

Perfect Day: A Meditation About Teaching

Mr. Valadez revisits a day that was so full of powerful learning experiences — for his kindergarten students and their teacher — that he remembers every detail of it almost 20 years later.

BY GILBERT VALADEZ

I was neither
Living nor dead, and I knew nothing,
Looking into the heart of light, the silence.
T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*

A STUDENT in a teacher seminar recently asked me, “Did you ever have a perfect day when you taught elementary school?” The question made me think for a moment. “Yes,” I said, “I have, but only one day comes to mind.” It is funny. In the 18 years that I taught in California public schools, only one day stands out as being *perfect*. That is not to say that many other days were not good in themselves. Rather, this day was the best day because I gained deeper insights into teaching and life.

My perfect day happened in November 1984 when I was teaching Spanish bilingual kindergarten at San Pedro Street School, Los Angeles. I remember the year because it was also the year my baby brother, Victor, was killed. Victor died in a car crash in San Bernardino, California, at the age of 19. The emotional and

GILBERT VALADEZ is an assistant professor in the College of Education, California State University, San Marcos.

psychological toll on my family and me was intense. The baby of the family was gone. To be honest, I do not recall many details about the funeral because the pain was so strong.

Nevertheless, I resumed teaching in September, unsure whether I could manage it. I resolved to be there for my students and to do the best I could. So my perfect day had much to do with grieving over the loss of my brother. It also had to do with an oak tree. At the time, there was a huge oak in the kindergarten courtyard of San Pedro Street School. It was the largest tree in the neighborhood. You could see it from half a mile away, it was so big. When the sun shone, the courtyard was completely shaded by the tree’s full branches.

Because an oak tree is deciduous, its leaves change color with the seasons. While looking at the tree one day, I decided to teach a unit about autumn, because there are no real seasons in Los Angeles. The oak tree, I felt, would serve as an emblem of how seasons pass and the impact that climate has upon leaves and plants. Having made my decision, I developed and taught a unit about autumn to my kindergartners.

On my perfect day in November, I woke up feeling happy. It was Friday morning, and I was excited about what we were going to do at school. This Friday was to be the culmination of my unit about autumn. I had planned for a daylong experience with a number of learning activities. When I entered my classroom at 7 a.m., I was still happy. In the weeks prior, I felt as if I had been swimming in a sea of grief, but now I had landed on an island. I was standing on solid ground, and I was happy. I prepared the materials for the day’s work.

The school bell rang at 9 a.m. It was a cold morning, and the children straggled into the classroom all jumpy and excited. We took off our jackets and hung them in the closet. Lunch bags were deposited in their proper corner. Everyone was laughing. Everything was in synch. I do believe there was not a single argument among my students that day.

I sat my students down on the rug, and we sang the good morning songs. I talked to them about the day, about what we were going to do in our workstations. I read stories about autumn to the class. We recited leaf poems: "The red leaves are dancing, the orange one laughs, the brown leaves wave goodbye to the branches of the tree." I showed the children pictures of autumn trees in various parts of our country.

I asked the group, "Why do you think the leaves of some trees change color?" My students did not know. I explained that the reason the leaves change color is that the sap withdraws from the leaves when the cold weather comes in autumn. The sap leaves the leaves, retreating to the trunk of the tree, which allows the tree to survive the winter. So as the sap retreats, the leaves change from green to orange, orange to red, and red

to brown as they die. Eventually the dead leaves drop, and that is why autumn is also called the fall.

After the lesson, we divided up and worked in our stations. In those days I taught with two wonderful women — Minnie Grimes, my teaching partner, and Estella Villanueva, our paraprofessional. Mrs. Grimes worked the station where the children painted oversized leaves red, orange, and yellow, and Mrs. Villanueva helped the children create window art with leaves and wax paper. After cutting two circles of wax paper, the children sprinkled crayon shavings, pieces of paper, and leaves onto one of the circles. Mrs. Villanueva then carefully took the circle and placed it on an ironing board. Placing the second circle on top of the collage, she ironed the circles together. The crayon shavings and the wax melted to form window art. The finished circles were taped onto the classroom windows for all to see.

