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However Imperfectly: Lessons learned from thirty years of teaching

By Andrew Pudewa

It's hard to say exactly when I began thinking myself a teacher, but I do remember when I set out on my own as an independent violin instructor, preschool owner, tutor, and homeschooling parent. (Sometimes self-employed guys have to wear many hats to make ends meet.) It was about three decades ago. Certainly, it has been an adventure, not without its challenges and frustrations, but with a great many lessons learned along the way. Although much of my time now is spent trying to organize and communicate to other teachers and parents the technical things I've come to understand about teaching—and teaching writing in particular—the most valuable lessons are probably the philosophical ones, or in the words of Mrs. Ingham, one of my great mentors, “the intangibles.” So here I outline them for you: seven lessons learned from my thirty years of teaching, things which perhaps would have been good for me to have learned sooner.

One: It's hard not to do to your children what was done to you.

Most of us went to school. I did, eleven years in relatively good public schools with a few memorable teachers scattered here and there. Consequently, my primary understanding of teaching and education came from my own experience as a student growing up. Later, that was enhanced by three years of very unusual teacher training at the Talent Education Institute in Matsumoto, Japan. But for the most part, as I launched into teaching, my concept of school was that it had to be done with classes and grades, textbooks and exams, letter grades and transcripts, all proven effective by standardized tests.

Provisionally, and early in my career, I was given a book by John Taylor Gatto, New York State Teacher of the Year and eighth grade English instructor in Brooklyn for sixteen years. The title grabbed me: *Dumbing Us Down: The hidden curriculum of compulsory education*. It was a small book, and I devoured it. As I read it, I thought, “Ha! This explains why I am so stupid!” You see, around that time I began to realize that I was profoundly uneducated and wondered why. I always received good grades. I was a reader. I had pursued my vocation as a music teacher seriously. However, as I absorbed Mr. Gatto's book, I realized my own childhood was less about learning and more about playing the mandatory game called school. As I read it again, I gained a fuzzy idea that there could be a different type of education, and that it might be better than what I grew up with. But as Mr. Gatto didn't explain much about what that might look like, I was

somewhat on my own in finding something different.

Certainly, my Suzuki training was different. Shinichi Suzuki, the founder of the Talent Education Institute, believed that any child could learn anything given the right environment and method. Using music as a case study, he set out to prove that to the world, and as a result of his work, hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of children learned to play extremely complex repertoire on the violin or other instruments and make it look easy. His purpose was not, however, to create little armies of young violinists; his goal was to prove to the world that every child could learn anything. And the children did. They did so without age segregated classes, without report cards and grades, without threats and compulsion. They did so with joy and mastery. So when I left Japan, my hope was to continue his mission by teaching music and if possible applying the principles of Talent Education to other areas of teaching and learning as well.

Reading an interview between Shinichi Suzuki and Glenn Doman, I knew my next step: The Institutes for Human Potential in Philadelphia, where I lived and learned as a junior staff member for three years. Working in the clinic with brain-injured children and their families half the day and apprenticing as a teacher in their school for accelerated children the other half, I became acutely aware that all children learn differently, and the best ways to teach were very, very different than the way I had been taught. I was young and idealistic and fully believed that we were changing the world with the truth about children, brains, talent, and education. The school and its methods were entirely unconventional, and I often thought, “I wish I could have gone to a school like this—I would have loved it! I would have learned so much!”

However, it wasn't until I left Philadelphia and began home educating my own children that I realized how deeply ingrained my schooling mentality was. My wife and I dutifully ordered a pile of textbooks with a number on the cover and began to do school at home, replicating the very system I knew we didn't want to be a part of. My wife, with a degree in elementary education, was concerned that if we didn't use grade-level textbooks and standardized tests, our children might fall “behind,” which would be bad. We had come face to face with the bugaboo of school, even while knowing we didn't want to do to our kids what was done to us. Thus, we began on the long path of discovering options—looking for what we could do differently, and how.

