

In 2016 when I'm reading this again, I recall that I first heard it early in my teaching career that began over 50 years ago. It always puts a lump in teachers' throats, but it also speaks to everyone about perceptions we have, judgments we make too early. It also shows us what kindness can accomplish. It shows us what perseverance can accomplish. It shows us that better late than never is important when positive changes are needed.

My students always loved this piece; it appeared in many anthologies.

Three Letters from Teddy

Elizabeth Silance Ballard

Teddy's letter came today and now that I've read it, I will place it in my cedar chest with the other things that are important to my life.

"I wanted you to be the first to know."

I smiled as I read the words he had written and my heart swelled with pride that I had no right to feel.

I have not seen Teddy Stallard since he was a student in my fifth grade class fifteen years ago. It was early in my career, and I had only been teaching for two years.

From the first day he stepped into my classroom, I disliked Teddy. Teachers (although everyone knows differently) are not supposed to have favorites in a class, but most especially are not supposed to show dislike for a child, any child.

Nevertheless, every year there are one or two children that one cannot help but be attached to, for teachers are human, and it is human nature to like bright, pretty, intelligent people, whether they are ten years old or twenty-five. And sometimes, not too often, fortunately, there will be one or two students to whom the teacher just can't seem to relate.

I had thought myself quite capable of handling my personal feelings along that line until Teddy walked into my life. There wasn't a child I particularly liked that year, but Teddy, was most assuredly the one I disliked.

He was dirty. Not just occasionally, but all the time. His hair hung down low over his ears, and he actually had to hold it out of his eyes as he wrote papers in class. (And this was before it was fashionable to do so!) Too, he had a peculiar odor about him which I could never identify.

His faults were many, and his intellect left a lot to be desired, also. By the end of the first week I knew he was hopelessly behind the others. Not only was he behind; he was just plain slow! I began to withdraw from him immediately.

Any teacher will tell you that it's more of a pleasure to teach a bright child. It is definitely more rewarding for one's ego. But any teacher worth her credentials can channel work to the bright child, keeping him challenged and learning, while she puts her major effort on the slower ones. Any teacher can do this. Most teachers do it, but I didn't, not that year.

In fact, I concentrated on my best students and let the others follow along as best they could. Ashamed as I am to admit it, I took perverse pleasure in using my red pen; and each time I came to Teddy's paper, the cross marks (and there were many) were always a little larger and a little redder than necessary.

"Poor work!" I would write with a flourish.

While I did not actually ridicule the boy, my attitude was obviously quite apparent to the class, for he quickly became the class "goat" the outcast; the unlovable and the unloved.

He knew I didn't like him, but he didn't know why. Nor did I know then or now, why I felt such an intense dislike for him. All I know is that he was a little boy no one cared about and I made no effort on his behalf.

The days rolled by. We made it through the Fall Festival and the Thanksgiving holidays, and I continued marking happily with my red pen.

As Christmas holidays approached, I knew that Teddy would never catch up in time to be promoted to the sixth grade level. He would be a repeater.

To justify myself, I went to his cumulative folder from time to time. He had very low grades for the first four years, but no grade failure. How he had made it, I didn't know. I closed my mind to the personal remarks.

First grade: Teddy shows promise by work and attitude, but has poor home situation. Second grade: Teddy could do better. Mother terminally ill. He receives little help at home. Third grade: Teddy is a pleasant boy. Helpful, but too serious. Slow learner. Mother passed away end of the year. Fourth grade: Very slow, but well behaved. Father shows no interest.

"Well, they had passed him four times, but he will certainly repeat fifth grade! Do him good!" I said to myself.

And then the last day before the holiday arrived. Our little tree on the reading table sported paper and popcorn chains. Many gifts were heaped underneath, waiting for the big moment.

Teachers always get several gifts at Christmas, but mine that year seemed bigger and more elaborate than ever. There was not a student who had not brought one. Each unwrapping brought squeals of delight, and the proud giver would receive effusive thank-you's.

His gift was in the middle of the pile. Its wrapping was a brown paper bag, and he had colored Christmas trees and red balls all over it. It was stuck together with masking tape.

"For Miss Thompson, from Teddy", it read.

The group was completely silent and for the first time I felt conspicuous, embarrassed because they all stood watching me unwrap the gift.

As I removed the last bit of masking tape, two items fell to my desk: a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with several stones missing and a small bottle of dime-store cologne, half empty.

I could hear the snickers and whispers, and I wasn't sure I could look at Teddy.

"Isn't this lovely?" I asked, placing the bracelet on my wrist. "Teddy, would you help me fasten it?"

He smiled shyly he fixed the clasp, and I held up my wrist for all of them to admire.

There were a few hesitant ooh's and ahh's, but as I dabbed the cologne behind my ears, all the little girls lined up for a dab behind their ears.

I continued to open the gifts until I reached the bottom of the pile. We ate our refreshments, and the bell rang.

The children filed out with shouts of "See you next year!" and "Merry Christmas!" but Teddy waited at his desk.

When they had all left, he walked up to me, clutching his gift and books to his chest.

"You smell just like my mom" he said softly. "Her bracelet looks really pretty on you too. I'm glad you like it."

He left quickly. I locked the door, sat down at my desk, and wept, resolving to make up to Teddy what I had deliberately deprived him of---a teacher who cared.

I stayed every afternoon with Teddy from the end of Christmas holidays until the last day of school. Sometimes he worked alone while I drew up lesson plans or graded papers.

Slowly but surely he caught up with the rest of the class. In fact, his final averages were among the highest in the class, and although I knew he would be moving out of the state when school was out, I was not worried for him. Teddy had reached a level that would stand him in good stead the following year, no matter where he went. He had enjoyed a measure of success, and as we were taught in our teacher training courses, "Success builds success."

I did not hear from Teddy until seven years later, when his first letter appeared in my mailbox.

Dear Miss Thompson,

I just wanted you to be the first to know, I will be graduating second in my class next month.

Very Truly Yours,

Teddy Stallard

I send him a card of congratulations and a small package containing a pencil gift set. I wondered what he would do after graduation. Four years later, Teddy's second letter came:

Dear Miss Thompson,

I wanted you to be the first to know. I was informed that I'll be graduating first in my class. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Very Truly Yours,

Teddy Stallard

I sent him a good pair of sterling silver monogrammed cuff links and a card, so proud of him, I could burst.

And now - today - Teddy's last letter.

Dear Miss Thompson,

I wanted you to be the first to know. As of today, I am Theodore J. Stallard, MD. How about that!??

I'm going to be married in July, the twenty-seventh to be exact. I wanted to ask you if you would come and sit where Mom would sit if she were here. I will have no family there as Dad died last year.

Very Truly yours,

Teddy Stallard

I am not sure what kind of card one sends to a doctor on completion of medical school and state boards. Maybe I'll just wait and take a wedding gift, but my congratulations can't wait.

Dear Ted,

Congratulations! You made it, and you did it yourself! In spite of those like me and not because of us, this day has come for you. God bless you. I'll be at the wedding with bells on!