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The Journey of a Teacher

Rewards, Challenges, and Phases

Teaching is often referred to as a job, sometimes as a career, or even a profession, but it is far more than that: We consider the choice as a way of life, or even a way of being. The teacher's journey represents a lifelong commitment to learning, not only about your content area, grade level, curricular changes, school policy, and technological innovations, but about true passion for new knowledge and skills that make you more effective as a professional—and a human being.

It is remarkable when you consider that the teacher's journey is one of adventure. Each year we encounter new students and become a part of their lives, just as they become members of our community. We are witnesses to their joys and their sorrows. We watch as they learn, grow, and mature, as well as when they falter, make mistakes, and fail. We do our best to support, encourage, and inspire them to succeed. With our words, as well as through our actions, we model for them what is possible and what they can achieve. It is certainly through our skills, knowledge, and expertise, but also through our very presence, that we demonstrate our faith in their abilities.

We were working in a school in Southern India. This was in a lower-caste “Dalit” village that had been destroyed by a tsunami a few years earlier, adding even greater burdens to those of the “untouchable” caste that were operating in survival model. In spite of their hardships, the children loved

going to school, mostly as an escape from some pretty challenging family situations, often with the father absent trying to earn money as a fisherman or porter, or in some cases, a victim of alcohol abuse.

A group of us, all volunteers, were assigned to various classrooms. I (Jeffrey) ended up teaching kindergarten along with a college student, Monica, who was even more frightened than I was, given the vast cultural differences between us and the students. These were four- and five-year-olds who did not yet speak English, or even Hindi (I understand a bit of Nepali, which is close). Also, given our age differences, I wondered if I still had the stamina to keep up with the little ones; besides teaching college and graduate students, most of my prior school experience has been in secondary settings, although my first teaching job eons ago had been in a preschool. My partner, Monica, was terrified for a different reason in that she had minimal formal training in education and wondered how she would manage the class of rambunctious bundles of energy who were absolutely fascinated by their two white-skinned substitutes.

As it turned out, the children were so incredibly curious and well behaved that it was a dream teaching job. We knew songs and games and activities that were novel for them. We had come equipped with new books, art supplies, and even a Frisbee! Whatever we tried with the children seemed to rivet their attention, although it was difficult to tell what they were thinking most of the time. Most of all, they loved saying our names and having us repeat theirs so they could make fun of our accents.

Here was a twenty-year-old and a sixty-year-old collaborating as coteachers, although as much as possible I took a backseat because Monica was so amazing to watch with the kids. She was a natural in the sense that her love for the children was contagious. Whereas I was focused on following our assigned curriculum, teaching the alphabet, drilling them in numbers, trying to corral them to stay reasonably focused, Monica was all about validating these children who had been so neglected, abused, and impoverished that they couldn't believe that we were even paying attention to them at all.

But here is my most lasting vision of what that experience was all about—and I will remember this until my last dying breath. It was time for us to leave and move on to the next location where we would be volunteering. It had been an amazing experience but also an exhausting one in which I could barely stay on my feet. I ritually said goodbye to each child as they giggled at my mangled pronunciation of their language. I looked across the room and there was a long line of wiggling children standing in front of Monica. If you know anything about Indian culture, much less the culture of five-year-olds, you would realize that, in itself, this was remarkable. And each child was waiting patiently for his or her turn to approach Monica. She bent down and picked up each child in turn and hugged him or her in

her own arms, rocking back and forth, planting a kiss on the forehead and showing the most glorious smile. Each child felt bathed in love and seemed to float away, eyes full of tears. I watched the scene unfold trying to stifle a sob in my chest. I was so incredibly moved by the power of Monica's touch and her love that I felt as if I was in the presence of an almost mystical experience. I take that back: It *was* a mystical experience.

Regardless of whether you are a first-year teacher, a new student in the profession, or on the verge of retirement, we are all moved by instances similar to what was just described. We were challenged in ways that tested our resolve and commitment, that pushed us beyond what we knew and understood, beyond what was familiar and comfortable, and yet that provided a sense of fulfillment that bordered on ecstasy.