We often felt both excited but nervous; what if we failed our children? What if we didn't cover all the bases? What if they weren't ready for college? These were not easy fears to overcome. But as we met more like-minded people, read helpful books, and worked on keeping our priorities straight, it became easier. Sometimes it seemed as if I were part of an imaginary group that could be called Schoolaholics Anonymous. “Hi, my name is Andrew, and I went to school, and I don't want to think that way any more ... and I don't want to do to my kids what was done to me.”

Two: Process is more important than product.

We live in what might be described by some as a rabidly capitalistic environment, where the value of almost everything is measured, compared, and judged—often by its

profitability. “The proof is in the pudding,” and we are quick to evaluate the pudding as excellent, acceptable, or unacceptable. Unfortunately, when this thinking infects education, we can easily fall into judging experience by the product it produces and then engineering experiences to produce a hopefully superior product. While this approach may work in an industrial world where parts and materials are static and consistent, humans—and children in particular—are not so controllable and predictable. What I have come to see quite clearly is that education is a process, and the products are the artifacts of learning, neither an end result nor even an immediate goal.

There is an excellent scene from a particular movie that I wish all teachers and parents could see. Toward the beginning of *A River Runs Through It*, a film based on the autobiography of American author Norman Maclean, a young Norman and his younger brother, Paul, are being taught at home in rural Montana by their father, a very taciturn Scottish minister. The boy sits at his table, writing some type of story or essay. He then brings his paper to his father, who crosses out a few things, makes a few marks, and returns it to him with three words, “Half as long.” Returning to his desk, the boy rewrites the piece and brings it once more to his father, who reads it, marks on it, and hands it back with the command, “Again, half as long.” The somewhat exasperated child rewrites his composition a third time and again presents it to his father. This time, however, the response is different. Father reads it, hands it back, and says, “Good. Now throw it away.” The boy crumples it up, throws it in the trash bin, grabs his fishing pole, and runs out the front door while his mother shouts, “Norman! Norman! Wait for your brother!”

I have related this scene many times to parents and teachers, and I can always feel the collective cringe at the line “throw it away.” But he worked so hard! Shouldn’t we keep it? At least put it in a portfolio to prove that we did something? But, you see, the father’s lesson was not just about the economy of language; it was that the process is the product, and the effort of the day is sufficient thereto. He’s not finished learning, but he made progress, and the statement “Good. Now throw it away” is an acknowledgement of both. But today we are definitely attached to the product we can pin to the wall or hang on the refrigerator to justify our efforts. Objectively, the writing of a ten-year-old is worthless, and you’ll throw it away eventually, so why not now? It’s something to think about.

Another point under “Process over Product” is to understand that if we wait until we are very good at teaching something, we may be waiting so long that we never try. One of my favorite quotes is from G. K. Chesterton, who stated, “If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing badly.” This was echoed by Zig Ziglar decades later: “Anything worth doing, is worth doing poorly ... until you can do it well.” Somewhat of a perfectionist by nature, I don’t like doing anything I can’t do well, so this advice hits me square. What Chesterton probably meant, at least as I read it, was *imperfectly* (rather than *badly*). I have taught music poorly; I have taught math badly; I have taught Latin ignorantly. But I have taught those things, probably ... where no one else would have been able to teach. I learned as I taught; so did my students.

I have taught things I didn’t completely understand—but then again, there are many things I don’t completely understand and probably never will. My good friend Andrew

Kern of the Circe Institute once said, “Understanding is highly overrated.” This freed me. While I will probably never fully understand Homer or *Hamlet*, that doesn’t mean that reading or even teaching them is something to be avoided or feared. I now realize that it is through teaching and learning together that the best learning happens for both teacher and student, and if we were to wait until we felt perfectly qualified to teach something, there would be very few people teaching anything at all. Sometimes it is enough to just be a few steps ahead.

The final point under “Process over Product” is that *how* students learn is ultimately more important than *what* they learn. We have all likely had the experience of taking a required class, reading the textbook, taking notes during class, passing the tests—maybe even getting A’s—and promptly forgetting ninety percent of the content we supposedly learned. Conversely, we have all probably learned a great deal about something we were inspired to learn—not because it was required, but because we wanted to know—and developed perseverance as well as research, organization, and presentation skills that we carried into adulthood as great blessings.

