“The Teacher”

“I have learned silence from the talkative, toleration from the intolerant, and kindness from the unkind; yet, strange, I am ungrateful to those teachers.”

-Khalil Gibran-

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While attending school as an elementary student to a university student, I was taught by many teachers. Even after college graduation, I worked 10 years as a teacher myself. This lifelong experience brought me into the presence of many teachers and led me to think about the qualities that a teacher should have.

Before I ask myself the question of what makes a good teacher, I wonder what kinds of teachers students need. My first rule of teaching is to be understanding and kind. The second is to give students at least one opportunity to laugh. These seemingly-easy rules are sometimes difficult to follow, even for myself. However, I chose to follow these rules as much as possible because of firsthand experiences that I had while I was a student.

In 1979, I was a fourth grader at Gaeryeong Elementary School. The school band teacher, Mr. Lee, was notorious for being emotional and irrational. One day after school, I was heading towards the practice room. However, a senior student told me practice had been canceled, which is why I shortly went home afterwards. The next day, this led me to be punished. I believed it was unfair and reported to the teacher that I went home since practice was canceled. He yelled at me for not checking with him beforehand, the teacher in charge. He hit my hands multiple times for disobeying and arguing with him. I never corrected a teacher again, in fear that I would get punished.

I have seen many teachers around me who believe their authority as a teacher must be respected absolutely, even by students. They often do not allow any exceptions of any kind, to all ages. I believe young students in the elementary level should be taught, not yelled at or chastised. Also, teachers should keep their personal emotions from work. If the school band teacher had been more generous with me, I would have a good memory instead of a bad one.

I have many childhood memories involving one teacher or another. Since I was a minor as well as a student, I often think that I was in unfair situations. I couldn’t converse with teachers the way I can now, as an adult and a teacher myself, although growing up hasn’t kept me from meeting incredibly unkind teachers.

Looking back, I remember those who gave me discomfort, and those who influenced me greatly.

In summer 2006, my family and I crossed the Atlantic Ocean to move to Toronto, Canada. My husband had relocated, and the company required him to go there. Since we were in a new and strange environment, my children and I were often frustrated since we couldn’t express ourselves as much as we could in our mother tongue. I decided to listen to an ESL course, to learn English more.

The instructor’s name was Tom, and he was a very strict teacher. He didn’t allow any students to lose their focus during his lecture. He scrutinized all of the students’ movements and called for a 100% attention. Although it was exhausting, his class helped me get used to the Canadian environment. I remember he didn’t allow students to lose attention even for a second during his lecture, but outside of class he was a very shy person who gave kind smiles every time we ran into each other in the street.

In my memory, Tom was a great person who was deeply dedicated to us to learn English. However, his class was so strict that I sometimes felt suffocated there. In my opinion, it’s not so bad to give students an easy atmosphere. Instead of slacking, I find that it greatly influences their moods and when spirits are up, people often excel at their work.

Many experiences in my life have given me opportunities to reflect back on my learning and teaching. Even though Tom was a strict teacher, he respected his students. Moreover, all of the students, including myself, were adults. Unlike children, we were there voluntarily because we wished to learn. Malcolm Knowles said “Adults are autonomous and self-directed.” I believe Tom was so strict and pushing because he understood that we wished to learn English, enough to dedicate our time and money. His class could have been better without the tense mood, but it was a class that I enjoyed very much. My career with young students also helped me through this course. I now believe I can understand students as well as instructors. After I complete this course, I aspire to be a better teacher who can sympathize with students better.