

Her Wiseness Martha Graham

I just got back from my second Inner Resilience workshop, I feel like I have so much to say...

Perhaps it is best to start with someone else's words?

A Message from Martha Graham to Agnes DeMille

*There is a vitality, a life force, a quickening
that is translated through you into action,
and because there is only one of you in all time,
this expression is unique.*

*If you block it,
it will never exist through any other medium
and be lost.
The world will not have it.
It is not your business to determine how good it is;
nor how valuable it is;
nor how it compares with other expressions.
It is your business to keep it yours, clearly and directly,
to keep the channel open.*

*You do not even have to believe in yourself or your work.
You have to keep open and aware directly
to the urges that motivate you.*

*Keep the channel open.
No artist is pleased.
There is no satisfaction whatever at any time.
There is only a queer, divine dissatisfaction;
a blessed unrest that keeps us marching
and makes it more alive than the others.*

I feel like we, as teachers, are forced to spend SO much time "determining how good it is" (especially in report card season!) and comparing one with the other and telling the kids what of theirs is valuable and what is not. (Even despite all the emphasis on DIFFERENTIATING INSTRUCTION! they all end up taking the same STANDARDIZED TEST in the end... sort of makes all that differentiation talk sound a bit disingenuous, no? Not to mention how kids who have spoken English for one year are graded on the same scales as those that have spoken nothing but English for their whole lives...)

I think the current trend in education views teaching as scientific, empirical, formulaic... say the right words in the right order at the right time, input the right data into the program, adjust the controls, and get the output that you damn well expect and paid good money for!

But I think anyone who's ever tried teaching (or even witnessed it) would agree it's not like that. The processes of teaching and learning are very irregular and amorphous, and no one (not even experts like Doug Lemov, who was featured in this weekend's thought-provoking New York Times magazine article) seems to be quite able to put their finger on what it is that makes a Good Teacher.

In truth, I feel it is just as much art as it is science, if not more so. And that is where we, as teachers, get to connect to Martha Graham and her cohort... that unattainable-ness, the drive, the never-endingness... the "divine dissatisfaction" and "blessed unrest that keeps us marching"

applies, too, to my daily project, that Flow of the Day that I am incessantly crafting and re-shaping and perfecting and collapsing... Like art, teaching is never DONE, there is never a finish line (only checkpoints, but as soon as you reach one, new ones appear on the horizon). It is never perfected, nor, I suppose, should it be... like art, it is about striving, it is about imagining it always a new and better way, finding the right balance or seeing something there you never saw before, imagining it again anew and, like Martha, keeping on marching in hopes of becoming more alive than you have been before.

The other part that spoke to me was the part about not having to believe in yourself or your work, but rather, trusting the urges and motivations that brought you there.

There are, sadly but truly, so many occasions during the course of my workweek where I think to myself, *wow, this is really stupid*, or *what a dumb way to waste everybody's time!* But rather than dwelling on the more irksome details of the myriad of daily duties, I think an important survival skill is forgetting all the bullshit and letting it roll off your back, and instead remembering why you're there... the urge to try and DO something, dammit, and the motivating force of the kids, with their big eyes, looking up at you expectantly, trusting you with both the pretty and gritty daily details of their lives.

Skipping in the halls

OK, maybe this is just the hippy-dippy touchy-feely new-age crystal-holding incense-sniffing-chakra-aligning spirit-totem-Earth-Mother-worshipping womyn in me talking, but I seriously looooooove the inner resilience program. It goes like this:

Eat free snack!
Moment of silence
Choose an image and explain why you were drawn to it today
Light a candle
Read something meaningful and talk about it
Meditate
Journal
Talk to someone for two minutes/listen to someone for two minutes
Write a letter to yourself
Blow out a candle
Eat free dinner!
Pack up leftover free dinner in take-out containers to become following day's free lunch!

It basically makes me feel like a better person and also want to be a better person. And it makes me appreciate the people in my life who already DO make me a better person, like Corky who let me spontaneously sleep over at her apartment last night to make sure my report card comments got done even though it was late and I was tired, and then dressed me and bought me breakfast for no reason at all... Or my roommates, I'll call them Harmony and Rose, who heroically cleaned the fridge today since it needed to be done, and who make me eat more kale.

A welcome transformation happens when I go to inner resilience... I feel capable of appreciating more and griping less. I feel confident, capable, balanced. I can focus on accomplishments and not aggravations. I become a different person. A better one? A mindful one?

At school, I spent the afternoon walking around with a knot in my stomach... too much time scrutinizing the data of deficiency, I suppose; a case of the Mondays coupled with anxiety over Math Topics Yet to be Covered...

And by the way, if you were wondering if testing is a disease and whether or not it fucks with your head, it is and it does. Because when the wonderful and benevolent and kind Ms. A, the school librarian, called to notify me that we had library (and as usual, it had slipped my mind) my response wasn't delight at this unexpected windfall of precious unstructured, joyful book-worship. My initial response was more expletive in nature, calculating ways I could make up for the math pages that would now be undone, and lamenting the empty boxes besmirching my spreadsheet for small group instruction.

And something about that just ain't right.

So leaving school wasn't easy while feeling the grains in the hourglass sliding by just a little too briskly as this week's Big To Do built up a head of steam. Cutting out early from Inquiry Planning felt like skulking away into the shadows, shirking my duties, disappointing my fans.

But I sometimes think of my life as a pie chart, with my time split among all my various roles as teacher and student and sister and daughter and colleague and friend and occasional athlete and wanna-be writer (and everything else that I wish I could be, and certainly would if I just had More Time...)And sometimes I have to elbow the other pie pieces out of the way in order to gather up a little more real estate for the slice designated... well, Inner Life Liver (hah, liver!), I guess, or Caretaker of Myself or Seeker of Peace or something silly like that...But yeah, whatever it's called, this piece of the pie is special. Maybe it should be marked only with a symbol like the Artist Formerly Known as Prince...

Anyway, Inner Resilience Workshop is for that slice of me that doesn't really want to be named.

It is so great because it is a place and a time when I can stop self-censoring, monitoring my speech and my actions, stop searching for the most Appropriate Response, stop measuring and doling out emotions and ideas in easily digestible bite-sized tidbits, reduced and refined for ease of consumption.

It is a space that exists for Me and My Needs, and I can talk a lot or a little. Or I can choose not to speak, or to take a few extra minutes to finish something and not worry about how I will make up for them later on. I can lie down or sit or stand or walk or not. Fast or slow, loud or soft, off or on...it's all good. I don't have to worry about whether I am running off schedule, or whether I am correctly following the Architecture of the Mini-lesson or veering away from the acceptable protocol for one-on-one vs Small Group communication.

There, I am not right or wrong. I am not pedagogically sound and I don't have to be. Nor must I be efficient or effective or organized or responsible or even sensical. I am allowed to feel what I feel, say what I want, be what I am in that moment. I am speaking for myself, as myself, to others who understand me and do not wish me to be other than I am.

And finally, there also do I learn of tantalizing job openings in Manhattan schools where conference notes and massive assessment binders do not darken the desks; where sustainable agriculture can be a unit of study; and where students are allowed to skip (not run) in the halls...