

## If Only...

I received a call towards the end of December, 2008. It has been 10 months since that call and I decided to write this as a reflection of that encounter.

I was in Durban, South Africa ... in my hometown ... on my turf ... where most of my family and a few of my friends live. One morning, the phone rang and I answered. The voice I heard seemed to be a poor imitation of a woman's voice. And so suspecting that it was one of my friends pulling a joke on me... I played along. I said: "Oh hi, sweetheart, it has been such a long time... I miss you sooo much and lie awake at night thinking about you. I miss your touch and sweet words ..." Surely this was going to get back at my friend and we were supposed to have a good laugh about it.

Then my 'friend' answered: "It's so good to hear your voice, Paul. It is Mrs Abraham.<sup>1</sup> It has been quite awhile, twenty years I'd say. It's also good to hear that you haven't lost your sense of humor..." At that moment I apologized profusely. This former teacher of mine called *me*. I was blown away. In the three years that I spent at school, seeing her every day, she did not have a personal conversation with me, let alone know my telephone number (I don't blame her... we had no telephone, anyway).

She invited me to visit her in her home. I agreed. Together with my wonderful wife and challenging children I entered her home. We were received kindly and with so much care. My children were impressed at how I got along with my teacher. It was a wonderful meeting. We laughed and talked. My children just *clicked* with my teacher and her family and they were engaged for quite awhile.

1

Then it happened. My teacher, with tears in her eyes asked me to forgive her. Had she known, she would have treated me with a little more positive attention, etc. She had read my book, *The Wheelbarrow Kid* (an inspiring book, if I may say so...). It was recommended to her by another school teacher who has been negotiating an appointment for me to speak at my former school.

I was embarrassed. I did not know how to respond. I was unprepared for that moment. My children and wife were with me which made it a little more awkward for me to respond. I wanted to hold my teacher, who is now an elderly woman and just whisper in her ears, "It's okay, everything is going to be alright..."

When I was at school, had she known that I came to school almost everyday without lunch? Had she known that I came from a home with alcoholic parents and some nights I slept in the nearby sugar-cane fields with my mother and siblings... Had she known that I had come to school without breakfast... Had she known that I could not afford a pencil... Had she known that I lived in foster homes, children's homes and places of safety and detention... Had she known that I had only one school uniform... Had she known that I have been crying through the night... Had she known that I did not do my homework 'cos I was not at home... *if only she had known!*

If only she had known, she would have treated me differently. As my teacher spoke to me, tears welled in my eyes. With no feelings of anger, hatred or revenge, I embraced my teacher. Oh, how I wished I received that hug from her as a boy in school. How I wished for my teacher to 'talk' to me.

I have no doubt that she cared at school, but she wished she did much more... and ten months since that call, I too wished that she did a little more. Now that I had become a writer, I received a lot of

attention, now and again. How I wish that my English teacher had read my essay and encouraged me to write more instead of saying that I should rewrite it. How I wished that my mathematics teacher had said that I had an aptitude to understand theorems. How I wished that my teacher would have said that I was going to be somebody someday somehow. How I wish...

That experience with my former teacher opened my eyes to the realities of life. I can only imagine how many other children, especially in South Africa, wish to hear a gentle, caring word from their teacher. How many children hope to have a teacher spare a minute and pray with them? I can only imagine how many children would love to hear, "That was a good attempt...I am proud of you... well done."

In spite of all that happened to me, by God's grace, I turned out alright. I can only say that had it not been for God on my side, I have no idea where I would be today. So I am grateful to God for His hand in my life, in spite of my childhood circumstances.

I have travelled to many countries and know that I have influenced thousands of lives. I have produced a series for international television, recorded another, and will complete the next in a few months time. I just wished my teacher could have said, "I always knew you could do it... and am so proud of you and happy that I had something to do with it..." Instead she said, "If only I knew the potential you had and had an inclination then about the person you would turn out to be, I would have treated you differently..."

And that brings me to the motivation and purpose behind writing these words.

Dear Teacher, you have no idea what potential lies dormant in every child that you teach. It is better to assume the best and treat them as if they are blessed with tremendous potential, for indeed they are. Don't react, but respond to the behavioural challenges you experience with your students. If only they see that you believe in them, they would change. I know because I have asked hundreds of children to confirm this. That young boy who is disruptive in class may not necessarily be suffering from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), so don't recommend Ritalin to his parent. Just give him *your* attention!

I plead on behalf of the thousands of children in our schools, in your school. Don't allow your personal challenges to flow into your classroom. Please don't allow your marital, emotional and physical challenges to prevent you from giving of your best and bringing out the best in each child. Not everyone will be as lucky as I am. Twenty years later, you should be proud of your contribution to the lives of men and women who will be shaping their world. Don't live with regret; be prepared to celebrate the accomplishments of your students.

I wish I could meet you and share this personally, but please take heed to my plea, and treat my younger brothers, sisters and children in your classrooms with Godly love and care. They are not machines to be oiled, but living, breathing, full-of-life-and-energy individuals, waiting for you to love them. Love them I say, love them, as God loves you!

Maybe the rules of teaching do not allow you this freedom. Then to hell with any rule that prevents a teacher from showing care and concern for her learners.

My friend, Dr Edward Roy Krishnan, an education specialist, has this to say:

"When students realize that the teacher is interested in an issue that they are concerned about, the gap between the teacher and students is significantly reduced, and a neutral, stimulating,

positive platform for teaching and learning is created. Students feel comfortable to take an active role in the learning process without feeling like they were being pushed or unreasonably forced.