One example that comes to mind pertains to teens who do competitive policy debate. The obscure things they study in great depth (e.g., medical malpractice law or the federal criminal justice system) are not all that important as subjects, but the drive they have to go deep, motivated often by a competitive nature, allows them to learn how to learn something well. And in delving deeply into one narrow area, they learn the “subjects”—the vocabulary and grammar of it, the history of it, the science of it, the economics of it.

So while I agree that there are certain things all students should have some knowledge of (Latin, government, economics, literature, history), I am convinced that the way in which students study and learn is actually more lasting and therefore more important than the details of what they learn.

Three: All children are different.

The idea that all children are different is not a hard sell. In fact, everyone knows this. So why then do we often structure schools and curricula in such a way that assumes all children are the same? Yes, some factors necessitate similarities: Children are all human. Children should all learn some of the same things. Children all go through stages of growing up. All true. However, look at the way schools are essentially forced by their structure to teach the same things to children of the same age according to the same schedule and then evaluate their progress by comparing them with each other. Now that just doesn’t make sense. Two things brought this home to me clearly.

First was my work with brain-injured children at the Institutes in Philadelphia. Glenn Doman, one of the founders, often used to make this observation: “All children are brain injured; it’s just a question of location and degree.” It sounds a bit harsh, of course; no one wants to think about his child being handicapped, but Doman went on to explain: “On one end of a spectrum is neurologically flawless, and on the other end is comatose. Everyone is somewhere in between.” Now that makes sense. So if all of us have less-than-perfect brains, and what differs is location and degree of damage, then we can

understand that we may all learn differently, depending on whether our weaknesses are visual, auditory, tactile/kinesthetic, language, manual, locomotive, etc. Capitalizing on this, many authors and lecturers have tried to explain learning styles—for better or worse. And yet for the most part, we still keep children in age-segregated environments, where they all do the same thing according to the same schedule, though perhaps in a more multi-sensory way. For an institution to provide truly individualized education, it would have to change its very structure and method—something not only hard to do, but seemingly risky. I’ve seen a few schools that have done this successfully, but it is rare.

Another way in which I became acutely aware that children are different was by teaching violin. Truly, that was the best of places for me to start my career because music teachers do things very differently than most schoolteachers. For one, it doesn’t matter how old the child is when he starts. A child can begin lessons at four or ten or fourteen or forty. It’s never too late to begin playing an instrument, and although there may be certain advantages to starting at a younger age, any time is okay. Suzuki himself did not begin playing violin until around age twenty. There’s no decree that because a child is a certain age he or she must now start lessons or else be behind. That’s important, because while some children may be ready and may do well starting music lessons at four, others clearly are not, and forcing it at too young of an age could cause them to hate it. Of course, this is true with things like reading and writing and math, but we don’t think about it the same way, and we have laws that declare that all children must start school (and therefore conform to state “standards”) at five or six years old.

A second way in which music teachers nurture students of differing aptitudes is by having no expectation as to how quickly they will progress. It may take a student six months to learn all the pieces in Book One; it may take two years. But it doesn’t matter. What matters is that each individual student is making progress, learning pieces, developing technique, coming to love music. That’s all that matters. There’s no need to compare students with each other, and if we did, it could have some very negative effects. Correspondingly, music teachers don’t give grades. What’s the point? Should I, the teacher, sit at the recital and score my students as if it was a final exam? (“Oops, missed that C#—A-. Oh no, bowings confused—down to B+. Ugh! Major memory lapse—C.”) What would be the point? Instead, what do music teachers do? They note areas that need modeling and practice, and they teach at the point of need. Wouldn’t schools be healthier places if they weren’t compelled to group students by age, compare them with each other, and sort them by test scores and grades? I would say yes, but how to accomplish that is a big question. Gradually I have learned to eliminate expectations based on age, to avoid comparing students with other students, to be unconcerned whether my children are ahead or behind other people’s children, and to keep foremost the question, “Are they making progress?” which is really all that matters.

Four: “Progressive” education doesn’t mean progress.

