, and Jane reaches James, and among all of us, hopefully, we get every kid."

Most administrators won't tell you this, but it's true. If it truly takes a whole village to raise a single child, why expect yourself to be the saving grace for 150?

Lesson Seven: Vacation Means Vacate

Recharge. Recharge. Recharge. Teachers rely so much on vacations as opportunities to get caught up that when the vacations finally arrive, teachers become mired in guilt for what they are unable to get done. Go to the copy room Monday morning after a week's break and you'll hear a common refrain: "Last night was just like the first day of



school all over again, filled with nightmares. Am I prepared? Will it go OK?"

So many opportunities and distractions fill our breaks — the house that hasn't been properly cleaned in months, the books that you've been pushing aside, the body that really needs to rest, your own children. Don't set unrealistic expectations for our vacation. Teachers work harder than most of our students (a sad fact but nonetheless true); we need these breaks. Do as much as possible before leaving. Have something prepared for your return (thereby reducing the cold sweat, nightmare syndrome). Then get away and relax. For at least this week, stop trying to turn a flawed educational system into Oxford and Cambridge. You'll be much more likely to come back and have another crack at it.

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