

Hats off to our Teachers

A couple of weeks ago, we welcomed back our teachers the week before school began. The day began with a Mass, and I used a story from a collection of teachers' stories. The story was told from Adela Anne Bradlee, called "You Elevated My Spirit," and was about her first day of school in 1960.

She writes how they sat in their crisp, new school clothes, hands folded in front, fidgeting slightly. Finally, the 9'o clock bell resounded through the halls and classrooms announcing the beginning of a new school year.

The seconds ticked away as they waited for their new teacher to enter.

Your grand entrance, Mr. Barlow, she writes, was worth the wait.

They watched him dash in, long wavy hair flowing behind him, leather tassels hanging off each suede sleeve. A white 10-gallon hat crowned him, a relic of an era gone by or maybe yet to come (for this was after all 1960). Removing the cowboy hat in a sweeping motion, he bent at the waist and raised himself upright. With a baritone laugh, he smiled and twirled his handlebar mustache.

"My name is Mr. Barlow," he enunciated resonantly, then proceeded to write it on the board. Slapping chalkboard dust off his hands, he perched on the corner of his desk.

"Now tell me who you are and your favorite thing in the world," he said.

One by one, the kids mumbled their answers, not knowing quite what to make of their new teacher. He taught the whole day, never explaining his get-up. They found themselves smiling through geography, science, math, English and penmanship.

When they walked in the next day, he was in the same outfit and greeted each of the students by name: "Hello Suzy, who loves her Barbie dolls. And aren't you Tommy, who has three GI Joes?" As quickly as Mr. Barlow learned the kids names, he learned their strengths and weaknesses and they always found the positive in the kids.

Even, Adela reflects, Catherine. Adela had known Catherine since the first grade. She would walk into a room with her head down, then slink into her chair to become invisible. The teachers rarely called on her because she broke out in tears when she didn't know the answers. That was usually the case in math. They were studying their times tables when one morning. He proceeded to ask her her favorite number, and she said "9". He then said it was his favorite too. And when he asked her what number she should like twice as much, she thought and said 18, which he said he liked twice as much. On and on they went, and Catherine the math phobic suddenly found multiplication tables were not too scary.

Adela also remembered clearly the day Mr. Barlow taught a lesson to Dennis, the class clown and occasional bully. Dennis had mercilessly teased a classmate, unaware Mr. Barlow had witnessed the unacceptable behavior. The kids held their breaths waiting for the teacher to put a end to the cruelty.

“Stand up, Dennis,” he said sternly. Startled, Dennis quickly collected himself and laughingly got up. “Repeat after me,” he continued. “I am ashamed of myself for making Mary feel bad.”

Denis repeated the sentence with a grin on his face, causing some of the class to giggle uncomfortably.

A few seconds later the bell rang, and the students were astonished to watch the usually unfazed Dennis slump into his seat, put his head in his hands, and sob in loud, gasping heaves. No one was more astonished than Mr. Barlow. He rushed to the side of Dennis while the other kids herded to recess. He consoled him, and was there for him, and then when the kids came back, he demonstrated another important lesson: humility.

He turned to the class “As you know, I embarrassed Dennis earlier today. I want all of you to know that I am very sorry. No one has the right to shame another person. If I had a problem with the way Dennis was acting, I should have spoken to him in private. Anyway,” he smiled to lighten the mood, “we’ve both learned something today, haven’t we Dennis?” He winked at Dennis who turned scarlet and covered his face, his eyes shining brightly through his fingers.

All of the kids, Adela notes, seemed to excel at something in his eyes. And Adele says she got to follow in his footsteps. Not though by becoming a teacher.

What he gave her was confidence and a belief in herself; and as for why he was dressed that way, it turned out he was in a community theater production of “Annie, Get Your Gun.” He helped lead the class into a production of “Cinderella” with Adela playing the lead - and her reflecting he’d never make it as a casting director. But she left that class prepared for life to be a more confident, self assured person who recognized her gifts.

Such is the power of teaching.

As we begin this new school year, I’m reminded of the incredible dedication of our teachers here at Saint Joseph’s. It’s an honor to work with them, and they care so much about the welfare of the students. They work hard to prepare for class, to get to know the students as individuals, and to help reach all of the kids teaching them not just the subjects, but life-long lessons like Mr. Barlow - lessons such as humility and admitting to a mistake; of loving one another as God has loved us; and of remembering that each one of us has gifts.

This is a great time of year to reflect on teachers and how we too are all teachers.

For one, we can pray for them. So many work so hard because they truly care about the kids.

Second, we can go the extra mile for one another. So many teachers exhibit empathy and concern; like Mr. Barlow helping Catherine through being creative and giving her his time, when we see people hurting, in need, or fallen away from the faith or making some bad choices in their life, we can not give up on them.

Third, we can strive to have patience. How hard that can be in life especially with people. But great teachers realize it takes time for gifts to emerge. As God is patient with us, may we be that way with one another.

Lastly, we can remember that we are all teachers through our baptism and confirmation. We are essentially walking signs of the faith. So how do people know we are Christian? What do our actions say about our faith? This is especially true for parents, who are the first and primary educators of their children as they strive to help them become saints.

As with any profession, there are plenty of teachers who are not Mr. Barlow. You've had some most likely; a teacher who may have been frustrated, burned out, or difficult. I've only had a couple that seemed to really be in the wrong profession. But I've also had a lot of great ones who cared about me, and helped me believe in myself and find gifts that I never knew were there. Our teachers are such a gift to us. And, maybe I'm biased, but our teachers here, led by our amazing principle Mrs. Kelly Roche who taught in the classroom for many years herself, have created a very special place where I see the amazing work of the Holy Spirit every day through them.

Our school year is off to a great start at Saint Joe's, and hopefully if you have school-age children, it's going great for your family too. The school year is a marathon, as is life, and as it goes on may we pray for our teachers, support them, and if you have kids work with your child's teacher and try to be a team, and never forget we share in the ministry of teaching through how we show the world through our words and actions the meaning of our faith.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul