

AMY BAGBY

3. LOST WITH LITTLE GUIDANCE IN UNFAMILIAR TERRITORY

I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher; the desire began as a young child enthralled with school and grew throughout childhood and into my young adult years. I contribute much of this aspiration to the wonderful teachers under whom I had the privilege of sitting throughout my years in school. The effect that those teachers had on my life is so profound that it is difficult to put into words. The person that I am today is a tapestry woven with many strands, and each of my teachers is a thread in that work of art. I flourished academically under their tutelage, enjoying the wonders of stories, the mysteries of science, the structure of mathematics, and the glories of the arts. I also benefited from knowing those teachers on a personal level; their character and values helped shape my way of thinking. Over the years, a few individual teachers played special roles in my life, taking an interest in the person I was becoming and providing guidance in my development. I am especially thankful for the relationships that I had with my teachers during middle school, in the midst of the awkwardness and the struggles to become my own person. Often, I did not feel emotionally safe with my peers, but I could count on my teachers for support and guidance. Knowing the impact that they had on my life, I too wanted to have that effect on the lives of others, to leave a lasting impression and to encourage growth in student's lives.

I am a white female who grew up in a mid-sized city. My middle class family lived a simple and happy life. For me, K-12 schooling consisted of classrooms with people who looked like I did and had families very much like mine. Though it would have been easy for me to only circulate in a community of similar people and customs, my family attended an interracial church with a mission of purposeful cross-cultural worship. Initially, the congregation was small, with 50 to 100 people gathering on a Sunday to worship and hear the word of God. However, over the years, the church grew, and so did the impact and outreach to the community. This church had a significant impact on my childhood as well. In this congregation, I learned to love and respect men and women with vastly different skin colors, languages, and customs than my own. I felt very comfortable with people from various backgrounds and enjoyed the variety that God had created among His people. This church was very concerned with the surrounding neighborhoods and sought to find ways to provide for both the obvious physical needs as well as the spiritual needs of the people in residence. Many of my summers were spent working with the church

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on a variety of service projects: cleaning and maintaining widows' homes, sorting and organizing food pantries, and building homes with Habitat for Humanity, as well as other activities. One of the most frequent summer activities was conducting backyard Bible clubs in the housing projects of our city. We walked the streets, knocking on doors to collect children for Bible stories and activities. On several occasions, I was invited into the homes of the children in order to help them dress or grab their shoes in preparation for attending the Bible club. The world that I experienced in these homes was very different than my own. I was often surprised by the poverty in which these children were being raised, and I struggled to make sense of this disparity. I was amazed that the parents so willingly allowed their children to leave with complete strangers, and I was inspired by the eagerness with which these children entered into relationship with me, often clinging to me when our time together drew to an end. These experiences provided an education that I could not have received in a classroom.

Upon graduating from high school, I attended a liberal arts college where I experienced the wealth and breadth of coursework offered in many disciplines, as well as completing a teacher preparation program which provided me Pre-K through fifth grade state certification. As a part of this program, I was introduced to educational and developmental psychology, foundations in education, pedagogy in reading, math, science, and social studies and had ample opportunity to practice in a classroom setting. To this day, I am thankful for the teacher education program that I attended and know that they did their best to prepare me for the teaching positions that lay ahead of me. However, there were a few things that I didn't learn.

My first teaching job was finalized late in the summer of 1997, during the month of August. This was in the years before No Child Left Behind and the expectations of highly qualified teachers providing instruction within their area of certification. I have often said of this position, "They needed a teacher, and I needed a job." I was hired to teach seventh grade language arts, outside of my certified field. Having recently graduated from college and having no money, I moved back in with my parents. I was very eager to begin teaching and spent time visiting yard sales to find bookshelves, comfortable chairs, chapter books, and other items that I could add to my classroom on a meager budget. My primary goal was to make my classroom an inviting place for students, and I had dreams of afterschool conversations with individuals who wanted to hang out in my classroom looking for close connections with their teacher. However, the classroom that I was provided did not offer this inviting atmosphere. The school building was constructed into the side of a hill, and my classroom was on the bottom floor at the very end of the hallway, with one side underground. As a result, there were no windows to the outside, producing a very institutional feel. Despite my most creative attempts, the cinderblock refused to hold any type of tape or other adhesive, so most mornings, the bright maps and posters that I had hung would be on the floor. Though I was successful in relating with students during class, no one remained after school to spend time with their teachers.