In 1990, Myra J. Linden and Arthur Whimbey wrote a book entitled *Why Johnny Can’t Write: How to Improve Writing Skills*, in which they presented well-documented research to support their claim that writing skills of high school graduates had been in decline for twenty years. That was in 1990. I don’t know a single person who is going to argue that

the writing skills of high school students have improved since 1990, so that indicates that writing skills have been in steady decline for over twenty years now. Why? While some would blame television then (and now the technology that distracts many students from reading and writing almost anything but drive), others might blame the methodology used to teach writing, or the general dumbing-down of schools and curriculum. Whatever the cause, we do know that governments and schools have been trying to turn things around. Each new iteration of “standards” addresses basic skills: reading, writing, and arithmetic; each results in a wave of curricula promising to solve the problem. But it hasn’t. Almost five decades of decline, all during the “progressive” era. Similar observations of math skills and general knowledge could be made, yet the curriculum and education experts continue to convince us that a new approach will certainly be better. But new is not always better; sometimes we find what works better in what used to work better.

After examining current weaknesses in writing instruction, Linden and Whimbey offer two strategies for effective teaching, both old, and both very similar to what we do at IEW: 1) text reconstruction and 2) sentence combining. They even quote (as I have) Franklin’s autobiography, where he talks about “taking short hints of the sentiment in each sentence” and then trying “to complete the papers again, by expressing each hinted sentiment at length.” They mention Somerset Maugham copying by hand portions of the *King James Bible* every day, “jotting down for future use turns of phrases that struck me,” and Malcolm X in prison writing out words and definitions from the dictionary to improve his vocabulary and grammar. All in all, their suggested techniques are not modern; they are old, even traceable to ancient and medieval times when the study of rhetoric was built on a solid foundation of memorization and imitation. But modern “progressive” education has rejected this as ineffective, even stifling to a child’s creativity and motivation.

But now, “progressive” education seems to be moving into a truly terrifying realm—the paperless classroom and the end of knowing things. Two years ago in 2016, I listened to Dr. Sugata Mitra, then Professor of Educational Technology at Newcastle University, give a talk at the Global Home Education Conference in Rio de Janeiro, wherein he commented that his colleagues at the university didn’t want students to use their smart phones during exams. “I asked, ‘Why not?’” he said. Their response: “Because they would answer every question.” Dr. Mitra’s counter: “But don’t you want them to answer every question?” He went on to prophesy that eventually the phone will shrink until it disappears into our bodies, and we will have continuous access to all the knowledge of mankind, and that our great-grandchildren will ask us not only, “What’s driving?” in reference to the inevitable ubiquity of self-driving vehicles, but that they will also ask, “What’s learning?” in response to the idea that once upon a time their parents and grandparents had to memorize information and carry it around in their heads.

While you or I may laugh at such a thing, Dr. Mitra was serious. He appears to be a true post-humanist, one who views technology merging with humanity as the inevitable next step in our “evolution.” Others in education now argue against teaching children “useless” information, like how to find the square root of a number or the dates of wars or

discoveries— unnecessary because we can simply google the information or ask Siri®1 or Alexa®2. The consequences of not knowing things, however, can be seen by a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*. It may be one thing to not know the dates of the Civil War and ask your phone, which will tell you, “It happened from April 11, 1861, to May 10, 1865.” However, you must know that there was a Civil War in order to ask the question! What happens when students know so few facts about history or government that they can’t even ask the questions?

Instead, consider Daisy Christodoulou’s argument in her critically important book *Seven Myths about Education*. Myth one is this: “Facts prevent understanding.” This misconception derives from the work of progressive Rousseau (and subsequently Dewey), who advised this: “Give your scholar no verbal lessons; he should be taught by experience alone.” However, Christodoulou presents case after case to prove that in writing, math, and all subjects, “knowledge and skills are intertwined. Skill progression depends on knowledge accumulation.” Pointing out that the more we know about a particular topic, the easier it is to gain understanding of that topic, she definitively states: “Learning such facts does not preclude meaning, it allows meaning.”

Technology atrophies the skill it replaces. Show kids how to use spell checkers, and they won’t care about spelling. Teach them how to use calculators, and they won’t believe that memorizing math facts has value. Let them ask their phones the answer to any question they are asked, and they won’t believe that learning and remembering things is worthwhile. Sadly, current progressive education is so deeply infected by this wrong thinking; I fear that by the time we realize the extent of the damage done, it will be too late to rescue an entire generation from a deep mire of ignorance and dependency.

