

Words of Wisdom, Car Cries, and the Blessing of Teaching

Adapted from a Presentation for "Shout Out: Excited about Education" (11/14)

My timing is impeccable. It seems that any time I am asked to share words of wisdom about education, about making a difference in the lives of our youth, about impacting the world for the better, something hits me...

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I AM DOING!!!

How am I allowed to do what I do!?! Because...

I DON'T KNOW WHAT I AM DOING!!!

My car --- if it could talk, could attest to this sentiment.

I can't tell you the number of times that I sit paralyzed in my car, right outside of the building where I am supposed to lead a workshop and despite lengthy preparation and extensive experience, I am asking myself,

"Who do you think you are?

You know, you don't know what you're doing, right!?!"

Just so we're clear on this!"

Other times, I just have to have a good cleansing car cry before I gather the strength to methodically put one foot in front of the other, pull it together, get over myself, and give the best of myself to my students.

Shout Out! for Education I think I am better equipped for the Cry It Out: Cry It Out for Education!...

Fortunately, in those times of distress and surrender, I find that somehow God either equips me to do what I am CLEARLY unable to do or places angels in my path to remind of the why's and what's of education.

Like just a couple of weeks ago, an angel Nikki, a young college student, who, just after one of my down and dirty, well just not pretty, car cries, found me in the hall before a workshop and exclaimed, "I thought that was you.

Just wanted to let you know that I have written a book and started a business with my Dad and I think I am going to go for it and see if I can make it out in California...and I know it's all because of your program and my experiences in it, just wanted you know that..."

Oh....

I can even recall angels from my youth who informed me what "education" can mean....

Her dance studio and her essence were filled with the aroma of orange slices – the only thing we ever really saw her ingest – in public, at least....

Her creamy alabaster skin

was bordered by a brown head band and

The precise and heavy click of her heels betrayed

her petite frame

"What are you crazy, ya!?!"

"You look a spider!"

"Stick in your po-po."

She was Lisa Boehm, and she was my ballet teacher.

Lisa was the best and we all knew it --- in fact, she let us know it --- often reminding us through insertions of her credentials throughout her class instruction.

A few months following her death in 2008, a memorial was held for her at the Elgin Public Museum to celebrate her life. After the formal ceremony, we alums reminisced about her oranges and her hair and her productions and *infamous* sayings and...

And then we shared our own our personal “where are we now?” stories. Of course, we were not surprised by the stories of her students who had gone on to dance with professional companies throughout the world – I mean, we were taught by the best...no! we were surprised by how many of us had become teachers --- and not because of that old adage, “those who can’t, teach” but because something was instilled in us in that dance studio on Villa Street –

that we needed to share what we know and what we are passionate about and that sharing was important!

And when I say “teachers” - it’s interesting how many of us are not your “traditional” teacher – I’d say we are more entrepreneurial teachers (and one may argue that any good teacher is an “ideas entrepreneur”) - one had started his own dance company, one her own studio, others started academy programs at arts high schools, another her own youth theater and dance group

And still another, a nonprofit to make sure all kids could participate in the arts –

the arts which she had been led to love by her dance teacher that smelled of oranges.

Well, then we tried to figure out “why”! Why were all drawn to education – to teach?

I know my standards for quality arts and arts education came from Lisa Boehm. And when my nonprofit Hamilton Wings began a program called SCORE! or Students Creating Opera to Reinforce Education – I wanted to offer young people, all young people, the type of high quality arts education that I had received as a child.

But like Lisa, I was not *formally* trained as an educator – so I *may have had* and admittedly continue to have missteps in my instruction. For example, it was 1999, and we were down to the wire. In days, we were going to mount the first ever student-created opera, and we were still short two songs. We were still short songs! *What have I gotten myself into – I don’t know what I’m doing! (Please refer to earlier “car cry” description.) So, this was it – this was going to be the culmination, the proof as to whether or not students could really create their own opera and that “yes” this or that foundation’s investment in this educational initiative was clearly well spent....* As Staff were supporting another group, I sequestered a small group of students to generate those two final songs. We discussed what was needed, and, as I was leaving the room, I turned back and shouted, “Create!” and closed the door.

Now, any seasoned educator worth her salt clearly knows that “nothing” inspires creativity than screaming “Create!” and then briskly exiting the room! More than ten years later, I asked one of those sequestered students, John, who is now performing on Broadway, about his memories of that particular episode. He did not remember that incident, luckily, and instead recounted memories of being challenged and excited - like no other educational or professional experience he has had to date.

Payment of therapy bills averted (for now)!

In that first group of SCORE! there was also a girl named Tatiana. During the entire SCORE! process and despite the use of various strategies, Tatiana remained shy and timid – sharing any ideas, stepping out there was just “too embarrassing!” Until it came time to audition...Tatiana kept hinting around, “What if you *want* to do something but you’re too scared to? What if I’m too nervous? What happens if you mess up? Tatiana wanted to audition for the role of the magical book – but to “go for it” was just not her. I sat with Tatiana and said, “Let’s just sing AT each other until you feel comfortable.” Her response was, “I can’t.” To which I replied, “Let’s try...” “Read me, I can help you!” “*Louder!*” “Read me, I can help you!” “*Louder!*” “Read me, I can help you!” Until we were both screaming --- I mean singing at the top of our lungs. She came in the next evening and sang at the top of her lungs with such poise and conviction that I was left ... blubbing – some hysterical hybrid of laughter and crying. *“I think I made Dr. Jones cry....”*

She did what I want for all of our students: to enter a room, say their names, and proudly and confidently share what is inside. Years later, many years after she and her family had moved out of the area, I was asked if I had any photos of Tatiana that could be used at her funeral service. She had died from emergency room complications. Sometimes, I get so saddened by this thought – her life ended way too soon. But then I think... **we had our time together**, surrounded by and in the middle of other students and passersby, *but just the two of us.* With Tatiana, taking a risk, finding her voice and singing at the top of her lungs!

Yeah...it’s more true than ever, I DON’T know what I am doing! - don't know too many educators who DO. But, for the Tatiana's in our lives, we somehow are driven (post car cry, that is) to get up, stick in our po-pos, and do what we are blessed...and proud...privileged to do...teach!

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- Risé Jones



SHOUT OUT: Excited about Education

Monday, November 17th at 7:00 pm
Kaneland Auditorium
Tickets \$5 at www.kaneland.org