

One morning a week, I teach an art class to half a dozen adolescent boys at a juvenile detention center near my home. As volunteer gigs go, this one is especially challenging, though not for reasons you might think. Their behavior or my safety are never problems. And my sketchy qualifications, plus having a room without windows and a high turnover rate as my students are paroled, are all things I can work around. The difficult part for me is wondering if what we do together makes one whit of difference in lives that have been profoundly deprived at every level of their being.

### **A Kinship**

My boys don't know it, but I know something about what it takes to recover from a difficult childhood. Yet I wonder if recovery is even possible for these boys whose childhoods appear to have had no saving grace. These damaged youth are already drawn to the dark side.

Once, at a lecture I attended, a psychiatrist from a hospital for the criminally insane said that his patients had endured as children nearly every kind of abuse known, abuses he enumerated to his resolute listeners. When he said that, for these patients, therapy is measured not in years but in decades, I felt a strange kinship.

This is the path my thoughts began to travel after a lively morning with my boys. Leaving the detention center, I bundled up against the cold and began the two-hour trip to my therapist's office. Deep in thought as I emerged from the train station and pushed into the wind, I wrestled with this question of whether or not our art class mattered to anyone but me. My thoughts found their way to a memory, which is where they often go to understand something with an emotional origin.

### **The Crisis Teacher**

Many years ago, as a first year teacher, I was housed with twenty third graders in a portable classroom behind the school. The physical isolation and the needs of a troubled boy in my class drew me into the main building during my free period to observe a "crisis teacher" named Mary. Her job was to provide remedial help to children, and support to teachers who had a child in crisis—children who were behaving out of control. Removing the child from class, she could take the time to

figure out what had triggered an eruption, while the classroom teacher continued with the other children. In Mary's room, children worked on special projects or vented their feelings until they could return to the classroom.

In my class, a nine-year old-boy named Roy required 80 percent of my time and attention. He couldn't sit still or stop talking and moving around. He was cheerful and insistent about pleasing me, but was quietly agitated. Even when he was set apart from distractions or given a special project, nothing relieved his need to be near me. Academically he was far behind the other children. I had not been trained to work with a child like this, nor was I alone in my frustration. At recess one day, another teacher, exasperated with Roy, lashed out with a jump rope across his face.

At the school's open house, his situation became clearer. His mother came with her three younger children and Roy. He was excited to have her there, looking at his desk, seeing his papers. In front of other families, she told him sharply that if he didn't quit acting up, she'd put him in diapers when he got home. Turning to me, she said, "That's what I do when he acts like a baby at home. I tell him I'll treat him like one and I put him in diapers." I was stunned.

### **Levels of Being**

Roy went to Mary's classroom at regular times for remedial work, and sometimes in crisis, but he couldn't be there all the time. I sought her out, watching what she did, because I didn't want to fail. Inexperienced and insecure, only now do I realize that I was observing her at two levels—aware of one level and utterly unaware of the other. At one level, I noted the ways she worked with children's difficult feelings; at another level, something beneath my realm of understanding made a deep impression.

I remember how she would approach a child who was out of control. Wrapping her warm arms around him and speaking quietly, she held the child firmly and safely, gently, until he regained control and would be able to talk. Then she would help him put into words what had happened that was so upsetting, and she'd find out what had happened before that, often something at home, some added pressure on that child, or some worry or fear. There was always a reason. They would talk a bit, then she would re-engage the child in a task he could succeed in to restore some self-esteem, and he would return to the classroom. Her magic was in listening and trying to understand from the child's point of view how he felt, and then helping *him* understand. And helping him find words to express himself.

Her approach conveyed that while she understood the force of anger, maybe next time there would be a better way to handle those feelings. She needed no harsh words, no punishment, no shame or humiliation in order for children to know what she meant. She helped them learn to put their anger into words.

### **Being Helped to Learn**

I often watched her during my lunch hour, my free period, and occasionally after school. (Did we ever talk? Or did I only watch? It would not have crossed my mind to write about her then, so fleeting were my impressions.) She would say, “We aren’t teaching them. We are helping them learn.” She gave each child the benefit of the doubt, offered a bond of trust on her belief that each child meant well, was trying, wanted to succeed and to feel favored and proud. She was not suspicious of them or sarcastic, but open and trusting. I imagine she helped them believe in themselves.

Four days before the end of the school year, Roy moved to Texas to live with his father. Many years later in therapy, I began to realize that what I had been drawn to in Mary had a great deal to do with me and the family in which I grew up. Mary had awakened in me a curiosity to learn what it means to reflect and understand, rather than snap to a judgment or course of action.

She had a way of treating children that didn’t cause them to shrivel up, that seemed to bring about their willingness to participate and open up, rather than to resist. She offered a safe place to reflect on what had happened and on their part in it. She allowed the possibility of making a mistake and not being skewered for it or banished, of being forgiven, being given another chance, being loved and included. Her approach fostered understanding; she helped children understand why they had acted so impulsively, and she gained understanding about what distressed them so much that they risked alienating themselves from everyone else—risked everything, really.

In my mind, words echoed from attitudes expressed toward children—attitudes that I recognized from childhood, and later, from other teachers I worked with who were oblivious to their effect on children. “Snap to it. When I snap my fingers, you do what I tell you to do—no discussion.” “Don’t inconvenience me. I’m on a schedule.” There were no words that said, “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.” Mary’s approach was a longer way around to gain the children’s cooperation.

### **Being Accepted**

My experience of Mary was an emotional one. And it was almost as clear as if one day I finally inhaled deeply what seemed like oxygen, so instinctively did I recognize and need it. What my senses were too numb to realize then was how much I longed to be wrapped in her strong embrace and held until the storm inside me passed, and then to talk about what happened, and still loved, be given another chance. By accepting the children—and all of their feelings, too—she was helping them learn to manage intense feelings constructively and appropriately.

I didn't realize for many years how she had quietly touched my life. When unconsciously I found Mary's qualities in a therapist, something felt right; and indeed it was. Remembering this experience of my younger self in that first year of teaching so long ago, helped me understand something about my later work teaching art to incarcerated boys.

Whether in a nursing home, a psychiatric setting, or a juvenile home, a caring person gives to anyone whose life is constrained a breath of oxygen, a whiff of hope, and ultimately a memory of someone who cares—a feeling that some people may never have known before.

Those we touch may forget us for a long time, but when they once again meet someone who listens to them, without judgment or a set of conditions, who relates to them as one person to another, they recognize it instinctively. I believe they want to align themselves with that person's way of being in the world. They may not realize they are touched or moved in a familiar way, but it's as if life itself has been breathed into them. They may feel, however briefly, that their lives matter and they are worth saving.

As my therapist has said, it's work worth doing.