

## 'Farewell!' speech to graduants of the Centre for Creative Education, Cape Town, South Africa

*Beulah Tertius-Reeler, lecturer and colleague*

Dear friends, parents, colleagues and graduants,

It is an honour to be here today at your graduation celebration where you stand at the door to a new life as a teacher.

Through your years here at the *Centre for Creative Education*, you have gone through many life changing processes on your road to becoming a teacher. Now you are standing on the brink of your career and ready for your next journey, with so much 'up your sleeve' and your suitcase filled with deep philosophical notes, classroom resources, an array of artwork and pencilled notes and reminders to keep you prepared, resilient and flexible. As Day One approaches and you've developed the lesson plans and set out the crayons and made the name tags and painted the classroom and the children and their parents finally step into your classroom, the question: 'What is my real work here?' begins.

All good teachers grapple with this question and at times the answer is clear, but most times it becomes fuzzy and hard to grasp and hold onto. With all the daily tasks and responsibilities that teachers have to deal with, knowing your real work can become overwhelming and hard to reach. Teachers often grope at the day-to-day routines and curriculum guidelines to keep them on track and focussed, sometimes losing sight of what their real work is.

When I was asked to be the speaker at your

graduation, I was in the process of packing up our house for our move to Greyton, a small town, some two hours from Cape Town. In the sorting and sifting, I came across a long-lost, but not forgotten, letter (in the form of a poem) that I received from a nine-year old when I was teaching Class Three, many years ago. This letter made me think back on my life as a class teacher and I wondered again what my real work really was ...

That young, wise and insightful child, is here today, all grown up and graduating with her teacher's degree. With her permission, I would like to use her letter to highlight some key elements which will help us look at this work of the teacher.

She wrote:

*"Once upon my best year,  
I met a teacher who was cool,  
She had a dream to help me be  
the very best of 'bestest' me ...  
So, all year through I learned,  
and teacher and mom's respect did earn!  
We were new: she pulled us through  
and gave us projects we could do ...  
I worked hard, it felt like play  
and I had fun nearly every day ...  
My teacher had us planting things  
and swimming and camping and playing on swings -  
and next thing we knew  
there were all kinds of things we knew how  
to do -  
For me what a year as I settled down  
and now I'm no longer the new girl in town*

*Class 3 was the best, Mrs Reeler my Star as she guided me gently and laughingly far – and as for my mom, she says I'm so wise for choosing Mrs. R as my school day's guide.*

*Mrs. R is a friend and so much more as she's opened for my family the Waldorf Door."*

How beautiful is that!? Children see, know and feel more than we sometimes realise and give them credit for.

Today, I would like to suggest that as a teacher your real work is four-fold:

### **1. It is about the children in your care –**

Meet the child soul to soul. This is the beginning. In this way you will receive the child in reverence. Sometimes it is hard to do this – especially when a child is challenging and seems to push all your buttons. But try to remind yourself of this every day. Work consciously on creating moments of reverence throughout your day. It will change the way that you teach and will allow you and the children to work together with a deeper sense of awe and respect.

Start with a dream, a vision for your class and for every child to be their 'bestest' best! The best of who they are and can be! When you believe in them, they believe in you – and then all work will be done out of love and a sense of mutual respect. Help them to see all that they could be and work with them work towards that vision.

Work hard towards helping them overcome any obstacles. They have a natural urge to develop and learn and so part of the real work of the teacher *is to remove any hindrances* that may get in the way of their wholesome development. Look out for these hindrances, as they come in all forms, and be

persistent in helping children to overcome them and succeed. Believe that they can and will find ways of pulling themselves through. Don't let any child slip through your fingers. Each child is a wonder and a miracle sent into your care. Your task will be to find the key to understanding and meeting each one. Make learning fun! Find the JOY! Many of them will not remember the content of the lessons, but they will remember how they felt during those lessons. It's not important to tick all the curriculum boxes – what is important is to make learning alive and joyful. You want to create life-long learners who enjoy the pursuit of knowledge, not rigid know-it-all's.

Be creative in your approach to everything – from Mathematics to Classroom Management. This will stretch your imagination and help your children to see that you are able to work 'out of the box'.

Educate the children in love but let them work hard. Khalil Gibran said that "work is love made visible." But work in such a way that the children don't feel that they are being pushed to know and do things. Entice them. When you work organically and with care, they will suddenly wake up to the realisation that they can read and spell, write stories, make clay houses and paint beautifully ... *and* argue a point clearly and with confidence.

