Do Not Mistake the Quiet for Apathy

This week, I read a piece in NPR about supporting introverted students, which was also covered in The Atlantic. It’s something I’ve both written about as a teacher and struggled with as a person, so it inspired this letter.

Dear quiet ones,

I see you.

I know sometimes it feels like I don’t. You imagine—perhaps with a tinge of loneliness, or maybe with a small flicker of joy only you understand— that you fly under the radar. In a world that seeks the spotlight and thrives off the cries of the exuberant, it’s easy to let yourself get lost (purposefully or not).

Sure, it might seem simpler that way. It’s tiring enough having to sit day in and day out in a world that thinks your voice is only worthwhile if you are willing to snatch the mic off the stand without hesitation. You are in a society that too often forgets that there is “zero correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas.” You wonder if your unwillingness to speak is some kind of sign that your thoughts are best left alone, quiet birds nested in your chest whose soft song only you hear. You worry that because their melody is softer, it lacks the excitement of those who speak often and assuredly.

The thing is, I know I was and, perhaps, still am one of the people who perpetuate that belief. Initially it was out of fear during my first years in the classroom. I desperately sought allies in a war I thought I was fighting (spoiler: there was no war; the sides were in my head) and looked immediately to those who caught my attention “in positive, engaged ways.” I sought “energy” and “excitement” in my classroom, and while those words sounded nice, they didn’t reflect the best learning environment for everyone.

Now, I occasionally make the mistake of buying into the charisma hype. Wait, that’s not right; your charismatic classmates certainly have something to bring to the table. The mistake we make is believing that there is a singular “culture” in my classroom. We fall into the comforting idea that once I’ve gained a handle on “culture,” I suddenly know everything about and can teach to the specific needs of all my students.

That’s an easy lie we want to believe. It makes us think that, as teachers, we just need that one idea or silver bullet to make our job easy or do better by you all. Even when well-intentioned, we are often tempted into the belief that “flipping a classroom” and being “project based” or will suddenly, magically fix everything.

I know that’s not true. Don’t get me wrong, I know that this serves some of your classmates and the worlds they come from.

I just think that many of you understand what it means to grow, live, and love quietly. I know that, for some of you, silence was never a sign of apathy or misunderstanding, but a safe space shared and created among your own families and culture. For many of us, silence was the place to show our strength and respect for those around us.

This doesn’t mean I think those in our classes are misguided when they exuberantly shout to the world; I only mean to say that I should not falsely assume that because you are the same grade or gender or race as other students means that you all need the same thing.

So, here’s what I promise: I promise to work harder to see all your individual, unique selves. I promise to better understand how I can create parts of our classroom that don’t treat you as a monolith, but rather as multi-faceted and wonderful as all of you.

All of you-- every single one of you as my students-- are such marvelous, nuanced beings. I promise to do better to not just create space that helps those of you who revel in the company of each other, but seek resources to help make places for you quiet ones who find your song is at its most lovely when it is kept as a gift for yourself or a select few around you.

Most of all, I will not mistake your silence, your quiet moments, for apathy. I will do better to not just provide you safe space to learn,
but learn to celebrate and nurture you as you are right now. I will do my best to show you that, quietly, I adore you. I see you, and I am in awe of you.

I hope you see yourself that way too.

With love,

Ms. Torres

Image via author.

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