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Mid-Term Exam Assignment

Ray,

Thanks for stopping by yesterday. I have enjoyed your studious appetite for knowledge in class, and I am equally enjoying getting to know you and learning more about you. I appreciate your trust and hope that I can be of support to you as you navigate through making this decision. I thought a lot about our conversation and your reservations about your dad's idea of trying out for the soccer team. As I said yesterday, I can't (and even if I could, wouldn't) tell you what to do. Not only is that not my role, but it would be unfair since I am not the one who will be affected by your choice. I view my role as a teacher not necessarily to instruct students on what to think, but rather helping them learn how to think.

As humans co-existing together, I think one commonality we all share is the desire to be valued and accepted. I heard yesterday that you want your dad to acknowledge your efforts in school more, to appreciate your love of literature, and realize the positive impact that has had not only on your academic success, but your growth as a person. But let me ask, who bought you those books? Who took you to the library on the weekends? Sometimes our expectations of people don't always match our reality precisely, but that doesn't mean they aren't meeting them. By his actions, does your dad show you that he is proud of you? Still, every now and again we feel the need to have that validation verbalized, so how might you achieve this? Keep waiting for him to say it one day when you come home from school? Have you ever asked him directly? What do you think he might say? And to continue you down this path of thought,

have you ever told him that you are proud of him?

I want you to take a second and imagine yourself as a character in one of the fantasy novels you are reading. You know that the inciting incident is where the protagonist is faced with a choice or a set of circumstances that will ultimately change the direction of the story. Have you considered how your situation would play out in a book? Often the main character is pushed (sometimes unwillingly) into a situation that they were not anticipating or expecting. Then through the rising action, they grow, develop, and always learn something about themselves or the world around them. What happens if the character chooses not to engage? The story doesn't go very far. If you were reading your life story, what would you hope happens next?

Sometimes, new things can be scary. We worry about what others will think of us or that we might fail. But remember in class how we celebrate failure. You all looked at me like I was crazy the first time we did it, but think about why we do it. We celebrate failure because we are one step closer to the answer. We are better prepared for the next problem. We learned. Now, I don't believe your dad wants you to fail, but I do think he is hoping to challenge you, to expand your identity, and to expose you to situations you never thought to see yourself in before. And maybe that doesn't have to be soccer. Maybe there is something else that could accomplish this. But like you said, it is something that he is passionate about, and it sounded like you enjoyed playing the sport outside at recess in elementary school. Now to be clear, I don't think we should just do things just because other people want us to, but I do wonder what the benefits of choosing soccer might be. Could it help your relationship with your dad? In what ways? What other benefits come from playing soccer?

As you know, we can learn much from reading the stories of others, so I want to give you some passages from "Hand-Me-Down Dream" by George Dohrmann. It is an essay about a father and son and their complicated relationship over basketball. Their situation is very different from yours, but as you read the passages I selected, you will probably relate to the pressure that Roberto (the son) feels to please his dad by playing basketball. However, I want you to pay even more attention to the dad's perspective. Try to ask yourself why the dad might pressure his son? What were his past experiences that influenced his actions? My hope is having you think and reflect on what your dad's point of view might be could help you to see a different side of the situation.

Take some time to reflect on all this and then, if you want to talk about any new thoughts or ideas that come up, my door is always open. I will leave you with one last idea - and it is a sports metaphor (which seemed fitting). "You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take." - Wayne Gretzky. Ray, I am here to help support you - whatever you choose.

Mr. C.

Calling them "father and son" never seemed accurate. The order was wrong. Roberto came first, and he was all that mattered, so much so that the son usurped the father and became the head of the unusual family.

On the surface, Bruce filled the paternal role. He worked three jobs, including part-time as an assistant coach for the basketball team at Santa Barbara High. He monitored Roberto's grades and he occasionally disciplined his son, although one got the sense that Roberto agreed to be punished only for the sake of appearances. Bruce was merely the titular head of the family, and

his happiness was so bound to Roberto's basketball career that it gave the son enormous power while also saddling him with an unfair burden.

"My dad, you know, I'm all he's got." Roberto said. "I need him. I do. But he needs me more. You know what I'm saying? It's like I'm all he's got, and so I gotta make sure he's okay."

I first met Roberto when he was twelve years old playing basketball on an AAU team.

Roberto was more mature than the other boys on the team, on the court and off, and as I got to know Bruce, as I witnessed his dedication to his son, Roberto stood out even more. Many of the boys were hampered by a lack of guidance, typically the absence of strong male figures in their lives. Not Roberto. Bruce had his faults, but his presence seemed to ensure that the pitfalls that claimed many talented kids would not ensnare Roberto.