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At the end of my first month of teaching, I excitedly awaited my first paycheck but was confused when my school mailbox did not include a check like everyone else's. It was only then that I discovered the county held the first paycheck for new employees and that I would receive this check the following summer. Not only was this an emotional blow, withholding a symbol of my hard work that month, but it was also financially difficult to survive another month with no pay. Despite the drawbacks, I was hopeful about what my first year would bring.

Growing up in the city, most of my experience had been in urban settings, but this neighboring county was small and very rural, consisting of two elementary, one middle, and one high school. Eager to find a job, I did not thoroughly investigate the county or school in which I accepted this position. If I had done my research, I would have discovered that the current principal of this middle school was under investigation by the state for practices that amounted to teacher intimidation. As an example of her coercive tactics, she demanded that everyone in the building refer to her as Dr. Gregory (name changed for anonymity), but she absolutely refused to refer to any other faculty who had achieved such an advanced degree by the same title. Perhaps this was an outward expression of the inward struggle that she experienced as a female in a predominately male field, but it had the effect of causing most of the staff to be resentful as well as fearful. I don't know many details about the investigation, but I do know that I was definitely apprehensive and did my best not to cross her path. Fortunately, due to the placement of my classroom, I could go entire weeks without even laying eyes on her.

The seventh grade consisted of two teams; therefore, I had a counterpart teaching language arts on the same hallway. He served as my "mentor" that year although he did little more than share with me the worksheets that he planned to give to his students. I was in over my head, unfamiliar with the curriculum and instructional strategies for this age group. Between a scary principal and an incompetent mentor, I was left to figure things out for myself. Most days, I simply followed the scripted curriculum in the textbook and looked for ways to make the content more interesting. In addition, I read several books aloud to my students, mainly because I had always loved being read to by my own teachers.

Many of the students lived their entire lives in this closed community and had not encountered people from other ethnic groups. It was not uncommon to hear students refer to the "clan meetings" over the weekend or talk about the new graffiti that had appeared on the trees and roadways, which indicated that a meeting was scheduled. Racial slurs were very commonplace, voiced by both students and teachers. One such incident, which remains etched in my memory, occurred at lunchtime. A student received some coins from a vending machine from which she had just purchased a snack. She fiddled with them in her hands for a few minutes and then placed them in her mouth. Disgusted to think of the many germs she was ingesting, I said, "Don't put those in your mouth. Just think of how many places those could have been and how many hands could have touched those coins." She immediately spit them out

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and then, with a look of absolute horror, she exclaimed, “Black people could have touched these coins!” Her concern was not an over-exaggeration for my benefit but a true fear on her part.

During this time, I was dating and soon to be engaged to an African American and often found myself worrying that someone from my employing county would find out, and I was fearful about what the possible ramifications might be. Since my daily commute was about half an hour each direction, I thought that it was unlikely that I would run into my students or their families, but I worried about how my fiancé would be treated upon such an encounter. Even though he had four years of teaching experience, I was hesitant to have him attend school events or come and help me in my classroom, fearing the reaction of my colleagues and students as well as being anxious over the way he would likely be treated. This limited the amount of help and advice that he could offer, so he was relegated to providing support from a distance.