At my station, I had a big drawing spread out on the floor of a tree without leaves. The children had to come and draw leaves on the tree's branches. I also had them draw a line from their leaves to show how the sap retreats to the trunk in autumn. I wanted my students to think further about why leaves change colors, so while they worked I asked repeatedly, "Why do the colors change?" Hearing my students' explanations provided a wonderful assessment of their learning. It was great to hear their words.

Before we left for morning recess, we cleaned up our classroom. The children returned to the rug, and I sat in front of the group to explain our last activity of the morning. "Today," I told the class, "we are going to be a forest. I want each of you to grab two beanbags from this bucket, one for each hand. We will pretend to be trees and the beanbags are your leaves. Do you understand?" After I confirmed that they understood, each child grabbed his or her beanbags.

"All right, class," I continued. "Find a place to stand. You can stand anywhere so long as I can see you." The children scuffled

to their places. It was remarkable how creative they were in choosing a place to stand. The children stood beside my desk, beside our sink, next to the door, in the middle of our group rug, and in our class library. When they had settled down, I continued, "Stand still. You are trees. Put a beanbag in each hand. Now open your arms. Your arms are the branches, your body the trunk. It is spring now. Your new leaves are starting to come out. Show me your leaves. What color are the leaves?"

"Light green," the class chanted.

"Good," I said. "Stand for a moment in the rain. Your leaves are growing. They are still connected to you. Stand in the rain."

My students stood for a moment. "Good," I said. "Now it is summer, and your leaves are full-grown. Let them dangle in your branches, but don't let them fall. Hang on, little leaves. Hang on. Now, children, stand like a tree in the summer sun. The bees fly around you. Families are having a picnic underneath you because you give them shade. Jesus," I asked, "what is your family eating?"

"Tamales!" said Jesus.

"Rojelia," I asked, "What is your family eating?"

"*Arroz con leche* and ice cream," replied Rojelia.

"Very good," I said. "Now, class, stand for a moment. Yes, the summer is ending, and it is starting to get cold. The families are gone; they are safe at home. Fires are burning in the fireplaces. The leaves are falling now. I want you all to hang on to your leaves. I will say the following words: cold, colder, coldest. Remember, coldest means the most cold. When you hear the word coldest, I want you drop your leaves. Hang on until you hear the word coldest. Do you understand?"

"Yes," the forest said.

"Here we go," I continued. "Cold, cold, colder, colder, colder, coldest."

At the signal the beanbags fell. The children giggled. "Very good, class," I said, "Now stand still. It is the fall."

A moment later I continued, "The fall is ending, and winter is coming. We have to be quiet in the winter. The snow has fallen. The leaves are buried beneath the snow. It is the quiet time, be quiet. Quiet, quiet. Think about the winter. . . ."

The children stood for 30 seconds. In that quiet, I had a thought that Victor's birthday was November first. Were he alive, Victor would have been 20 years old. I felt him near me and I did not speak.

"The winter is over, class," I told the children, "What will happen next?"

"The spring!" the children shouted.

"And what will come in spring?" I asked.

"The leaves, the leaves!" they shouted.

"Great job, children," I piped back. "Let's get ready for recess."

In order to get to the courtyard, my class and I had to travel through the classroom across the hall. After putting on their jackets or sweaters, my students lined up peacefully. We walked across the hall, and I knocked on the door. Rela Johnson, my colleague, opened the door. "Hello, children," said Rela, "My, what a wonderful line."

"Thank you," the children said. We walked through Rela's classroom to the door that opened onto the kindergarten courtyard. What happened next was a magic moment — a kind of miracle. I opened the door, and we all looked out to the courtyard. To our surprise, the oak tree had shed almost all of its leaves the night before. The courtyard was covered with hundreds of leaves.

The children shouted, "Oh, the leaves! *¡Las ojas!*" My students didn't wait for me to let them out. They ran out en masse, about 20 of them, and began to play with the leaves. I walked out and noticed the various ways that my students interacted with the leaves. Some of the girls picked up the leaves and put them in their hair. They danced a simple leaf cha-cha dance. "*Ojas, ojas, cha-cha-cha.*" The girls twirled and giggled. Jesus picked up leaves and started a little collection of his favorites, which he placed at the far end of the courtyard. "Look at my leaves," he told me. "These are the best ones."