We all became (or are becoming) teachers in the first place because we want to make a difference in the world. We thrive on learning, not only for ourselves, but also for the students we are privileged to help. In our own modest ways, each of us is changing the world, making it better, one child at a time.

Time for a reality check, lest we get completely carried away: teaching represents the best of times . . . and the worst of times. There are days when we can't believe we actually get paid for our work, given how exciting and fun it is introducing students to new ideas and skills that they can begin to apply immediately. Yet there are other times we want to bang our heads against the wall in frustration, wondering what the heck we are even doing in this godforsaken profession that feels so unappreciated and disrespected.

The teacher's journey is filled with trials and tribulations, just as one would expect during any adventure. Much of the time we feel lost, without an accurate map or working compass. There are obstacles to overcome and adversaries to face, but also exciting and novel experiences. Best of all are the relationships we develop with many of our students, some of their parents, and cherished friends and colleagues.

THE JOYS OF TEACHING

The rewards of teaching are immediate and long-term. We get to hear students speaking a new language we have taught them, playing an instrument they had never held before, and analyzing literature in a book they have read for the first time. We observe students learning to write, multiplying polynomials, baking a cake, or creating an artistic masterpiece, as well as mastering many other objectives. We know, if not for the environments we created and the nurturing we provided, the students would not have these experiences to call their own.

We get to know students' individual differences, abilities, and interests. As mentioned in the previous example in India, our greatest source of joy

and satisfaction arises from knowing we have made a difference. We may have not reached all the children in a significant way, or even most of them, but each year it is just enough to sustain us and feed our faith in the power of teaching.

It's exciting (and sometimes frightening) to enter an empty classroom in the morning and never know exactly what will transpire. Each day is novel and different. Each group of students has its own personality. Each hour is unique. Yes, we plan, we gather materials, we know from experience what the likely frustrations will be, but we don't know precisely what the timing will be, when the "ah hah" moments will occur. Our time is never predictable. At the end of the day, when the room is quiet once again, we see remnants of what was on the boards; the initial seating arrangement; the pages in books turned; the computer screens blinking; the used pens, pencils, and other equipment, all evidence of the students' activities. We think about the great variety of people we have interacted with throughout the day—not only the students, but also other faculty, administration, staff, and parents/guardians.

In the classroom, we see students improve in their academics and athletics, but also in the social arena. We bring together students who do not know one another and who do not necessarily know how to get along to develop a community. Throughout the year, we work with them to develop communication skills, helping skills, and leadership skills. At the end of the year, if not sooner, we see the results: students who can collaborate but can also work independently.

As time goes on, former students come back to visit. They notice what is new or that we've rearranged our rooms. They tell us how their lives have changed. They share how what we did made a difference to them.

Sometimes, we have to wait a long time. Recently, I (Ellen) received an e-mail with "Are you Mrs. Kottler?" as the subject heading. My interest was piqued, wondering who was looking for me. Twenty years ago, this particular person (now married with children of her own) was a student in my class and now she wanted me to know that she had been thinking about me and our experiences together. Given that there are many days that I wonder why I still stick with this profession, given my frustrations and challenges, I was elated for days afterward knowing that all the work is sometimes so appreciated.

The tangible rewards of our profession are easy to list: a stable paycheck, benefits, retirement; pay increases based on longevity and education; stable work hours during the week; flexible time in the afternoons, especially to be with our own children; holiday and summer vacation days; and ability to call for a substitute when we are sick. Then there are all the opportunities for us to learn and grow, improving our knowledge base, as well as our skills relating to others.

As time permitted over the years, my (Ellen) “domain” has significantly expanded. Over the years, I have attended so many plays, concerts, recitals, debates, athletic events, competitions, and performances. I have visited students’ homes and places of employment. I have toured their neighborhoods and lived in their communities. I have followed them as they went to college or a university, into the military, and then on to various careers. I have watched students’ accomplishments with pride, knowing that in some small way I have been part of their journey, a guide along the way.