Encourage each child to show gratitude and responsibility. These are the foundations of relationships, desperately needed in this modern time of individualism and self-gratification.

Be a guide – with humour, gentle coaxing and encouragement. Show them how things are done by doing it yourself. Be prepared. Be on time. Work hard. Say sorry. Redeem your-

self. Paint and sew and do Form Drawing in your own time. Be funny and make a fool of yourself – but don't be a fool and think it's an act. Children can see right through you.

Be a friend by building trust and relationships. In the end it is all about relationships. This means that you need to be reliable and trustworthy. You need to keep their confidences and be interested in them. You have to stand up to bullying to protect the children.

Make time to develop a relationship with each child. Create teacher-child conferences, make special efforts at camps for informal chats, make a special occasion of their birthdays, talk to them and listen. For this you need to be present – physically and emotionally. It is not enough to stand in the classroom and tick off your days on the calendar, you have to be there boots and all for all the days.

At the end of the day – look back and remember the child with curiosity and interest. You may discover many solutions to the puzzles of the day and find the next day fresh with new opportunity.

Open the door to their future – you can't go through – it's their door, but you can help them find the key – through lessons learnt from your own experience of life, your own questions, your own struggles and striving, your own search for truth ... and send them forth in freedom!

## **2. It is a family affair**

Involve the family and draw them into your work. They are co-educators. They are your best allies and support and also your most critical challengers. They only want the best for their children and so they'll challenge you to be the best teacher. Take on the chal-

lenge. See it as an opportunity to grow, not as an attack on you.

Don't get defeated. Often it is only one parent out of a group of 28 who may find difficulties with you, so keep a perspective on this. Don't let one parent affect your relationship with other parents. Often feedback tells you more about the one giving feedback. Check this. But it may be that you *do have something to learn!*

Work with warmth and openness, but set clear boundaries, not to keep parents out, but to protect your own space and at times your sanity!

Remember that you can't do this on your own. You need others to back you up and support you. The parents want to support you – so create and offer opportunities for them to do so. If parents feel that they are being held at arm's length, they will pull away or force a way.

## **3. Keep the Waldorf principles alive**

Work very actively and consciously with the Waldorf principles that you have learnt and developed. It doesn't matter whether you teach in a Waldorf or a state school – you are a Waldorf teacher.

You now understand the development of the child and how the curriculum can meet the needs and aspirations of the child. So, actively incorporate these principles into your lesson plans and teaching.

You understand the different aspects of the human being from the three-fold, four-levels, Temperaments, higher consciousness and lower senses. These are invaluable indications and tools for you as a teacher. They will enable you to 'see' and understand the child on so many levels and will provide you with a

range of lenses through which you can observe and develop strategies for teaching and learning.

Integrate these principles into your life so that your work may be imbued with imagination, courage and truth.

#### **4. Work on yourself**

Finally, but most importantly work on who you are. This is the hardest part! It asks for real commitment to yourself.

The best teacher is the teacher who is well. You cannot teach when you are not well – physically, emotionally and spiritually. So, the best gift that you can give to your class is to take care of yourself. This does not make you selfish – it means that you know your limits, you know your needs, you know your boundaries, you know your longings and you know when to have an early night.

Don't let teaching consume you. Nurture friends and interests. They will feed you and your teaching. Make time to study, to travel, to pray, ponder or meditate, to write poetry, to do artistic work, to go on hikes or walks on the beach, to visit friends, to host a party

or go on holiday. You are human, and humans need a strong inner and outer life. Try to keep this balance and it will bring you a greater sense of equanimity.

Love the time in which you live. Be contemporary. Learn about the world, stay current and fresh. You cannot grow stale and sour – but – be responsible about *how* you live in this time. The children need to be taught into the future and you need to be awake to what is being asked of you.

Make sure that you are worthy of imitation – watch your tone, your gestures and your manner. They say much more than words do.

Finally, be gentle on yourself. You will make mistakes and many days you may not get things right, but you are trying your best. So, seek help when you need it. Be honest about your struggles. Find a teaching buddy to bounce off ideas and share stories, make sure that you have a supportive mentor, ask for help, accept help and be gentle on yourself ... and in this way you will always know what your real work is.

Your lecturer and colleague