Five: “College and career readiness” ... isn’t.

College and career readiness. This much bandied-about phrase was popularized when the Common Core State Standards Initiative was discussed and adopted by many states from 2009 to 2014. Subsequently, this verbiage made it into the *Test Specifications for the Redesigned SAT*—not surprising, since the chief architect of the Common Core, David Coleman, went on to become the next president of the College Board. However, I think we see a significant difference between what the SAT can test and what real preparation for life is. I have polled thousands of people with this question: “If you were a college or university teacher who had to teach high school graduates, or if you were an employer or manager who had to hire high school graduates, what skills or abilities would you want them to have?” And guess what? No one has ever answered, “I want people who show ‘proficiency in reading, writing, and analysis by comprehending a high-quality source text and producing a cogent and clear written analysis of that text supported by critical reasoning and evidence drawn from the source.’ ”

Instead, what ordinary people most often say are things like: “Integrity. Honesty.” “Humble, teachable.” “Cheerful, takes initiative.” “Respectful, knows how to listen.” Even, “Shows up on time.” Then people go on to things like “Communicates well” and “Knows how to think.” So there seems to be a disconnect between what the world wants and what schools are trying to do to prepare students. Of course, most of those

intangibles are points of character developed primarily at home and outside of school. And they can't be assessed on a multiple-choice test. Many parents and teachers consider academics the most important thing about preparation for adulthood; however, in my experience academics is likely the least important thing about growing up. Study after study confirms the fact that academic performance in school has little bearing on success and happiness in later life, yet we tend to be anxious and even stressed about academic success in childhood.

Of course, study can and usually does build character. Cumulative subjects such as mathematics and a foreign language require consistent effort over long periods of time, which not only develops perseverance but actually grows the brain, as does memorization. Additionally it is good to know some history, geography, science, and literature, although today's texts and tests may distort or disorder many facts. So please don't misunderstand me and assume that I don't see the value in academic effort. There is much.

However, there are things more important in preparing for the good life than merely grades on a transcript and test scores. If we continue to contemplate what character qualities, values, and life skills we want our students to take into adulthood, we can make the best decisions about the use of our time and resources and truly prepare them for college and career in a way the College Board will never be able to measure.

Six: It's really about you, not them.

There's an old saying: "When mama's happy, everyone's happy." Most would agree there's some truth to it. I propose a corollary: "When the teacher is learning, everyone's learning" (or maybe almost everyone). We all recognize and probably respect the somewhat clichéd term *lifelong learner*. While some fields require frequent or continuous professional development, others may not seem as demanding. Either way, it's easy for teachers or parents to become busy, distracted, or complacent about their own study.

In the fourth chapter of *A Thomas Jefferson Education*, Oliver DeMille outlines seven keys of great teaching based on the methods of George Wythe, mentor of Thomas Jefferson. While some of these are easy to grasp (Classics, Not Textbooks), and others are a bit enigmatic (Structure Time, Not Content), the last key, number seven, hit me right in the gut: You, Not Them.

As a violin teacher, I knew how important it was for me to maintain my own practice regimen—no matter how inconvenient. As a writing teacher, I now force myself to write, to keep studying, to read, and to always be learning a little more about the history and methods of what I'm trying to teach. This keeps me fresh, keeps my students engaged, and prepares my mind and heart to overflow to the minds and hearts of my students.

The sabbatical tradition of university professors sounds like a good one, though impractical for most everyone else. We have work to do, bills to pay, children to feed, projects to accomplish, checklists to check. We are busy. But maybe, just maybe, we could work better and accomplish more if we scheduled study time for ourselves. Perhaps

now and then, especially at home, we should take a mini-sabbatical from teaching. Start reading a great book and leave the children on their own. They will be confused. Perhaps the dialog might go something like this:

“Mom, aren’t we supposed to do school?”

“You can if you want to. I’m busy.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m busy. Leave me alone.”

“But what are you doing?”