For some fortunate and passionate professionals, teaching is far more than just a job—it is a calling. For others it’s a way to give back to the community. Perhaps a teacher once helped them when they were in need growing up and they want to do the same for others. For others, it’s a way to contribute to the future of our society, a civic duty. Regardless of what teaching does to serve others, it does so much to enrich our own lives in a multitude of ways.

TESTS OF COMMITMENT

In spite of all the benefits and joys that accompany a teacher’s journey, there are also incredible challenges. The number of new teachers who abandon the profession after a few years is disturbing; as many as one-third within the first few years. We acknowledge there are many obstacles facing teachers today. Some are related to the classroom, others to the system in which teachers work, still others the result of larger societal issues. In some cases, there has been a loss of faith in the system itself. With greater emphasis on test scores, reduced support, and less than ideal working conditions, many teachers feel discouraged and dispirited. Stress is also exacerbated by the “emotional labor” associated with the job in which we often function in a nurturing role, with all the accompanying baggage.

Consider this very brief list of common complaints as a starting point:

- *Disruptive students.* One (or more) annoying, disruptive student seems to take 75 percent of your attention during the day and after school ends! Classroom management is an ongoing task.
- *Extent of assessment.* Administering quizzes, tests, benchmarks, grading, recording, giving feedback are all time-consuming tasks taking away from instruction. Standardized testing has changed curriculum focus and delivery of instruction. It involves teachers as test administrators requiring extra meetings to learn test protocol and duties of counting and delivering test booklets.
- *Unappreciative students.* We care so much and they sometimes seem to care so little. They are much more interested in one another than us.

- *Parents who undermine our efforts.* We spend all day working with children, doing our best to support and encourage them, and then feel helpless when they return home to the dysfunctional families that undermine our efforts.
- *Interruptions of schedule.* The schedule is constantly changing: fire drills, shelter-in-place drills, assemblies, late-start days, snow days, early-out days. There are also shorter calendars due to mandated testing, furlough days, or limited budgets.
- *Unsupportive administrators.* Some principals don't appear to understand the realities of what teachers face, or they have forgotten what it is like to be in the classroom.
- *Demanding curriculum.* The amount of curriculum teachers are expected to cover has increased. We are faced with lists of standards that are virtually impossible to meet.
- *Doing more with less.* There are fewer resources in the classroom, out-of-date textbooks or technology, and increasing class sizes. Music, art, and library programs are cut. Schools are in various states of disrepair as maintenance lists get longer and longer.
- *Toxic colleagues.* We come in contact with faculty who seem mean-spirited, rigid, and controlling, or who just don't seem to care.
- *Remaining current with technology.* We need to constantly update existing software, learn new programs, and add new technology to our repertoire. More and more the emphasis seems to be how we deliver content, rather than the material itself.
- *Social media and mobile technology.* In addition to struggles with our own technology, we must deal with all the distractions related to students' obsession with social media and mobile devices.
- *Staying current with pedagogy.* There are professional development workshops and conferences to attend. Journals and books report on results of recent research in the field.
- *Student values and interests change.* We note how quickly language changes. No longer do students "date"; they "hook up." There is more to keep up with: new music, reality television shows, and apps.
- *Policies and procedures.* The "paperwork" increases. Though we report using computers for efficiency, the number of requests for information increases and we must learn how to submit forms online. New policies are constantly implemented. Then, some policies are unrealistic when applied to individual children.
- *Familiarity of routine.* We see the same undesired behaviors as we teach the same content year after year. Even the pendulum on professional development swings back to where it began, with an emphasis on reading and math. Wait long enough and a software program will become obsolete or the license will not be renewed.

- *Personal economic reality of being unfairly compensated.* We compare ourselves to others whose jobs don't seem as critical and yet they are paid so much more (i.e., business owners, athletes). Recent cuts in health benefits and furloughs have had great impact on our lives.
- *Physical exhaustion.* It is just so draining to be on your feet all day, constantly in motion.
- *We are getting older.* The children never age and we are a year older—every year.

