

Help.
Thanks.
Wow.

It's the title of a [book by author Anne Lamott](#).

It's also exactly how I feel about being a teacher.

It's what I lean on to stay joyful and present in my teaching.

So, let's talk about HELP.

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So, let's talk about HELP.

In the book *[The Labors of Hercules Beal](#)* by Gary Schmidt, we meet 12-year old Hercules who is running the family business, Beal Brothers Farm and Nursery, with his older brother after losing their parents. He's also a middle school student at the Cape Cod Academy for Environmental Sciences, and his homeroom teacher gives him the assignment of duplicating the twelve feats of mythical Hercules and writing reflection papers.

Along his journey, Hercules realizes that he doesn't have to face his challenges alone. For every challenge he faces, there are people helping him and supporting him. There is even a moment in the story when his teachers all come together to help him deliver 125 crab apple trees for the nursery.

His homeroom teacher (though a little questionable in his methods), Lieutenant Colonel Hupfer, writes to Hercules after grading his reflection paper,

I do point out this, for what it's worth: you are not alone. You think your teachers lifted crab apple trees all Sunday for the blisters? They did it in gratitude for what you and your brother have done for the Academy, and in support of you especially, because you are our student.

We are here to help you carry the sky when you have to, and we are here to help you put it down when you need to. Why else would anyone ever become a teacher?

I think we can learn two things from Hercules Beal.

The first thing is a reminder that we are here for our students. At our very core, we are here to carry the sky for our students. We are here to help them put it down if they need to. What an amazing way to spend a life.

But also.

Like Hercules, we need the reminder that we are not alone. Our labors in the classroom sometimes leave us feeling like we have no one to turn to, and the challenges can feel so daunting.

In the book *Stillness Speaks*, Eckhart Tolle says.

Human interaction can be hell. Or it can be a great spiritual practice.

I think we can adapt that for teachers as well. Forgive me for saying this, but teaching can be hell. Or it can be a great spiritual practice. Emphasis on the word “practice.”

What I have discovered in my career as a teacher is that my attitude about this distinction makes all the difference. I think of it like this: our students are like mirrors. Teenagers especially are *terrific* at holding up the mirror and reflecting back at you a pretty tough truth about yourself. You have a choice. You can either armor up and close off. Or you can stay curious.

When we choose each day to turn towards our students with joy and with an open heart, we are given the greatest gift. The chance to know ourselves and grow in a capacity to serve others.

Note that I did not say it’s the easiest gift.

It’s not sunshine and rainbows for anyone, I promise you.

And if you look at someone and think that it is, all you need to do is sit down and ask them to tell you their stories. We *all* have our stories.

When I was a first year teacher, I had the most amazing principal, Jim Steeby. He had already had a full career and was in his retirement, but he took on one last job at Grosse Pointe North High School.

Jim drove this tiny black BMW convertible, and he was always the first person at school at 5:30 in the morning.

You might wonder how I know that...

I was an anxious wreck in those early years, and would often find myself at school, parked right next to him, around the same time, or sometimes earlier, frantic in my to-do lists. (Side note: if you are a young teacher, this is not a story about a badge of honor for busyness. I would like you all to adopt the motto of ‘work smarter, not harder’. Thank you.)

Anyhow, I can’t even count the number of times I sat in his office for a morning chat and some much needed advice.

One day, I came to him in a panic because I had gotten there at 4:30 in the morning and couldn’t get in the building and I absolutely had to have a key to the outside doors. He so kindly turned to me and said, “Mandy, there’s crazy. And there’s crazy.” And he walked away.

And I took a breath. And I stopped spiraling. And to this day, I can hear his voice when I need a reminder to slow down.

All of our stories have one thing in common. Somewhere, somehow there have been people to help us through.

In her book [Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers](#), Anne Lamott writes,

Things get a little better when we ask for help. People help us. Most astonishing of all, people forgive us, and we eventually forgive them. Talk about miracles.

May we all remind ourselves that asking for help is a sign of strength.

