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Wisdom Through Stories

My Story—Teaching Through Divorce, Death, and Dissertations



Audio Reading
by the Author

We all have struggles in our lives. Ups and downs are part of being human. In my middle 40s I was struggling with my identity and individuality, classic midlife crisis some would say. The internal emotional conversations I was having needed the guidance of a trained professional, so like many people I found a therapist to help me sort out those feelings. I found it comforting and validating to have someone listen to my thoughts, but also frustrating to not get any answers.

Three years earlier I had changed my teaching focus from the fifth-grade classroom to lead a student teaching program at a university more than an hour away. The long commute, the new role as a director of student teaching, and a new identity as a program leader contributed to my unsettled feelings. In addition to all these professional challenges, my relationship with my husband was strained.

After much deep reflection I decided to separate from my husband of 24 years. When I told my parents, I will never forget my father asking me, “Are you happy?” Admitting that I was not happy brought up feelings of failure and shame. I felt torn and emotionally insecure. I had two sons who needed my love and

care. My inner voice and soul felt the honesty of my decision, even though it would take great courage to proceed.

Soon after my decision to leave my marriage, my father’s lung cancer recurred. Commuting to work, visiting the hospital almost daily, and finalizing a divorce were all happening at the same time. To add to the emotional chaos, I was in the final stages of completing and submitting my doctoral dissertation. I was depleted, unfocused, and confused. When I mistakenly deleted the final chapter of my dissertation, I lost my will to complete the task. At that moment, I dropped to my knees and sobbed. This was the last straw. I second-guessed all my decisions and spent the day in emotional turmoil and tears over the lost work and the confusing challenges I was facing in my life.

A friend sent me a card with the phrase “Face the sun and the shadows will fall behind you” printed on the front. I repeated the words several times and felt a shift in my energy. The words touched my heart. I said to myself, “Look at the positive, Carol. Find your light.” Then I heard a tiny voice inside of me say, “Don’t quit now. Your father would not want you to quit.” So I intentionally shifted my thoughts and energy. I moved toward the light by taking action. I rewrote the final chapter and submitted it on time.

Three things I did that you may consider doing if you find yourself in desperate times.

- **FIND MOTIVATION**—I dedicated my dissertation to my dad. That action of typing the dedication page motivated me to complete the final chapter.
- **GET HELP**—I stayed in counseling. I went weekly to process my emotions in a healthy way so I could see the good that still existed in my life.
- **GO TO SCHOOL**—I went to school every day and left my troubles at the door. It

was a relief to have a break each day and not think about my personal issues.

What I love most about this expression is that it gives me an intentional direction to look for the positive, the light, and the good instead of focusing on what is not working. When I look back at this phase of my life I see the enormous pain and suffering, but I also see my strength and my willingness to shift.

Another Teacher's Story



Meet Jimmy Knuutila and listen to his story, *I Choose to Teach Again*.

Finding Your Wisdom: What's Your Story?

Reflect and respond to the following prompts:

1. Is there such a thing as work-life balance? How do you balance?
2. When have you needed help in your life? How did you *Face the Sun*?
3. How does your personal life influence your teaching?
4. How does the message “leave your troubles at the door” relate to you?
5. What do you do to stay positive and get yourself out of despair?



Mindful Living Actions

FOCUS ON GRATITUDE

When we are suffering and our lives are filled with pain it is difficult to find that place where we can be grateful. Sometimes our lives and work can just be overwhelming. *Facing the sun* means to see the beauty and to see the positive in the situation.

For me healing my personal hurts helps open up the space for gratitude to come in. Healing

is a process of becoming healthy again. It allows us to relieve and lesson our suffering. The first step toward healing is to shift our perspective away from what has caused the pain and look instead at what is beautiful around us. Then gratitude can emerge to give us voice to what we indeed are grateful for in our lives.

ASSESS YOUR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SKILLS

Rate yourself from 1 to 3 (1 never think about it – 2 sometimes pay attention – 3 very mindful)

1. I recognize my emotions and how they influence my behavior.

① ② ③

2. My perspective includes empathy for others.

① ② ③

3. I manage my emotions in a healthy way to minimize stress.

① ② ③

4. I am motivated to create personal and professional goals.

① ② ③

5. My choices are based on how they impact my health and well-being.

① ② ③

What is the message you see in your responses?