A couple of the boys played leaf soccer. They kicked up leaves while running in circles. All conversation in the kindergarten courtyard was focused on the leaves. Everyone was so happy. As I watched my students delighting in the leaves, I thought, "This is wonderful." I considered the kinds of activities that had gone on before we had gone out to recess. We had participated in multiple inquiries that were scientific, artistic, and literary.

It occurred to me that literacy is always the pursuit of meaning. Meaning is central to all educational discourse and activity. What is meaningful not only has to do with speaking, but also with creation. My students had learned something about leaves, and they had come to their new understanding on their own terms. On the other hand, I also realized that learning is social. We learn by interacting with one another

and with shared ideas — meaning is the tree, and ideas are leaves attached to it. I saw these things more clearly watching the children play in the courtyard. The air was crisp, clean. Indeed, I learned something myself. I learned more about how to teach, and I realized how hard it is sometimes to separate one's life from what one teaches. I understood that I live in my teaching, and my teaching lives in me.

While I watched, one of my students named Rudolfo came up to me carrying a pile of leaves in both his arms.

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He stopped in front of me and threw the leaves up in the air. I looked down at him and asked, "What are you doing?"

Rudolfo didn't say anything. He left and returned with another pile of leaves. He stood in front of me again and threw the leaves up in the air. This time the leaves went higher. Rudolfo laughed and laughed. The leaves came floating down. "What are you doing?" I asked again.

Rudolfo didn't say anything. After wrapping his arms around my waist, he looked up at me. Rudolfo's face was beautiful, skin the color of cinnamon bark. His huge brown eyes were laughing, or so it seemed. Rudolfo asked, "Do you know why leaves float to the ground slowly instead of hard as a rock?"

"No, I don't," I replied.

Rudolfo smiled before saying, "It is God's kindness."

God's kindness. With those words my thoughts scattered. It was as though there were a leaf storm in my mind. Images of my brother's face, the car rides home, my students working and playing, leaves, and the recent events of my personal history all swirled together. I thought about kindness.

It seems to me that autumn leaves are an emblem of the perfect symmetry of life and death, the transition from lightness to dark. Learning is also a perfect symmetry — of moving from not knowing to knowing, the transition from darkness to light. The central point of my perfect teaching day is the fact that the end product of learning is something more than the sum total of observed lessons and spoken words. Teach-

ing and learning incorporate spirit. When I approach my work in the spirit of trust and belief that children know things, I am the most effective.

Looking at Rudolfo's smiling face, I could not help but feel the joy of letting go. In that moment I was taken back to a moment in the past. I had forgotten the incident but now relived it as if it were happening in the present. The memory filled me with a new kind of hope.

My mother was making tortillas in the kitchen the

day Victor learned to walk. I was on my knees behind her, watching Victor, who was only 10 months old, sitting against the opposite wall. Victor was trying to stand. Every time he stood, he fell flat onto his bottom. I laughed. He tried again and fell on his rear, crying. I laughed again.

"Stop laughing at your brother," my mother said. "You should try to help your brother."

I looked at my mother and said, "I am helping Victor."

After many attempts, Victor finally stood. "Mother," I said, "Victor is standing!"

My mother turned around and saw my brother standing. She got on her knees beside me and yelled, "Victor, Victor, come on, *mijo!* Come on."

I said, "Victor, come on, walk over here."

Victor took a step forward and then he took three wild Evil Knievel-like steps toward our mother. He fell into her arms.

My mother said, "Oh, Victor!" She started kissing him all over his face. When she was finished, I took Victor into my arms and kissed him on the face. We were so happy. My baby brother had learned how to walk.

This was the spirit of the day. As I looked upon Rudolfo's face, I felt that I could take those tentative steps toward accepting my loss. I learned a valuable lesson. Perfect. My perfect day ended with a little boy teaching his teacher a little lesson about life. I was happy, at peace for a moment. I felt like an autumn leaf floating slowly to the ground. ■

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