“I’m studying. Go do something.”

“Uh ... aren’t we supposed to be doing school stuff?”

“Like I said, you can if you want to. But I’m busy.”

“What are you reading?”

“You wouldn’t be interested.”

“What are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t really care.”

“But what are you reading?”

“Look, if you want to stay here and be quiet, I’ll read it out loud. But otherwise, please leave me alone.”

“Okay ...”

If you are excited about learning, excited about your subject, and excited about new challenges, there’s a much better chance your students will be excited as well. If they see you studying and enjoying it, they may be inspired to study more themselves. If you are a good student yourself, you are likely to have better students. It’s a simple but hard thing, and I’ve found it to be true again and again.

Continuing your own study also engenders empathy. It’s easy to forget what it’s like to not know something you know well or not be able to do something you do easily. I once worked with a school that had a very unusual—and I think wise—policy for the faculty. All the teachers and administrators were required to take one semester course each year in a subject new to them. The school paid for the courses, and the teachers were repeatedly reminded of what it’s like to be a beginner. Similarly I have heard many hundreds of times attendees at my writing seminars making exclamations of empathy for their students. “Wow, this isn’t as easy as I thought.” “It takes time to do this right.” “I think my expectations have been a bit unreasonable.” Even, “Now I understand why my son cries when he has to do writing.” These are all great realizations to have and then have again a month and a year later.

Seven: Love is the key.

All the great teachers I’ve met love not only their subjects but also their students. It’s universal. Looking back, I remember very few teachers from my schools and classes, but the ones I can remember are still in my mind, not because of what they taught me but because they loved. Mrs. Berry, my fifth-grade teacher, was no taller than the tallest child in her class. She was tiny, but organized and strict, a lot of fun on the dodgeball court at recess, and she loved me—I knew it. She probably loved all her students, but I knew she loved me. Mr. Grantham, my middle school orchestra teacher, holds a place in my very

fuzzy memory neither because he would throw pencils at students who weren't paying attention, nor because he made funny faces with funny voices, but because he was a real encourager. He believed in me, personally, and he brought out my best efforts. He loved me. Among the many high school teachers I had, I can remember only two by name: Ms. Harper the Latin teacher, who was cute, and Mr. Spurgeon, who taught English. He loved his poems, he loved his books, and he loved teaching us what he loved. I don't remember his poems, and I don't remember his stories, but I remember his zeal.

As an adult, my four great mentors were Dr. Shinichi Suzuki, Dr. Glenn Doman, Mrs. Anna Ingham, and Dr. Bertin Webster, whom I wrote more about in the article "In Retrospect: Heroes of Providence." While the time I spent with them and the training they provided was seminal for my mission, the thing that made it so powerful, even life changing, was that they loved me. Not just a general love, but a personal, heartfelt love—they appreciated me, they believed in me, they trusted me. While I know these great mentors loved others as much as me, I always felt individually loved and encouraged, and that made all the difference.

I discovered early on in my teaching career that if my students felt loved and appreciated, if they knew that I liked them and was happy to be with them, everything went better. Students of various ages, mostly six to thirteen, would come to my violin studio during the after-school hours, often tired or distracted. I knew that before we even took out the violins, I needed to communicate love. But if you are a male teacher in your twenties, one thing you don't say to a twelve-year-old girl is, "Hi, sweetie. I am so glad you are here because I love you so much." No. You need to find other ways to communicate that. And so I developed some secret weapons.

One of these techniques is something you've probably already heard of: filling up the emotional gas tank, or the emotional bank account. I like the bank account idea better, since the gas tank metaphor implies that you fill it up to drain it. My teacher Dr. Suzuki used the bank account idea, but with a twist—live off the interest! You see, one of the problems of teaching violin is that as soon as someone picks up a violin, he or she is doing everything wrong. Teaching it is a continuous process of correction, and most people don't do well with constant correction. So I followed Suzuki's model. He would always say something positive first, sometimes several nice things, before making the first correction. I remember one time in particular. A new foreign teacher trainee came to Matsumoto for a few months. When this individual first played for Suzuki in master class, we, the more seasoned teacher trainees, shuddered and held our collective breath, because this young man's playing was nothing less than dreadful—out of tune, wrong rhythms and bowings, horrible tone. He was completely unprepared. What would Suzuki do? Well, the first thing out of his mouth was, "Good. You can play." And then he proceeded to give a short lesson on how to hold the bow correctly. Later, some of us were involved in a conversation about this event.