At the close of the first grading period, I dutifully completed and submitted my report cards. The majority of my students scored well. However, I had three students whose cumulative scores were very low, even as low as 30%. Naïvely, I assumed that this was simply evidence of laziness and an unwillingness to put forth the effort required to earn higher grades. I don’t remember worrying too much about the situation until I was called into the principal’s office the following day and told that I was in danger of having a lawsuit filed against me for failing special education students. I was astonished; no one had bothered to inform me that I had special education students in my classroom, and I was too ignorant to have seen it for myself. I quickly assured my principal that I had not purposefully ignored their needs and was eager to find ways to supplement their studies so that they could succeed in my classroom. Her answer was to purchase these students third- and fourth-grade grammar workbooks. For the remainder of the year, they sat in my class and worked at their own pace through these books while I presented entirely different content to the majority of the class. No matter how successful or unsuccessful they were with this classwork, their grade never fell below 70%. Instead, I adjusted their grades to ensure that they passed the class.

In hindsight, I am completely embarrassed to think of the ways that I let these students down over the course of that year. Not only was I completely oblivious to their needs for the entire first quarter, but even once I was informed of their special education status, I still did not provide them with an adequate education. Some of this was due to a lack in my preparation to be a teacher. Though I took a survey course in Education for Exceptional Students, I was not taught how to assist special education students. My understanding was that special education teachers taught special education students, not that I was expected to also teach them. However, the majority of the blame falls squarely on my shoulders. I believe that all students are created in the image of God, and as such, each student is the bearer of attributes that are inherent. They are creative, active, purposeful, dominion-seeking beings geared

for learning by their very nature. These students were no exception, yet I did not treat them as such during that year. I denied them the ability to interact with the subject matter in a way that was consistent with their unique capabilities. Due to my lack of preparation and my inexperience, I failed to provide these three precious students with the dignity of a rich and engaging curriculum.

Sometime during the second semester, I began to read my class *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank, 1993). This opened the door to conversations about prejudice, which I was eager to have with my students, yet I ignorantly did not foresee the possible difficulties that it could present for this particular population of students. Issues of prejudice can be found throughout history, and although Nazi Germany was vastly different from American slavery, that was the closest link that these students had to the concept of prejudice. Therefore, the conversation in class frequently became about slavery in the Southern states. I found myself making the argument that slavery was indeed a bad thing while students in my class contended that slave owners were good to their slaves and that those slaves enjoyed their lives on plantations. Some of the conversations became very animated, and several students were distraught with the position that I presented.

Again, I found myself called into the principal's office. I was informed that some of the parents were angry about the discussions that we had in class. At least one parent belonged to the Sons of the Confederate and demanded that I be brought before his sergeant to answer for the comments that I had made. I was terrified. I had no idea what the Sons of the Confederate was or what it would mean to go before them. To me, this appeared to be a politically correct version of the Ku Klux Klan. Though my principal diffused the situation to some degree, she did consent to a meeting at the school. She was in attendance along with several men, one of whom showed up in a uniform resembling that of a confederate soldier. I was rather confused by the purpose of the meeting; I fully expected there to be yelling and to be made to feel as though I was leading their sons and daughter astray by my teaching. Instead, the men in attendance produced pictures of blacks in confederate uniform and told me that the slaves were so happy about their roles on the plantations that they even fought on the side of their Southern masters. I suppose that these men viewed this as an opportunity to educate me about the pleasantries of slavery. I drove home that evening in utter fear, wondering if I would arrive in my driveway to view a burning cross. Fortunately, this incident did not turn into much more, and I finished out the year in relative peace.

I did not remain at this school or in this school district the following year. I was eager to return to an elementary school and to a more urban setting. Subsequent years proved to have their own challenges; on my first day as a first grade teacher, I realized at lunch time that I had no idea where the cafeteria was located within the school building. My students had to guide me. Utterly embarrassed, I realized how important it is to have a tour of the school prior to beginning a new job. Although there are others stories that I could tell of my experiences in the classroom, nothing

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compared to this first year, when I often found myself with little guidance in unfamiliar territory.

REFERENCE

Frank, A. (1993). *Anne Frank: The diary of a young girl*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.