



A Letter From Margaret

By Margaret Wharram

Peggy Bennett recently found this letter in one of her office files. It was written by Margaret Wharram who lived in Wheatly, Ontario and who had a gift for teaching students with special needs. She was friend, colleague and mentor to many member of Music EdVentures. This letter shows the passion and wisdom possessed by Margaret and, although it was written nearly 20 years ago, it seems as current and important today as it did then. Margaret passed way in July of 1995.

Dear Friends,

As school is about to begin, my thoughts are with the many friends I have met over these years. Here are a few thoughts I felt compelled to share. I hope some of them will be helpful.

There will be youngsters in our classes whose behavior will make life more difficult for us. Several years ago, I realized that as I entered a notoriously unmanageable class, I was the picture of self-pity and misery. My body language and facial expression showed that I feared and disliked these students. Any thoughts about them were only in relation to my own distress. They, in turn, reacted appropriately to these messages. I had conscientiously prepared my lessons to make learning as easy as possible and felt that that should have elicited gratitude and good will. It didn't. They needed more than an impersonal teaching machine.

It was late in the year when I realized what was happening—too late to reverse the direction completely but I tried and felt better because of it. It had been a hard lesson but I had learned it well. I found it helpful to consciously construct a mental picture, one at a time, of some of the most troublesome students and think positively about this student as a person, about the problems he might have in his life. I did this as I drove to school and before entering a classroom.

Perhaps one of the vital things we can do is to reflect upon the inevitable misbehavior and unkindness and decide how to receive them. We can take every bit of misbehavior as a personal insult causing us to feel hurt and unjustly treated. Or we can decide to view this behavior objectively as symptoms of inner

difficulties, recent crisis and/or present uncertainties. Hopefully, we will choose the later. This is an important decision but it is only the beginning. A great deal of effort may be required to train oneself to think in this way. When entering the classroom we should be conscious of our body language and facial expression. The students should see that we are interested in them as people. Not just in their lessons.

Perhaps this is a time for personal remarks while we move through the room preparing to start the lesson. We must look for these opportunities because there are so many students. I can start as simply as a, "Good morning", to one student in hall. We must not be discouraged by a lack of response or by rebuffs. They are not directed at us but at the world in general. It is easy to understand how a frail little girl in kindergarten could be afraid but what about the tough guy in grade 7 or 8. Society places so many demands and restrictions on our youth. Toughness is very often a front to cover up insecurities that they dare not reveal. This behavior is evident even in very young children.

We make allowances for ourselves when we are feeling badly but we sometimes fail to acknowledge to a child that he too has a right to feel sleepy, sick, sad, worried, or preoccupied by excitement. After a moment to air his problems it is much easier for him to get on with his work

A teacher has been described as a responder. In order to respond one must first perceive and interpret. Here are three main areas where these should occur. Perhaps there are more.

1. Perceive, interpret and respond to the ideas of the children.
2. Perceive, interpret and respond to the level and speed of their learning.
3. Perceive, interpret and respond to the behaviors exhibited by the students.

By responding to any behavior, we increase the chances of it reoccurring. Thus by responding positively to the kinds of behavior we want, we can increase them and crowd out less desirable kinds. Long-winded scoldings consume valuable class time, interrupt the flow of the lesson and accomplish little of nothing in improving behavior or class rapport. Worse still, such scoldings satisfy the mischievous tease and the child who is starved for attention. In others, they may nurture bitter stubborn attitudes toward school and authority in general.

While following all the rules of positive reinforcement to build better tomorrows, the teacher may feel like a punching bag on which "X" number of students are working out their frustrations unless she uses other techniques as well. Sometimes a child needs to be "awakened", and we must survive too and so occasionally some form of punishment, such as removal, must be used. There

should be as little fanfare as possible. We should be firm, matter of fact, even pleasant while making it clear that we won't accept that behavior.

I recall one grade 8 student who had to be removed from an assembly in the gym. I accompanied him to our home room where I made up a review of fractions. I assigned 2 or 3 questions from each process in his text. If he had difficulty I helped him and assigned a few more/ if not he went on to the next process. At the end of that half hour I had a friend for life instead of an enemy and with no more effort. In addition, my own mental and physical state was much better than if I had chosen the anger-punishment routine. We often have the choice of being helper or punisher.

As teachers, we are often led to think that we must make every encounter into a battle, so that we can win it and "show who's boss." Unfortunately, one can win all battles and still lose the war.

If we try to make every lesson look perfect on the surface, we may be teaching only for today, but it is for tomorrow that we should teach today. It seems better to slowly, carefully, purposefully lead children to develop self-discipline than to keep them under thumb-pressure control. This has been compared to the slavery system. When the slave is set free he has not been prepared to cope with freedom and so chaos develops. We must try to give whatever outer control is needed but continually direct our efforts toward prevention and correction of wrong attitudes, belligerence, resistance---toward building good foundations for tomorrow.

Persons usually behave in the way others expect them to behave and so if students are treated as "the enemy" they too often comply by behaving that way. Let's make sure there is room for them to join our side.

Sincerely,

Margaret