Reviewing this list, or others you might consider, there are many reasons to reconsider one's decision to go into teaching in the first place. It is no wonder that so many in our profession feel overwhelmed and have lost some of their initial passion and enthusiasm. Yet there are ebbs and flows in the development and life cycle of any profession and during any life journey.

LIFE CYCLE OF A CAREER TEACHER

Students aren't the only ones learning in the classroom: One of the gifts of teaching is that we are privileged to learn almost as much as our students. Every day presents opportunities to increase our knowledge, our understanding of the world—to get not only a deeper appreciation of the lives of children, but also a greater understanding of ourselves. The skills that make us effective teachers involve persuasion, explaining things in comprehensible terms, connecting with others in trusting relationships, inspiring people to work harder and reach further. Interestingly, these are the same attributes that make us better friends, family members, partners, and parents. Additional training and experience help us to become more attuned to others' needs and more responsive to them.

There is a developmental progression in most teachers' journeys in which we progress through a series of stages, increasing our abilities and skills along the way, but also facing unique challenges to be negotiated. As in any developmental model, the stages are rather fluid and hardly discrete; it is entirely possible to skip a stage, just as it is likely some people never move beyond a certain level.

Preservice Teacher: "I want to be a teacher when I grow up!"

It is an abrupt change indeed making the transition from "civilian" to a member of the corps of teachers. For many beginners this is the first time you passed over jeans in the closet to make another clothes selection. You are now addressed by title and last name. Students will ask you questions—and expect reasonable answers. Colleagues will look at you and smile in amusement at your naïveté. It's likely you spend hours observing students and teachers, visualizing yourself as the academic leader in the classroom.

You have read about discipline policies, teaching strategies, and assessments. Now it is time for the application. You feel excited, nervous, anxious, eager, but not nearly as ready as you'd prefer.

Student teaching is the time for trying on your professional role, experimenting with what it feels like to *be* a teacher. For years you have entertained fantasies about what it would be like standing in front of your own classroom. Maybe you imagined just how you would arrange the room, how you would present yourself, perhaps even how you would introduce yourself that memorable first day.

You start out slowly, writing your first lesson plans, grading papers, calling parents, taking attendance, completing other tasks as assigned by your master/cooperating teacher or instructor. You begin to teach parts of a lesson, an introduction, body, or closure working your way toward taking responsibility for a whole lesson. You meet your new colleagues and feel in awe of some of their easy self-assurance and the ways they navigate through the school; you see others who just make you shake your head at their inertia or bitterness.

This is a period of trial and error—a variety of errors. Hopefully, you have support and good supervision in place to guide you through reflection because no matter how well prepared you think you are, you feel flooded reviewing all your miscalculations and bungled efforts. You wonder how you can possibly learn all the rules of the school, much less match student faces with names. You have second thoughts about whether you made the right decision to pursue this particular professional path. Yet once the master teacher or university supervisor backs off, you are finally in charge and can't believe the exhilaration you feel. Sometimes you look around and can't believe where you are and what you're doing.

I'll never forget my master teacher. I was fortunate to be assigned to someone with so much experience—and so much patience. He first had me observe him in action and then we'd discuss what he did and why. We talked about when and how to use stories in class or when to break students into smaller groups—and how to keep them on task. He was brilliant at bringing himself into the room, sharing parts of himself, yet without seeming self-indulgent. He was human to his students and to me.

We were working in a very rural school, in stark contrast to my background from a big city. He taught me so much about getting outside myself to meet the children where they were in terms of culture and context. He was able to do this because he gave me permission to be myself in the room instead of trying to imitate him.

The New Teacher: “I have keys to my own classroom, but how will I learn their names?”

The next stage in the journey involves the transition from student to beginner. You have prepared for this awesome responsibility, but with a certain amount of trepidation. You put your organizational skills in operation, discovering that things aren't necessarily what you anticipated. Even with the best of intentions and most rigorous planning you soon learn that one of the most important survival skills is the ability to go with the flow, to alter your plans according to the moment.