"How could sensei say that he played good?" asked one.

A senior student answered, "Sensei didn't say that he played good. He said, 'Good—you can play.' That's different."

It was a starting point. He started with a positive statement. One time Suzuki shared his way with us. He explained that you have to “live off the interest.” Deposit enough love in the emotional bank account that when you make a withdrawal by giving corrections or being strict, you still have the principal there, gaining interest so that future corrections won’t drain the student to the point where he or she hates lessons and wants to quit.

So I got in the habit of saying positive things, even counting on my fingers to be sure I made ten good comments before the first correction. “Hey, thanks for being on time! I really appreciate that, and I know how hard it is for my kids to get their mom to get them places on time.” “That’s a cute outfit you’ve got on.” (I don’t really know if it’s cute, but I do know that a twelve-year-old girl may have spent half an hour trying to figure out what to wear that morning.) “Hey, your violin is nice and clean. It’s a good thing to keep your instrument clean.” (Maybe he didn’t practice all week, and that’s why it’s clean.) I’m not saying give false praise; I’m just saying find things to praise. It works.

The other secret weapon I discovered is the power of a smile. A smile communicates all the right things. I like you. I’m happy you’re here. I’m grateful for you. Although some people think that smiling is a result of attitude, I discovered that smiling can influence attitudes. In my early years, I used to practice in a mirror all manner of smiles—large, small, peaceful, amazed, subtle, dramatic—and then I’d go try them out on students. I don’t do that any more, but I do have a decent repertoire (or arsenal, as the case may be).

Once experience changed my life forever. I was at the Spokane airport, leaving to go teach writing workshops in Boise for six days, and my little daughter Fiona just lost it. “Daddy, do you really have to go away again? I miss you so much when you’re gone.” Sobs.

My father’s heart was tearing apart, but a commitment is a commitment, and that was my work. But I thought, why not take her with me? Spokane to Boise won’t cost that much. I made a phone call. “Okay, you want to come with me?”

“Really?”

“Sure. We’ll buy a ticket right now, pick up some clothes and a toothbrush at Walmart, and you can spend the week with me in Boise.” Although my wife shot me a skeptical look, I knew I could make it work. And so it did. We flew to Boise, and on the next day I let her sit in my grade three to five writing class. She had never done that before, being a bit on the young side for dad’s writing classes. I’m not sure what she did during that class since I was very busy helping other people’s children. After the class she went away to play with the children of a family I had arranged it with, and I taught two more classes. That evening I picked her up, and as we were driving to the hotel, I asked, “So, Fiona, how’d you like the writing class?”

And with the awe of a child who idolizes, she sighed, “Oh daddy, it was just wonderful.”

“Yep, I’m good,” I thought. And then she said the thing that changed my life.

“Daddy, how come you’re not like that at home?”

And in that moment I realized how easy it is for me to be unconditionally enthusiastic toward, excited about, helpful to, and happy with other people’s children, and how easy it is to forget to be that way toward my own. (Yes, I love you and you love me, and we

know that, so would you please get to work? We have stuff to get done!) From that day forward I determined to be as expressive of my love to my own children learning at home every day as I was to all the many students in my classes and workshops. Love really is the key.

So those are a few of the things I've learned in three decades of teaching. I doubt I will have thirty years more, but I do expect to continue learning as I teach and teaching what I learn. It's been a great life. I am profoundly grateful. All my children are grown and out of the home now, which is a strange feeling. But I have young grandchildren next door and down the road, and I am very much looking forward to the day not too far off when one or two of them will be in "Mr. Pudewa's writing class." I expect they will teach me a thing or two.

Endnotes

¹Siri voice recognition software is a trademark of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries.

²The Alexa Voice Service (AVS) is a product of Amazon.com, Inc. Usage of the name of their product does not imply sponsorship or endorsement by Amazon.

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