

My son's nursery school teacher once said to me, "I tell every child in my class that I love them every day. I think children need to hear that." I was in my second year of teaching high school then, after a decade of practicing corporate litigation. I remember thinking to myself that high school kids need to hear that their teachers love them too – but try telling a fifteen or sixteen year old that you love him or her. The best outcome from such a declaration would be the student thinking you were creepy and weird. Ask any teacher though – we do love our students. By the end of the year, they've become a part of us, each and every one of them. I have watched eight years of senior classes graduate from my school, and I shed a few tears each time at the poignancy of sending out those still-innocent souls masked with teenage bravado into the big world, a place where I won't be there to answer their questions or listen to their troubles.

And oh do they have questions and troubles! In the past eight years, I've seen everything from your garden variety teenage stress over college applications or breaking up with a significant other, to the most intense religious crises, parental divorces and financial melt-downs, to heart-breaking drug addictions and deaths of parents. I consider it a real honor that many of my students stay in touch with me after graduation. I have advised them on what courses to take, debated the benefits of study abroad with them, discussed different graduate school programs with them, met their boyfriends and girlfriends, listened to and supported them as they came out of the closet, and danced at their weddings.

But, I never tell my students verbally that I love them. Instead, I try to show them: by being there for them, by really listening to them, by expecting a lot of them, by respecting them and treating them like the beautiful human beings that each of them is. When they graduate, I tell them that I will always be there for them, that I will forever be cheering them on. I figure that is really the best way for me to tell them that I love them.

Until Daniel. Daniel was without a doubt the most extraordinary student I ever taught. Brilliant, charming, athletic, uber-responsible, kind and gentle, Daniel was the type of boy that most teachers only dream of having in their classrooms. He was the boy who was still ready to talk about medieval philosophy when the first snowflakes of the year were falling outside and was still turning in perfectly executed homework and raising his hand to answer every question the last week of class his senior year. He was the boy whose test you always marked first because he would have answered the questions more correctly than YOU would have. He was the boy who remembered every single thing you ever taught, even things you just mentioned in passing and was sure that no one even heard. (I used to call him my “institutional memory.”) A gifted athlete, Daniel was the kid who managed to stay ahead of his schoolwork even when attending international martial arts competitions. But, he was far from just a brain. Daniel was what my grandparents would have called a “*mensch*.” The antithesis of self-involved, Daniel was on a quiet mission to be a force for good in our small school society. He was the kid who noticed the student who had no friends and made sure to say a warm, smiling hello to that student each and every day. He was the rare teenager who was able to see the adults in his life as human, and who made sure to thank his teachers at the end of class and to stop in to their offices during lunch to say hello. In my classroom, whenever one particularly sarcastic boy would try to get my goat, Daniel knew just how to diffuse him and defend me without anyone even noticing. Most remarkably, Daniel was eternally modest and unassuming, seemingly unaware of all of his incredible gifts. Oh how I rejoiced with him when he was admitted to Yale for college. I wasn’t surprised though. Yale would be lucky to get him.

Like many of my former students do, Daniel came back to visit during winter break of his freshman year in college. I still remember his sparkling blue eyes and his wide grin as he sat in my office, sharing stories about college, and of course, because he was Daniel, asking with genuine interest about my life. After he left, I remember smiling to myself, so proud of the young man he was becoming. I could not wait to see what Daniel would do with his life, because I knew that whatever it was, it would be wonderful.

In the middle of Daniel’s sophomore year of college though, he was diagnosed with brain cancer. After that, he endured chemotherapy and radiation, seizures and memory loss. He remained Daniel throughout it all – gentle, patient, good-humored, loving. He never stopped fighting his illness and never stopped hoping that he would be cured, that he could return to the life he loved so much. Brain cancer is cruel though. Daniel’s tumor returned, and it stopped responding to treatment. Daniel was forced to leave his beloved Yale and move back home with his parents.

I used to go visit Daniel during that time. During one of those visits, his father told me that Daniel knew he was going to die and wondered what his legacy would be, whether anything he did in his short time on this earth would be remembered. What do you say to a twenty-two year old who is worried about his legacy on this earth? That you wish he could have lived to change the world? That you may never have another student like him? That you will never forget him? Nothing is enough. He should have lived, had a chance to spend his life with someone he loved, to raise children, to have a fulfilling career, to discover and create new things, to grow old and wise. All of this was taken from him. I could only try to explain to him the difference he made in my life; that having him in my classroom was the finest reminder that becoming a teacher was the best decision I ever made. I could only try to tell him that he was always an inspiration to me to be more modest, more gentle, more thorough, more kind.

I had the honor of visiting Daniel a few times in his last weeks of life. He was bald and his brain surgery scar bulged ominously. But his eyes still lit up with joy at the visit of his former teacher. His rapid-fire intellectual banter was gone, but he and I still had so much to talk about. The last time I saw him, he was no longer able to speak very much. When I left, though, he reached out his hand to me and said, “I love you.” We held hands for a moment, and I told him I loved him too. It was the first and last time I ever told a student that I loved him or

her. The end of life brings with it a certain freedom to say it like it is. Daniel died the following week. He was 22 years old.

So what is a teacher to do when her beloved student has died of brain cancer? Her student, who might have one day won a Nobel Prize or been elected President or cured a dread disease. Her student, who worried in his last months that this world might forget his all-too-short stay here. How can I keep showing him that I love him?

Daniel cannot be here on earth anymore, but I can be his messenger. I can make sure that as long as I live, Daniel will continue to impact this world.

“He sat right here,” I will tell each new crop of seniors that I teach in Room 224. “You never knew him, but his spirit is in this room. He will inspire you to be the best student you can be this year.”

“What would Daniel have done?” I will ask myself when I am about to take a short cut and not work as thoroughly or hard as I should.

“Daniel would not have walked by,” I will remind myself as I stop myself from walking past a student who needs a smile and a kind word.

“This bookcase looks like Daniel’s,” I will think to myself as I examine a set of shelves laden with works of classic literature and philosophy.

“Daniel,” I will whisper every time I see a Yale bumper sticker.

“The world will never forget you,” I will say, picturing his warm grin in my head. “You’ve made it to the New York Times.”

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