Studies in brain processing (storing and retrieving information) reveal that there is a strong connection between reason (cognition) and the three-pronged elements required in learning – emotion, activity, and meaning. Scientists have discovered that the same areas of the brain that are involved in processing emotion are also involved in processing memory. The connection is so strong that reason, emotion, and bodily sensations and functions affect each other at neurological levels. Emotion activates attention, the primary and most vital component of any learning or information processing act, which then triggers the short-term and long-term memory, and eventually makes the overall learning process possible. In other words, learning does not take place at optimal level in the absence of emotional arousal. Apart from being responsible for initiating and activating cognitive processes, emotions are also responsible for behavioural responses of individuals.

Since the relationship between emotion, cognition, and motion is inevitable and real, it is necessary for teachers to get students to become emotionally involved, before initiating teaching and learning. When students are emotionally captivated in the initial stage of learning, the chances of them paying attention is significantly increased. Increased attention enables students to be highly engaged (mentally and physically) and hence gain maximum benefit from whatever is taught or discussed. The more emotionally engaged a student is, the more likely he/she is to learn. Furthermore, having positive and favourable feelings toward a task (academic or non-academic) helps students to feel that they have done the task well. Similarly, when they experience negative and unfavourable feelings toward a task, they experience difficulty.

3

Allowing students to talk to each other about non-academic matters, before or in-between lessons, is an appropriate teaching practice. Instead of depriving students of their basic social need to interact and feel good about being connected with one another, teachers might want to consider taking a more progressive approach in harnessing the emotional gains that accompany such a practice. The best learning takes place when a positive feeling toward a task enables students to use what they already know, motivates them to extend that knowledge and build on it, even to the extent of constructing new knowledge. Casual talking with peers allows students to experience a positive emotional arousal, which serve to improve their own learning. This is true at psychological, as well as, neurological levels.” [His work can be viewed at [www.affectiveteaching.com](http://www.affectiveteaching.com). His e-mail address is [edwardmsia@gmail.com](mailto:edwardmsia@gmail.com)].

I want to share a story with you, that someone shared with me. It is about Kyle.

One day, when I was a freshman in high school, I saw a kid from my class was walking home from school. His name was Kyle.

It looked like he was carrying all of his books. I thought to myself, "Why would anyone bring home all his books on a Friday? He must really be a nerd." I had quite a weekend planned (parties and a football game with my friends tomorrow afternoon), so I shrugged my shoulders and went on. As I was walking, I saw a bunch of kids running toward him. They ran at him, knocking all his books out of his arms and tripping him so he landed in the dirt. His glasses went flying, and I saw them land in the grass about ten feet from him. He looked up and I saw this terrible sadness in his eyes. My heart went out to him. So, I jogged over to him and as he crawled

around looking for his glasses, I saw a tear in his eye. As I handed him his glasses, I said, "Those guys are jerks. They really should get lives."

He looked at me and said, "Hey thanks!" There was a big smile on his face. It was one of those smiles that showed real gratitude. I helped him pick up his books, and asked him where he lived. As it turned out, he lived near me, so I asked him why I had never seen him before. He said he had gone to private school before now. I would have never hung out with a private school kid before. We talked all the way home, and I carried his books. He turned out to be a pretty cool kid. I asked him if he wanted to play football on Saturday with me and my friends. He said yes. We hung all weekend and the more I got to know Kyle, the more I liked him. And my friends thought the same of him. Monday morning came, and there was Kyle with the huge stack of books again. I stopped him and said, "You are gonna really build some serious muscles with this pile of books everyday!" He just laughed and handed me half the books.

Over the next four years, Kyle and I became best friends. When we were seniors, began to think about college. Kyle decided on Georgetown, and I was going to Duke. I knew that we would always be friends, that the miles would never be a problem. He was going to be a doctor, and I was going for business on a football scholarship. Kyle was valedictorian of our class. I teased him all the time about being a nerd. He had to prepare a speech for graduation. I was so glad it wasn't me having to get up there and speak.

Graduation day, I saw Kyle. He looked great. He was one of those guys that really found himself during high school. He filed out and actually looked good in glasses. He had more dates than me and all the girls loved him! Boy, sometimes I was jealous. Today was one of those days. I could see that he was nervous about his speech. So, I smacked him on the back and said, "Hey, big guy, you'll be great!" He looked at me with one of those looks (the really grateful one) and smiled. "Thanks," he said.

As he started his speech, he cleared his throat, and began. "Graduation is a time to thank those who helped you make it through those tough years. Your parents, your teachers, your siblings, maybe a coach... but mostly your friends. I am here a story to tell all of you that being a friend to someone is the best gift you can give them. I am going to tell you."

I just looked at my friend with disbelief as he told the story of the first day we met. He had planned to kill himself over the weekend. He talked of how he had cleaned out his locker so his Mom wouldn't have to do it later and was carrying his stuff home. He looked hard at me and gave me a little smile. "Thankfully, I was saved. My friend saved me from doing the unspeakable." I heard the gasp go through the crowd as this handsome, popular boy told us all about his weakest moment. I saw his Mom and Dad looking at me and smiling that same grateful smile. Not until that moment did I realize its depth.

Never underestimate the power of your actions. With one small gesture you can change a person's life, for better or for worse. God puts us all in each other's lives to impact one another in some way.

As a teacher, you were intentionally placed in the path of every child in your class. Consider the significance of being placed by God in your classroom, to impact the life of every student we interact with.

My plea is that we have too many teachers who are experts in their subject material.

Dear teacher, your subject matter is not primarily the content of books but young individuals waiting to be discovered. ***If only*** ...we would realize this.

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***Not everyone could or should be a teacher... so if you are ...  
then God has a purpose in positioning you in the classroom.***

***Remember :***

***Effective teaching is done by affective teachers***