

CHALK TALK: A Teacher's Voice: Staying gold in the classroom

By WILL BANGS

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*Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold.
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.*
— Robert Frost



There's a critical passage in the novel, "The Outsiders," by S.E. Hinton, where two of the main characters, Johnny and Ponyboy, are looking out at the sunset, reciting Robert Frost's poem.

All the odds are stacked against Johnny, Ponyboy and their band of brothers — the Greasers. They're poor and society portrays them as criminals and thugs.

Despite this, they hold on to hope.

Even though Frost's poem ends with "nothing gold can stay," Johnny tells Pony to "Stay Gold." In other words, don't lose hope. Stick with it. That's the Greasers' strength — they have each other and an undying loyalty.

I consider myself a good teacher. I work hard, and I teach from the heart. I have a master's degree in education, and I have won several awards for my work with children.

But, I'll be honest with you — I've had my share of low-points in my career as a teacher, too. Sadly, I'm not alone.

Studies by The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future show that one-third of all new teachers leave after three years, and 46 percent are gone within five years. I, too, once came close to

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becoming a victim of those statistics. But, thanks to the support of colleagues, I am now in my sixth year of teaching.

While completing my master's degree, a professor introduced me to the work of Parker Palmer's book "The Courage to Teach," and it became an important source of nourishment for me, as a teacher. I just didn't realize it at the time.

The book begins with Palmer, an educator with over 20 years of experience in the classroom, describing his own trials and triumphs. He writes, "I am a teacher at heart, and there are moments in the classroom when I can hardly hold the joy ... But at other moments, the classroom is so lifeless or painful or confused — and I am so powerless to do anything about it that my claim to be a teacher seems a transparent sham."

There's a certain comfort in knowing you're not alone. That a veteran teacher like Palmer faced some of the same sense of uncertainty and frustration that I have, too, made me understand better the difficulties of this profession.

Palmer claims that teaching is difficult because the subjects and students we teach are "as large and complex as life."

So much of our professional lives as teachers is devoted to knowing our subjects and our students. What we forget is that we have to know ourselves, too.

I have attended professional development about preparing for PARCC, differentiating instruction or crunching data points on student assessments. But I never built in time to learn more about myself and focus on who I am and what I stand for in the classroom.

Reading Palmer's book helped me hold on to hope in the classroom by looking inward at myself.

So I kept reading. And thinking. And eventually I asked colleagues to join me in this discussion. We read and discussed a chapter each time we met.

The book grounded our discussions and reminded us of why we became, and remained, teachers. That reading group has now expanded to another reading group with my Western Massachusetts Writing Project colleagues.

What is made clear with the lens of Palmer's book is that we all need hope. We need to be reminded of why we came into the profession in the first place. We need to think about what's going well, instead of just thinking about what's not going well. We need feedback, reassurance and community to know that we are in this together.

We need to be reminded, as Johnny tells Ponyboy, to Stay Gold, for our students and for ourselves.

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