

Lessons from “Martha”

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To reiterate the cliché that school is a microcosm of the wider society is to accept the inevitability of the types of experiences a school population faces in three, five, or seven years. Much like the wider influences on overarching policy-making in education, such as the national and the international economy, globalisation, and developing educational theory, “life experiences” at the school level paint the background against which many of our lives and our philosophies of life have been framed.

It is against this background of life experiences that I share this one which many a school community has had to face. I refer to the untimely passing of an in-service teacher and the shock and grief suffered by the school community. Our response to the loss caused us to reflect on significant realities as we coped by searching for meaning in the midst of grief.

Our grief came from the recent loss of a dear teacher, fondly known by staff at my alma mater as “Martha.” Reflecting on her life “on the hill,” it is interesting that even though the “old girl network” may be a phenomenon that still operates within this particular school, “Martha,” not an “old girl,” epitomised many of the positive qualities traditionally embraced by the school, and operated as one would expect an “old girl” to. She defied the theory which espouses that “outsiders” will not “fit in.” *Au contraire*, she immersed herself into the school’s culture and brought her personal taste and style to the organisation. Indeed, this is how she was nicknamed “Martha.” She became the Martha Stewart of the staff, advising on and changing institutional and personal interior decorating. Hers was the final word on the matter. Her contribution is evidence that organisations only stand to benefit from new talent.

“Martha” exemplified a healthy work ethic, spelt out as dedication to her students and to her tasks. If new teachers could learn one thing from “Martha,” it was her sense of responsibility to her students. In preparation for classes, going the proverbial extra mile was what gave her professional and personal satisfaction. She would playfully complain about the number of photocopies she had to make, but all knew that they were not serious complaints. Both her present and past students now quote her famous words, “where two are gathered...I will still teach.” So that when students absented themselves from school “to study for exams,” “Martha” was present and teaching even if there were only two students there.

“Martha” recognised that her school was a community, and her behaviour towards colleagues and students reflected this. Some small details reflected her belief that professional improprieties were not to be encouraged. So she was professional in the way she addressed administrative staff, even though relations were amicable and familiar. Most outstanding in her sense of community was how she viewed students. Students were persons who had their own stories, and whose talents she saw as her mission to unearth. It was her vision of her role in this community that saved many a student from academic apathy.

The community that “Martha” helped to shape mourned her loss as they armed themselves by harnessing their combined strength. Tears and grief strengthened the mutual support and organisational skills required in the situation. As they mourned, the school community was able to do so with dignity and caring, acknowledging their humanity, but cooperating with each other to lend structure and organisation to a potentially overwhelming situation.

“Martha’s” passing, according to her friend, Naomi, catapulted the school into living their motto: “non nobis solum sed omnibus”— “not for ourselves only but for others.” The school community moved automatically into “support” gear. A school bus filled with present and past staff members, in addition to other staff, arrived to take charge of the wake service as support to “Martha’s” family. Staff members assumed the roles of “minister,” “choir,” “preacher,” and “hostess.” “Martha” would not have been surprised.

“Support” became the theme for our farewell to one who exemplified dependability and concern. Naomi’s “sermon” highlighted the high value this school places on sensitive listening, observing, sharing, and caring, manifested by selfless contribution, advice, counselling, teamwork, camaraderie, respectful exchange of opinions, and tireless searching for solutions. Giving support, seen from this perspective, is an automatic response, somewhat synonymous with being human and belonging to the great and noble profession that is teaching.

Remembering her dignity and smile, even in disappointment or in anger, we will miss “Martha.”

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