Each day brings new insights as to how students function, how colleagues get along, what administrators expect, as well as your own strengths and limitations. You become aware of how many decisions and how many adjustments you make throughout the day. You realize how your mood influences others—for better or worse. You learn how to establish routines and pace yourself throughout the day to make it through the week. The good news is you become more efficient in lesson planning, more accurate in timing, more comfortable in your relationships with students. You get to know the climate of the school and make connections in the community. You find the resources that are available to you and your students and enlist the aid of others. You note the progress (including baby steps as well as giant leaps) students are making and gain increasing confidence in your role as a teacher.

But the first year is a difficult one, perhaps one of the toughest of your life. Sometimes you feel like you are in “survival mode,” trying to conquer the demands each day presents. Most of the time you feel like you have some idea what you are doing, but you still have reservations regarding whether you can continue to meet the daily expectations of what you sense will be a very long year. You may feel isolated as the only adult in the classroom with precious little time to talk to colleagues during prep periods or breaks. You try not to let others sense your doubts and fears of incompetence. You seem to catch every cold that goes around. The hours devoted to the job are long, as there are so many details to attend to. When the last school bell rings, it seems like it is five o'clock and you haven't even straightened up your desk or erased the board yet.

I remember my first year just trying to figure out my way around the school campus. I got lost constantly, not only in terms of finding my way in the building but just keeping my head above water. I'm not so good remembering names during the most ideal situation, but all of a sudden I had all these students who expected me to know who they were, plus all the staff in the school. My head was in a fog.

On top of that, my students came from backgrounds that were so different from what I was used to. There were all these schedules and activities going on in which everyone seemed to know where they were and where they were going next, everyone but me. All I wanted to do was just stay in my room and catch up on the mountain of grading assignments I had to do. I'd skip lunch altogether or just grab something at my desk. I think other teachers thought I was antisocial or something, but it's just that I was so overwhelmed I had to get my head together during some quiet time.

When I did go to the staff lounge, I'd sit there quietly trying to figure out who were friends with whom. There are all these different cliques and coalitions, and I wanted to stay out of the school politics as much as I could. But that was a mistake, too: I didn't realize at that point how important it was to start networking and building my own support system. It took me another two years before I started to feel really comfortable in my job and gained the confidence to feel like I knew what I was doing.

The Proficient Teacher. "I can't believe I get paid to be with students all day long!"

Sometime between the third and fifth year, most teachers develop a sense of competence and increased confidence. By this point you anticipate what students' behavior will be like and what misconceptions they might bring to the table. You have enough experience to be able to compare student behavior in a broader, normative context. You not only have developed a system to be able to predict and anticipate difficulties, but you've accumulated a repertoire of coping strategies. If your first attempt to deal with a student's crisis, discipline problem, or critical incident doesn't work out, you are prepared to try Plan B, C, or D.

You can sequence instruction in a meaningful way. You are comfortable with the curriculum and have resources to support your teaching strategies. Your assessments give you the information you need about student learning, plus you draw from all the behavior you have observed during the preceding few years. When you feel stuck—which still happens with regularity—you know to whom to turn for help.

You have become more skilled at pacing yourself, realizing you need periodic time-outs to socialize and replenish your energy. In some ways, you may feel a little bored with the routines that have already become entrenched and may yearn to branch out into new areas, take on a new grade level, or teach a different class. You have found opportunities to become actively involved in extracurricular activities in the school, whether in the arena of clubs, sports programs, or service projects. You begin looking for other ways to broaden your horizons and tackle new challenges that will keep you fresh.

It sure is a great feeling to reach that point where I know what I'm doing. I have established a reputation that I'm proud of, that I've worked hard to develop. I've got plenty of friends in the school; in fact, it's interesting how so many of my relationships have changed since I've become a teacher. I prefer to spend time with other teachers because we have so much in common and share so many of the same experiences.

What is most interesting is now how some of the new teachers are seeking me out for advice, just like I was doing just a few years ago. I am by no means an expert, but I do feel like I'm pretty good at what I do. Students trust me. I don't have to prepare so much for my classes now that I have developed the ability to improvise as things unfold. I used to spend hours planning each lesson, each class period; now I just have a basic outline I follow, but I'm fully prepared to go in different directions depending on student interest. If only we didn't have so many of those tests we have to administer I could really have some fun!

