

## Pass It On®...

### Sometimes, Quiet Listening has the Power to Save a Life

For most of us, teaching seventh-grade English would be akin to an eternal assignment teaching flying monkeys to sit still. Just thinking about it, we might feel Dorothy's terror at being carried away. But not for Miss Smith.

For 40 years, she stood in front of her classroom, tapping the blackboard where an inspirational quote was drawn neatly in D'Nealian cursive. "Open your notebooks and write," she would instruct. If a student was late, she would simply say: "Write about why you are tardy." The content and style didn't matter. It was the connection of thought to paper that was the aim.

If you scribble long enough, those thoughts will turn into feelings, and feelings on paper become visible, tangible enough to examine. The angst of seventh grade, that cusp of puberty and blender of emotions, needs an outlet. Miss Smith knew this. She knew students in the throes of adolescence needed to develop their own guidance systems, or they would be tossed about by the forces that surrounded them. Most of the quotes she carefully wrote on the chalkboard were affirmational, inspirational, and encouraged self-reflection. Most of the notebooks were filled with the kind of drivel you would expect, like looking forward to tacos for lunch and describing in detail the teacher's desk at the head of the classroom, or worse, line after line stating I don't know what to write today.

Regardless, Miss Smith read every entry and, in neat red handwriting, jotted notes of encouragement and praise. Some students who wandered through her class went on to become journalists and fiction writers. But those were not the ones who needed saving.

Before she passed away, she reminisced about the thousands of students she had. Most were flying monkeys, bounding off to other places. And there were the writers who made her proud; they sent her letters thanking her for getting them to think. But the ones she remembered most were those who found a way to release emotions through pen on paper. Pen because it is permanent, and you can't change the past; you have to just move forward in a

new way, with a new sentence. There were the boys who couldn't find the courage to stand up to an abusive father but found refuge in a few words that discharge negative feelings. There were girls in angst over rejection by peers, and some who had deep traumas. The first sentence in their notebooks read, "Please don't read this."

These were the students, the children fighting to become adults, that Miss Smith focused on. She would read Shakespeare and ask how Romeo must've felt being rejected by his friends and family, how Juliet felt not being able to express love to her own mother. The archetypes in literature gave permission for emotional growth in a safe way, and the words inside those notebooks became more and more personal as the year went on.

The letter Miss Smith remembers most was from a young man named Rob, some years after he quietly wrote meaningless sentences in his notebook just to get by in her class. He told her his parents were alcoholics, that there seemed to be no future for him, that he knew he was a mistake to them. But she made him feel like he was more. He said he'd stayed alive to see what that more was going to be.

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