

## A Too-Full Glass

by Peter Sedlak

My first tears in the classroom came unexpectedly. At the end of my first year of teaching, I was trying to find a way to say goodbye to a group of struggling and wayward seniors. They were—let’s be honest—not great students. AJ, who could barely read and was the nephew of an infamous South Boston mobster, would only talk about weightlifting and “getting ripped.” Fallon was caught *in flagrante delicto* in the boy’s bathroom, on the first day of school. Ilan was dealing drugs. Tommy was apathetic about everything. That April, I was so worried about them that I helped them fill out job applications. When I looked them over, their names were misspelled, and their handwriting was like the scrawl of a five-year old. They were going to graduate, but just barely. To say I was worried about them is an understatement. As the final seconds of the last class ticked on, I scrambled for something to say. I muttered something about how the world after high school was different, harder, less forgiving. My heart rate quickened, and then my voice got wobbly. And suddenly I could feel the tears sloshing in me like water in a too-full glass.

Chris O’Brien then said, “Mr. Sedlak, are you crying?”

I wasn’t sure I should admit it, but I said, “I think I am, Chris.”

“Why?” he asked.

I don’t remember if I even responded because the bell chimed and off they went. At the time, I opined that I cried because I was concerned for these young people, that after high school they would never have a chance to learn in such a safe setting again. A little more time and they would be more prepared. But really that is a condescending lie to make me seem heroic. In reality, I think I cried because I felt I knew I had failed them. All those lessons in November on literary devices, or Hemingway’s style, didn’t connect with them. I feared they needed a teacher who worked with them and not one who stood in the front and conveyed information listed out in the state frameworks. At the time, I just didn’t know how to make it relevant to them. In that moment I felt the responsibility of being a teacher, that what I do or say does have an effect on others. I can accept I was not a good teacher, but it still hurts to realize this.

When I decided to pursue an education degree, I thought, “I have an English degree; it’s a logical next step to teach. I will read books, talk about them, share stories with kids, create moments in learning like I experienced.” Those first years of teaching focused a lot on the intellectual. I was eager for discussions about characters, motifs, metaphors, symbolism. If someone brought up existentialism, I could feel my toes bounce in my shoes. So, it was a surprise to realize how much I had to confront being overcome with emotions in the classroom. It was not something I even anticipated about this profession. Even today, these emotions can sneak up on me like some merry prankster, unstitching the refinement of my shirt and tie.

Since that first year I have cried, not very often, but many times in class. I cry after getting a sweet thank you letter. This year it was Lisa's card saying that she was grateful I understood her mix of depression, perfectionism, and writer's block. I cry reading essays too. Like when Graham wrote about his father's drug and gambling problem, which led to his struggles in school. It was like a primal howl, and I was overwhelmed that he shared it with me. And I had to compose myself in the bathroom after Nate Meyer left me a two-page poison pen letter that said I made him hate school, that I was "single handedly the worst teacher in the high school." He was a polite and quiet student, and I was stunned to realize how my class marked him in such a negative and profound way. I had to sit on the toilet that day, wipe back some watery eyes, and accept that he might have a point. I have tears when giving positive feedback on an essay, filled with pride and awe. And when giving some not so positive feedback. I surprised myself two years ago while confronting Michela over the plagiarized introduction on her *Things Fall Apart* essay. I knew that failing this assignment would mean failing for the quarter and that her parents would be beyond upset. There was no doubt about my disappointment, but as her eyes glistened, so did mine. It hurts filling in zeros in a gradebook and to fail someone.

Sometimes I'm reading something aloud, like the end of *The Things They Carried*, where a young Tim O'Brien, in grief, dreams about his dead girlfriend, Linda, who had brain cancer. Maybe the third time I was teaching this book, while we were discussing the last chapter I just broke down. We got to the part where Tim asks Linda what it's like to be dead. She says, "I don't know, I guess it's like being inside a book that nobody's reading...An old one. It's up on a library shelf, so you're safe and everything, but the book hasn't been checked out for a long, long time. All you can do is wait. Just hope somebody'll pick it up and start reading." Somewhere in there, the words must have gotten blurry, for I could barely speak them through short breaths of my crying. Perhaps it was simply the power of a good story, or that we all want to be remembered, or that we all want to have mattered enough to be remembered. As I took a breath before moving on, Caleb, who was usually uninterested in class, said with much glee, "Dude, he is really crying." I am sure it was an unexpected sight to look up and see their six foot two teacher in a blue suit trying to hide his watery, red-rimmed eyes.

In many moments, those tears were brought on by disappointment, or an unpleasant realization, or doubt, or shame, or empathy. Or feeling rejected. Or regret. Those feelings just seemed to float to the surface like secrets in a quiet room. And I was not always ready for the reveal. It took many years before I started to accept this as part of the teaching world.

And sometimes I know I am carrying feelings within that drop right in the middle of class.

The Monday after my colleague, office mate, and dear friend Amy died began and ended in torrents of tears. I was the first to arrive in our office that morning. She had not been teaching, but her presence was still afloat in the room. I inhaled hard as I glanced at her desk, still piled with books, papers, and folders. When my colleague Rebecca walked in, mascara muddied on her cheeks, I turned to hug her, to hang on to something I knew was sturdy.

The bustle of the school day meant I had to compose myself for class. I was hoping that the business of school would distract me from grief. But when I actually had to teach, I struggled. As my sophomores waltzed in cheery and chatty, I suddenly blanked on the lesson plan. What were we even doing? I started to talk, “You probably heard that a teacher died over the weekend. She was my colleague and friend for many years. We started teaching here—” At that moment, I put a finger in the air trying to pinch time, to keep the mask of self control affixed to my face. Many seconds of silence passed. But on this day, there was only a noticeable deadening silence. If there was a sound, it was of the dust motes cascading slowing lower and lower. Oh, and my not very quiet sobs. My finger ceased to waver and fell to the desk. To get through the moment, I think I showed a movie. Even today, I can’t recall which movie.

When class ended, which I think happened without me noticing, no student said anything to me. And I didn’t address it the following day. Or the day after that. Or ever. I’ve wondered if that was a missed opportunity, a teachable moment about grief or vulnerability, that I was too cowardly to discuss. Normally, I’m pretty buttoned up, but I felt rather undressed at that moment.

I knew that Amy’s death had a powerful impact on me, but I foolishly thought I could control it. It was difficult that Monday to be raw and exposed in front of twenty-five teenagers. If I am honest, at the time I was embarrassed of my crying. I was afraid of looking unmanly or losing some authority. I was ashamed that they could openly witness me without some composure, like an actor without his costume on stage. Part of me has always feared that students wouldn’t connect with me if I was *too* much myself. But there is power in witnessing someone being unguardedly human. Even after that first year of teaching, which ended with tears, I understood that teaching is about relationships and connections. And courage. And vulnerability. And being seen.

While strange and unsettling, and certainly not something I thought would be part of teaching, these emotional moments have taught me a lot about being a better teacher. I always knew that there was showmanship to teaching—someone once commented that teachers put on 900 shows a year—but it took some time to accept how hard it is for me to keep up with the performance, how I can’t always put away my Self doing the job. Those tears have taught me that maybe I don’t need so much “show.” They have taught me how to care about more than just the intellectual and the academic. Who would have thought that the most important action sometimes would be to share a simple, honest human emotion publicly? And why not? Teaching is social and about real people trying to figure out what life is and can be. At times, I know I can take it all dangerously seriously, whether it’s a grade on an essay or a quiz, a sentimental moment in a story, or saying good-bye. But for me the only way the job matters is by making a positive impact on others. While they are alive and while you are.