

Caring for Ourselves

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“Advanced industrial society is sick-making because it disables people from coping with their environment and, when they break down, substitutes a “clinical,” or therapeutic, prosthesis for the broken relationships.” Ivan Illich.

I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. Unlike my friends who tell me of their earliest teaching experiences, which involved lining up their dolls or siblings and lecturing them before scolding and beating them with rulers, I don’t recall ever *playing* school. I remember being responsible for my first set of students when I was 12 years old and had returned to my primary school to assist my former Standard 5 teacher, Mr. Ousman Ali, with his Saturday classes. The painting he did for me—a simple scene based on ones he had drawn many times in coloured chalk in class to stimulate our creative writing—still hangs in my parents’ home today. Even then people told me I was crazy to want to become a teacher: “It eh ha no future in dat.” “Yuh lacking ambition or what?” “Dah is all yuh want to be?” “Yuh know how hard dem chirren head does be?” “Like yuh like holidays?”

By the time I had finished secondary school, I had had numerous opportunities to try out didactic experiments on my peers. These experiences reinforced my desire to enter “the noblest profession.” Once again, this seemed like insanity to those around me: “Boy, why you doh become a doctor?” “How you going to provide for a wife an family an ting?” “If yuh think dem chirren head hard, wait till yuh meet dey parents.” “Yuh have too much talent to remain in teaching.” I am sure that I disappointed many people by following through on my desire to become a teacher.

I began teaching in May 1999. I was interviewed in October that year and received my first teacher’s salary in March the following year. By the second term of 2001, I was diagnosed with and was being treated for depression. Few of my friends or colleagues knew about it. I was prescribed a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), which had the effect of flattening out my emotional landscape. Thus, while I no longer had feelings of anxiety, despair, or hopelessness I also had difficulty experiencing feelings of pleasure and desire. During the treatment period, I decided that I did not want to exist in that state longer than I had to and began to analyse some of the potential causes of my depression. Next, I took steps to improve those relationships I felt would help me to be healthy in the long term—I exercised more frequently, and put aside more time for rest and socialization with friends. I also tried to limit and remove myself from those stressful occasions, persons, and situations that had precipitated the onset.

Depression is not something that I have gotten over; but I have gotten better at recognising the early warning signs in myself, such as fatigue, short temperedness, and insomnia, and to take evasive action early. In the period just before I left teaching, for example, I spent a lot more time outdoors taking nature photographs and re-discovering my artistic side. My experiences as a neophyte teacher have led me to the brink of depression and rage because of the violence and humiliation that one sometimes finds in school. But it has been Art and Love that have taught me how to re-connect and re-orient my relationships; to find my way back. Not everyone finds a way back.

Teacher burnout and attrition are problems the world over. While they are related to individual characteristics, they are also related to the institutionalised isolation, frustration, and anger that accompany “the loneliest profession,” and which are consequences of our increasingly anachronistic industrial and mechanical constructions and conceptions of schooling. As a teacher, one can always do/give more. Indeed, some teachers feel intense guilt when asked to give more but *know* they are unable. Machines can be pushed beyond their limit and can be replaced if they break. We can no longer continue to conceive of any human being in this instrumental manner. One has a responsibility to oneself to sometimes do less, do differently, but always work to do better. As teachers, we have a responsibility to *care for ourselves* and to teach our charges, *by our own examples*, how to care for themselves by nurturing healthy relationships. We might begin by opening up, and re-discovering, the value and vulnerability of our relationships with our (he)Arts.

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