Let's talk about THANKS.

This January my New Year's resolution was to end every day writing a list of 5-7 things that I am grateful for. In the science of gratitude, scientists talk about "headwinds" and "tailwinds."

It's easy to let your thoughts become tangled up and obsessed with the "headwinds." These are the things that are slowing us down from what we want to do...meetings, paperwork, angry parent emails, budget cuts, drama with colleagues. Even as I'm listing all of these things, I can feel the tension in my body. I can think of all my complaints and worries and my brain wants to spiral.

Gratitude helps us actually rewire our brain to pay attention to the tailwinds.

Oh, my heart.

The student who stayed after school to help you organize the music library. The colleague that brought you coffee this morning. The former student who sends you a thank you letter. When we actively start to rewire our brain, something like magic starts to happen.

Our students feel it. We start to attract more of that feeling of expansion. Even the challenges feel like a win at the end of the day.

In the book [Coyote, Lost and Found](#) by Dan Gemeinhart, our young heroine Coyote is grieving her mother and finds herself on an adventure to find some closure and peace.

Along the way, Coyote meets a series of characters who join in on her wild cross-country bus trip. One of these folks is an older woman, Doreen who has lost her sister to Covid. She becomes a mentor to Coyote and is telling her how lucky she feels to have grown old. She says,

So when good things happen – sunsets, delicious meals, beautiful music, new friends – I think: *How lucky am I?* But, also, when those unpleasant, being-an-old-person things happen – achy knees, sore back, and false teeth – I think: *How lucky am I?* Simple gratitude, dear, is woefully underrated.

When I find myself mired down with the headwinds of teaching, I really do try and take a moment to say to myself: *How lucky am I?* I get to make music. I have a sense of purpose. I get to love kids every day and help them carry the sky.

Let's talk about WOW.

Take just a minute and think about a moment in your teaching that left you feeling wow. I'm going to give you a minute to think.

Anne Lamott tells this story:

My friend Mason, who is fifteen and has brain cancer, had a massive bleed eighteen months ago. He was in a coma and then for many months in a deeply silent condition where it seemed to me, but not to his mother, that he was brain-damaged.

One day his mother e-mailed me a video from Mason's rehab hospital in Texas, titled "Mason Singing." My heart leapt. His brother had filmed him in music therapy, sitting in a wheelchair between his mother and his therapist, who was playing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." At the end of every line, Mason would make a sound that was close to "hands," and everyone cheered. I inwardly groaned, having imagined something so different, so much better.

Later that morning I went up alone to my praying place. I called out "Hello Mother." Then I prayed for a glimpse of wisdom.

By the time I got to the bottom of the hill, I was amazed that Mason, silent for so long, had sung.

There is singing, and there is singing. Mason is back in school now.

I know that each and every one of us has these "wow" stories of students. Stories of a life changed that take your breath away and are so very private that other people may never even know. Helping a student find a job, find a therapist, find a home. A secret saving of lives in so many ways.

The "wow" moments can be small or they can be big.

The "wow" in my life that I'd like to share is the magic of my husband and life partner Jed. We would not have guessed it from our early days together, studying at Western Michigan University and then at the University of Miami (go BronCanes!): me in choral conducting, Jed in jazz writing and arranging. But life is filled with surprises.

Our journey has been both the gift of raising our amazing three children and building a home and family...AND the gift of building a choral community together.

Jed's genius is one of dreams and imagination. He truly sees people and then empowers them to dream bigger and imagine greater things.

The "wow" moments in our life together have been magnified for ourselves and our students because of Jed's wild dreams (things I would have never believed if you told me 20 years ago). A deep friendship and mentorship with the dearest Alice Parker, trips to the World Choir Games in both Cincinnati and Latvia, choir tours to Spain and Italy (and soon Croatia), collaborations with the Swedish vocal group The Real Group, and countless commissions and collaborations with living composers.

These "wow" moments, big and small, make up the deepest well of purpose in our lives as teachers. Why else would anyone ever become a teacher?