I'm also getting to know the families in my school zone. The longer I stay in the district the more I have a second, even a third child from a family. More and more students approach me to show me photos of what they're doing or tell me about what's new in their lives. I especially get a kick out of it when a student calls me "Mom," forgetting for a moment who I am. I prefer to think it's because they find me nurturing.

The Veteran Teacher: "I'm really good at this."

After many years of teaching (or doing anything), you eventually become an expert of your domain, especially if you are reflective about your work and driven to become more effective at what you do. At this stage, you are well aware of the strengths you bring to your job, as well as having learned ways to minimize some of your weaknesses. You know how to motivate even the most reluctant and disengaged students (with varying degrees of success).

With seniority and experience come new opportunities to expand your repertoire. You become more involved in leadership roles, mentoring new teachers, revising the curriculum, advocating on behalf of issues you consider important. You may choose to take on administrative roles, return to a university for further education and advancement, or otherwise keep abreast of new trends through attending conferences or professional development workshops. Perhaps you'll be stimulated to contribute by conducting your own research and writing about it or developing educational resources for other teachers.

With years of experience you also face a new challenge: operating in autopilot. You never want to become like some of the other veterans you've known who appear so burned out with their jobs, waiting out the years until retirement. Your perspective now allows you to see more of the big picture in education. As your own family and social contacts continue to grow, you

have also diversified your life so that your job is not as all-encompassing as it once was. Whereas you don't have to work so hard any longer, the timing is perfect because you no longer have the energy you could access in your youth. You've discovered efficient ways to get things done, and you no longer worry so much about the annoying little things that plague beginners.

You have attained a degree of wisdom such that others now see you as a mentor. People come to you more and more often for advice or input. They see you as having power, even though you may not often feel that way yourself. You have reached the pinnacle of your career and it feels good to know what you have accomplished, all the lives you have touched, the generations of students that you have influenced.

I think what I enjoy most after all these years is how my school has become a second home. My "teacher friends" are extended family to me. We have shared milestone experiences with each other, some good, some not so good. Together we watch our students grow up and become young adults.

I feel so comfortable walking the halls, at ease with all the movement going on around me. Sometimes I just stop and look around, shaking my head at all the things going on at the same time—lockers being slammed shut, kids talking and jostling with one another, everyone in a hurry to get somewhere or do something before the next bell rings. I just take a deep breath and remind myself how lucky I am to be part of this whole scene. I remind myself of all the hard work it took for me to get to this place in my life and career. I know what I do looks easy to others, but they really have no idea what I had to do to feel this way.

The Waning Teacher: "I know what I am doing."

Teachers in this stage are at the end of their teaching career, whether it was a brief or long tenure. You are very comfortable with what you do and appreciate the rhythm of the year. You know each stage of forming groups in classes will pass. Just as in the beginning of your career, the cycle begins anew: It seems like it takes a lot of energy to get through the day. You notice people ask if you need help carrying things, moving the seats, or picking up supplies; people treat you like you are old even though you still feel like you're thirty (except when you look in the mirror). You may feel less willing to share your extra time with others since you have other priorities going on in your life. You may feel more than happy to leave school as soon as possible at the end of the day to go home and rest, or take care of other things that interest you more. It isn't so much that you are disengaged from school activities as you are content to let the next generation take over. You may not agree with some of their priorities, but you are willing to let them take charge and put your energy elsewhere.

Among all the stages in the teacher's life cycle, this one might be the most diverse in terms of the way it is represented in a given teacher's life. The template just described may not apply at all to some senior teachers who strenuously object to the idea that they are "waning." On the contrary, some teachers don't find their stride until they hit their sixties or later. Rather than feeling on the periphery, they use their experience and wisdom to become even more involved in the profession, not only within the local community but perhaps on a national scale.

