

Teacher Orientation

JIM BURKE

We will become better teachers not by trying to fill the potholes in our souls but by knowing them so well that we can avoid falling into them.

—Parker Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*

OUR WORK IS NEVER THE SAME. It makes a complex array of ever-shifting demands on us, each of which has the power to cause in us profound feelings of disorientation that can undermine our ability to do our work or experience the deep sense of purpose and pleasure we sought when we began teaching. We enter into the profession guided by a narrative we have lived, one we have waited to tell about ourselves: becoming the teacher who changes others' lives through our love of students and subject, instilling in students the love of a discipline of which we have now become a disciple. We imagine a life steeped in traditions that go back hundreds of years. During our preparation to become teachers we have been in conversation with ourselves, about who we are, why we are here, and what we will do with our lives. We are, at that point, deeply oriented, our existential compass firmly fixed on the northernmost point of our dreams. Then the bell rings. Kids come. Complexity enters. Life happens.

Our job, to paraphrase William Stafford's poem "Vocation," is to help the world (and our students) find out what it is trying to be. If it were easy, anyone could do it. But it is not and thus takes a very real toll on those who devote their lives to teaching, even as

it enriches and gratifies these same people. It is not, of course, just the demands of the work that threaten the fire within us, for this work takes place within the larger context of our lives outside of school, a sphere in which people marry and divorce, give birth to and raise children, care for and bury parents, all while tending to the innumerable mundane aspects of our daily lives that require our time, energy, and attention. If these experiences came in a nice orderly fashion, we might handle them well enough; they do not, however, have a schedule, as we learn all too soon. Indeed, too often they tend to come unannounced, suddenly, and often around the time grades are due. Let us not even get started on the list of factors at school that can further cause in us profound disorientation—unusually difficult classes, larger classes, smaller budgets, new department or school leaders eager to make their mark by replacing their predecessor's efforts with their own brilliant reforms.

Within this whirlwind of confusion that disorientation brings, we find ourselves wondering why we ever thought we could be a teacher, how we ever imagined we would have the strength and resiliency needed to endure the myriad challenges we had not known were part of the landscape of that work. We were so busy telling ourselves a story about the difference we would make in the lives of students whose names we didn't yet know that we forgot to consider that it might not be so easy, that deeper and even darker forces lay ahead, some (physical, emotional, mental problems) lurking within us, while others lay hidden in those we worked with or worked so hard to teach. Thus, especially for the newer, younger teachers among us, a few dark days can throw us into existential despair as we wonder who or what we will be if not a teacher, for so painfully disorientating can such moments of failure—to teach well, to cope with the demands of it all—be that we are left only with the seemingly unshakable truth that we are not supposed to be a teacher, for surely a "real" teacher would never have such feelings, have such disasters, fail in so many ways. All of which is, of course, entirely untrue. But there is no way around such feelings, such experiences,

only through them into some new orientation where we begin to discover and develop within ourselves the resiliency, wisdom, and courage needed to teach, lighting our way by the knowledge that being a master teacher is not a destination but a journey through a land that changes as we change, as kids change, as society changes, and as each new year begins.

How we reach this farther, elusive shore of “new orientation” is an important and urgent question. And it is here, in the desert of our disorientation, where we often wander most and feel so lost, that teachers are most vulnerable, most at risk of leaving or losing their love for the profession they dreamed of joining. It is here, as Dante writes, that people feel most profoundly that they have fallen off the path and become lost in the forest, an experience of disorientation—both internal and external, emotional and physical, figurative and literal—that they cannot resolve on their own. In *The Inferno* Dante encounters what we all need if we are to get through to the other side of ourselves and this trouble: a guide, someone who has gone before us and can lead us from where we are to where we hope to be, from the teacher we are to the one we aspire to become. It is not, for any of us, a transformation we can make on our own, though that guide need not be with us in person. Instead, our mentor may come in person or online, through books or at school. Only through this guide, this process, can we achieve the state of new orientation we seek, a state that eventually becomes, once inhabited long enough, our orientation. That is until something new comes along to cause within us, our school, or our lives a new sense of disorientation, at which point the whole cycle begins again.

Every discipline, in some real sense, should cause in each student who engages with it in earnest some sense of disorientation; what is education, after all, if not a call to question everything you think you know is true up to that point about a subject? Even the root of the word *education*, the Latin word *educare*, means “to lead out,” to draw out from within one what was there all along and, one might infer, use that to guide oneself through whatever obstacles one will face in the future.

**PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:
THE THREE Rs FOR TEACHERS**

And yet we are so often alone in our work; where and how do we find such guidance, especially the type and quality we need? We speak often of students' mastery of the three Rs: reading, writing, and 'rithmetic. And many now talk of students learning the "new three Rs": rigor, relevance, and relationships. Who's to disagree with or question any of these? They are all essential, but impossible to achieve when we are drowning in some new phase of disorientation. Instead, we need a set of three Rs for teachers, a more personal set we can learn to live by heart: reflection, rituals, and relationships.

Reflection calls for us to take time to listen—to ourselves, to our mentors—and consider what we need—for ourselves and from our guides—if we are to move ahead and regain our sense of clarity and purpose. Reflection, while personal, need not be silent or done alone. It is as likely to involve reading authors like those you find included in this volume as it is to involve writing. While you can certainly go to the café to write in a journal about what is going on in your life or your classroom, you can also meet friends there, as I so often see people do at the café I frequent, and let them be your mirror as you reflect, through discussion, on your work and life. Such reflective conversations for me often take place while going for a walk to the café near school as a colleague and I talk there about teaching, kids, and life. Nor does the writing need to take place in the privacy of a journal; it can, if one finds the right community, happen online in a community such as the one I created (www.englishcompanion.ning.com) where thousands of English teachers come to help one another solve the problems inherent in the work. It is through such reflection that teachers re-collect and re-create themselves and in the process regain their sense of direction, moving through their disorientation into the greater resiliency of new orientation.

The act of reflection is, of course, a *ritual*; these three Rs by no means exclude one another. In fact, they might be best repre-

sented as a three-part Venn diagram to visually emphasize their integration, their interdependence. Ritual can, as I have already mentioned, mean going to a place (café, meditation center, forest) and engaging in an activity (writing, meditation, walk). It can also mean engaging in activities that reinforce our commitment to our own growth and well-being: exercise, classes, church, or reading; it is during such rituals, or the practice of such rituals, that our guides can make the biggest difference, offering us suggestions about what to read or what to do, how to think, what to learn.

Finally, it is through our *relationships* with these guides and other critical friends that we achieve the growth we need to continue on. Some of these relationships are based on what they tell us to do or read. I have enjoyed a long string of colleagues, both men and women, always older, to whom I have turned for guidance and wisdom about what to read—or even just the continuing affirmation that I must read, that nothing can make more of a difference for me in terms of professional and intellectual growth. But we need more from these relationships than book recommendations! We need community, the intimacy of conversation. For years I have gone to dinner a few times a year with two women from school—one a special education teacher, the other an ESL teacher; we go to the same restaurant (a lovely little bistro in San Francisco) where we always get the same seat (which we call our “tree house,” as it is nestled away in a corner by a window). We enjoy a good meal, have a nice bottle of red wine, and then walk down to the same French café for espresso afterward to continue our talk and get some air. This ritual has sustained each of us through periods of personal and professional disorientation. And, as I’ve already mentioned, other kinds of relationships can now exist, offering a deep sense of companionship and intimacy, through online communities, Skype, and even Twitter (despite the 140-character limit).

LIVING THE CYCLE

Now that I've been teaching for 20 years, one would think I have graduated from the cycle, that I moved through it, learned the lessons, and achieved some Nirvana-like release from the cycle, settling into the comfortable orientation of mastery. I wish it were so, but it is not. This year's freshmen class is unlike any before it; little of what I have taught before is working, thus forcing me to assess and create new ways to meet their needs. Our school has just been declared a Program Improvement school, a declaration that mandates that we begin to change everything we do to meet new federal requirements no one will clearly explain to us. A new principal this year brings new ways, new ideas, some of which he shares with us, others of which he does not, and none of which show any substantial wisdom, but then what can one expect from an administrator who makes up the agenda (on a sticky note in his hand) as he stands up in front of us trying to finish the meeting as soon as possible?

I don't mean to sound a cynical note; rather, I aim only to illustrate how volatile our work can be within the class and the larger community of the school. If, despite the swirl of chaos we call our work, we are to be strong and effective, to love and to last in our work, to live to tell the story we came in as young teachers wanting to tell about ourselves, we must use the three Rs I've proposed above to help us throughout the cycle. Then, instead of getting off the cycle of our own learning and life, it will be our turn to do for others what so many have done for us, especially in those early years: guide them through the dark days of their disorientation so that they, like Dante emerging from the underworld, will see the stars and know again the beauty of the world in which they have learned to work—and live.