

Greetings & Farewells

by WILSON McCASKILL

Early last year I had an encounter with a young teacher struggling to complete her first term at the helm of a class that was more than she had bargained for.

By her description, they were a class that if given an inch would take a mile. In her sustained attempt to be taken seriously and treated with respect she had been employing the strategy of not smiling for the first term.

The source of this strategy was a university lecturer and sadly she applied it trusting in its merit and effectiveness.

When I asked her how she might feel as a student with a teacher who was always serious and unsmiling she replied, “Well I wouldn’t like it, but that’s not the point.” “What is the point?” I asked. “That they don’t see me as weak, as easy pickings.” “And smiling would make you that?” I queried. “Everyone says they are the hardest class and you have to show them who is boss.”

The conversation continued for some time and with each question came an answer that revealed the degree to which this young teacher had subverted her personality in the attempt to keep control of her class.

When asked if all this darkness had been successful she, to her credit, admitted that the class was a constant battle, and she was sure the students disliked being in it as much as she did.

There was a lot to sort out for this once energetic, enthusiastic young hopeful and with only the morning tea break at our workshop to help, I suggested she focus on two really important parts of the school day. Greetings and farewells.

I asked her to warmly welcome her class to school everyday. To greet them with sincerity, openness and pleasure. I suggested making a general greeting followed by a few remarks to individual students to personalise the greeting

e.g. *Good morning boys and girls and welcome to another day of adventures in our classroom. I'm looking forward to what the day has to offer and I hope you are too. Mandy, I hope your dentist appointment went well. Richard, you're looking as bright as a button today and Matt, I've no doubt you're looking forward to sharing your news with us.*

When asked if she could do that, her reply was, “But supposing they had been real little sh&*s the day before?”

“Each day is a new beginning,” I suggested. “And by letting go and moving on, you model your capacity to do so, and show in no uncertain terms that you hold no grudges. Besides, you clean the slate and give them the chance to try again.”

“But I know they're going to stuff up, they always do,” she insisted.

“Then model hope and expectation and the strength to remain optimistic,” I said. A greeting affords the recipient significance. It is open and inclusive. It is a peace offering, even when no peace exists and if accompanied with a handshake, it's a proclamation of engagement without malice. Start your day with a greeting. Express your personality with the greeting and let your words convey your desire to be there working with them.”

“What if I don't want to be there?” she asked, a little teary eyed.

“Then be professional. Fake it until you make it. They are in your care and the least they can expect is your professionalism and genuine desire to help and guide them towards acceptable and appropriate behaviour. Besides you can't enjoy them or your job when you're actively being cold and colourless. Start every day with a greeting, a welcome to school, not just for this difficult class, but every class you ever teach. And mean it when you say it and never make it a throw away.”

“Won't they get tired of greetings?” Her question was predictable.

“Have you ever tired of people saying hello to you – of acknowledging your presence, of being glad to see you?”

“No, but they didn’t make a speech of it.”

“And you don’t have to either,” I said. “In your class I’d start the process off with a few obvious and well thought out greetings and then slide to greetings of different lengths that fit the moment. It might be a simple, good morning. That’s fine so long as it’s sincere and your attention is on the class when saying it.”

I continued. “If you think about it, I’m sure you’ll agree that what they have got tired of is the never-smile, no sense-of-humour teacher they have had the misfortune of encountering every morning.

To her credit she was not offended by my remark but chuckled as if a mental picture of herself had flashed across her mind.

“Farewells are very important too,” I said. “Care should be taken to end each day with a moment of acknowledgement and appreciation.”

“What if there is nothing to appreciate?” she asked. “You tell me,” I replied. “You have all had a difficult day, things have not gone at all well. It’s now 3pm and they, like you, are still there. What’s to appreciate?”

She understood. “They’re still there.” “Yes, they’re still there and with a bit of luck and courage they will be back tomorrow even if today really sucked.”

A sincere farewell, be it short or long, implies a desire to be reacquainted. It reveals the expectation of a person’s welcome return. Like a greeting it affords significance and like a greeting it is an offer of peace when you next meet.

e.g. *Well boys and girls, that was a difficult and tiring day, but we got through it. John, thank you for your honest remarks and Bobbie, I hope tomorrow works better for you. I will certainly have some things to think about tonight, but I look forward to tomorrow with you all. Have a good afternoon and thanks for sharing the day with me. Bye.*

With no time to offer any more than that, I never the less felt I had given her something significant to work on. Something that might start the release of her personality and diffuse the malignant tension between her and her students.

By greeting them and farewelling them she was offering acknowledgement and respect. There was every likelihood that her class would, to some degree, reciprocate.

Greetings and farewells are key tools for positive engagement with children. They are all-to-easy to devalue and dismiss. They can become flippant and meaningless and in some instances forgotten completely. We must all be committed to delivering them with sincerity. There are few children who do not respond to a warm “Hello” and a fond, “Goodbye.” It’s all obvious stuff to most of us, and a well-entrenched part of good teacher practice. But it never does any of us any harm to take a moment to check ourselves and with the first greetings of 2010 upon us, now might be a good time for all of us to have a little think about greetings and farewells.