Bruce was tall, gloomy man, with deep, sad eyes. His failings as a player and then his inability to land a head-coaching job at one of the area's high schools - mostly because he did not have the required teaching credential - weighed on him mentally and even physically. He walked hunched over and had pain in his legs, and he appeared much older than his fifty-five years.

Roberto's rise as a player and the attention it bought his father by associating brightened Bruce's mood, but his happiness was so tethered to the dream that there were few things he couldn't view as a threat. He worried about Roberto's decisions to also play football ("What if he gets injured?") and how he practiced with the golf team ("That is time he should be in the gym"). In general, Bruce griped because Roberto didn't live and breathe basketball. Bruce almost never missed a Los Angeles Lakers game on TV and watched college games on ESPN late

into the night. He read many of the recruiting letters that came to the apartment, and he talked with any coach who called the house, even those from universities that Roberto was not considering, like Utah and Clemson.

Roberto, in contrast, did none of the above, and this was a constant source of bewilderment for Bruce. "Sometimes, I just don't know about Roberto," he would say, shaking his head. "Why doesn't he take this basketball thing seriously?"

The suggestion that Roberto didn't take the game seriously was a gross mischaracterization. During a game, no player cared more than Roberto. Several college coaches cited his determination as one of this most alluring attributes. "You can teach a kid the game, but you can't teach heart," one said. "That kid's got heart." Bruce would concede that his son competed with a ferocity that great players possess, and yet when Roberto chose to go to a movie or to the golf course instead of to the gym, or if he just ignored a letter from a college coach, Bruce would rant as if his son had imperiled his future.

Analysis

This was so much harder than I thought it would be. I have had students come to me with problems or seeking guidance, but perhaps not with this level of specificity or this directly. I enjoyed the challenge, but it certainly gave me pause. Perhaps the format was challenging too. Speaking with a student is much more conducive to my mentoring style as I am able to ask them questions and build the conversation based off of their responses. However, writing a letter provided a different format - one where I could reflect on my advice before giving it and carefully craft those questions.

My approach for writing the letter was to not offer my opinion directly. I wanted to help Ray think through his options and offer some ideas about the situation that he may not have thought of. By scaffolding some metacognitive tools for him to use, he could better reflect on his own ideas. For example, having him connect his situation to a main character in one of his fantasy books would help him to visualize his situation from an outsider's perspective, giving him a new vantage point to view the problem and hopefully gain new insight. This approach is also supported by Chinese teaching culture in that it helps to support the student's problem solving through scaffolding sociodramatic play. While Ray isn't acting anything out, I did have him take his "issue... and weave it back into [his mind's] play to enrich the complexity" (Tobin, 2009, p. 70), providing him with a deeper understanding of his situation.

Emphasizing choice was also important to me. Like my American teacher colleagues, I believe choice is an integral component not only in school, but in life. Recognizing that we have choice provides us with a freedom and awareness that we don't have to accept what is. Granted, certain choices have undesirable consequences, but the power of choice still remains.

In Ray's situation, he had a choice to make and helping him recognize that it was indeed a choice was important. Even when one side of the spectrum was being influenced by his dad (a parental authority figure), he still had a choice of playing or not playing. This is important because "choice also fosters intrinsic motivation" (Tobin, 2009, p. 195), and if Ray went into soccer feeling forced or that someone made the choice for him, his chances of enjoying the sport or it being a positive experience are significantly lessened.

I also wanted to stress that choice making is not easy, and often one path can be scary because it is new, unknown, and we fear potential failure. Fears can often prevent us from taking risks, but it is in those situations where we "force [ourselves] to do the thing [we're] afraid of in order to overcome [our] fear. But if [we] never go through that process, the fear can turn into a phobia" (Rosin, 2014, p. 14). For Ray, I stressed the value of failure, framing it in a positive light to help minimize the fear of it. It was my hope that this would help him to "manage [his] fears and... arrive at [a] sound decision" (p. 14).

Contextualizing the situation in terms of his relationship with his father I felt was also important. Giving him the passages to read and having him reflect on his dad's perspective provided some very strong potential for him to recognize gaps and find ways of working to fill them. When reading "Hunger of Memory" I was heartbroken at how distant Richard became with his parents (especially his dad). As Ray is a second-generation Mexican-American, and subject to some of the same socio-linguistic conflicts as Richard, it was important to build this situation in the context of it being not just about choosing whether or not to play soccer, but choosing to build a relationship with his dad.

Recognizing this is a hypothetical, I still find myself very invested in the outcome of Ray's decision. I think this simply highlights the important role that teachers play in the lives of our students and the value that developing authentic relationships with them can have on their success as learners and people.

Resources

Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger for memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez: An autobiography*. Boston, MA: D.R. Godine.

Rosin, H. (2014, April). *The Overprotected Kid*. Retrieved July 15, 2016, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/04/hey-parents-leave-those-kids-alone/358631/>

Tobin, J. J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.