I think over the years, one thing that I learned that has been most valuable to me is how important it is to remain flexible. My favorite times in the classroom are not when I'm doing something I've done before but rather when my students and I are cocreating some experience I've never imagined before. I love my job most when I depart from my own agenda and move into new territory. I'm frankly bored with my own stories, doing the same things the same way, year after year. No wonder some of my colleagues burn out, since they are basically reliving the same experiences over and over.

I've developed a degree of trust in myself, and in the students. I always have a plan, a fairly detailed one at that, that I can adapt in many different ways, depending on the students, their mood, their interests, their readiness. Rather than thinking that every class is the same, I've learned to be more humble and less certain about some things. I try to treat each student, each group, as unique. I look for surprises—and welcome them when they occur—rather than feeling upset when things don't go as expected. I think most of all, the kids teach me so much: They keep my young! I plan to keep teaching until I fall over—or they put me out to pasture.

The Burned-Out or the Bored-Out Teacher: "Another day, another dollar."

Here is another variation on the theme just described. Despite the efforts to acquaint teachers with the realities of the profession, continued teaching is not a good match for all of us. If teachers don't develop their skills from building relationships to time management to advocating for change, or are not motivated to keep improving, it seems as if the stress overwhelms them or their enthusiasm diminishes significantly. Such teachers may withdraw, refusing to attend meetings; or they may become outspoken, using cynicism as their weapon of choice. They find other reasons to complain, badmouthing everyone to anyone who will listen, including students, parents, other teachers, administrators, superintendents, and the school board. They can't figure out what led them to be a teacher in the beginning of their careers. These teachers become people to avoid, and whereas you might know some who fall into this category, they would never be reading a book such as this; in fact, they stopped reading and learning some time ago.

They put in minimal effort in the classroom and see little achievement as a result. They tend to blame others for their problems and externalize their disappointments: “These kids today—they just don’t care”; “It’s not my fault they did so poorly since they never study”; “It’s not my fault; it’s this damn system that’s so screwed up.” Such individuals feel pessimistic about the future and contemptuous of those who are thriving. They may sense that they are out of date and out of step, but they are tired of change being the constant in their work lives. They resent new innovations in technology or pedagogy, complaining that things aren’t nearly as interesting now as they were in the good ole days. Unfortunately, their negative attitudes can become contagious, so they are isolated even further by those in the school who happen to love their work and adore the students.

FINAL REFLECTION

As you reviewed the stages in a teacher’s life cycle, you placed yourself in approximate location of where you see yourself in your own career, whether just beginning the journey or in the latter stages. We suspect you wouldn’t be reading this book in the first place unless you were hungry for new stimulation, novel ways of conceptualizing your work and its meaning.

There is always a danger in any developmental stage theory to gloss over individual experiences that are so different from what is supposedly normal. Regardless of your own personal rewards from teaching, as well as the particular challenges you face at this time, there are so many opportunities to enrich our professional experiences. While it certainly helps to become exposed to new technology, learn new teaching strategies, master additional content areas, and broaden your knowledge base, we hope to focus more specifically on the human dimensions of our work—the power we hold to inspire others not just by what we know and what we can do, but how we live our lives. It is through our relationships with students that we make the most difference in their lives—as well as feel the most satisfaction from our work.

ACTIVITIES AND APPLICATIONS

1. How did you first decide to become a teacher? This was most likely not a choice that was made in single moment of inspiration but rather a decision that evolved over time—and is continuing to change as you gain more knowledge and experience. Reflect on how your motives have remained fairly stable or have changed over time.

2. Shadow a “master teacher” for a day, not just anyone so identified, but rather a professional who you *know* has extraordinary skills and exceptional talent as a function of her or his vast experience. Observe how this teacher handles the myriad responsibilities that arise during a typical day. Discuss with this person how he or she remains energized and engaged, even after all these years.
3. Consider your current stage of development in the life cycle of a teacher. Compare your own feelings, thoughts, aspirations, and ambitions to those described in the chapter. Use your imagination to project yourself into the future ten years, during which time you will have moved through many of the other stages.
4. It may feel daunting to consider all those things you will learn in the coming years, but it is also true that you have already accomplished so much to get to where you are now. Make an inventory of your achievements about which you feel most proud.