

the seasons of teaching

*For every gardener knows that after the digging,
after the planting,
after the long season of tending and growth,
the harvest comes.
Marge Piercy*

“What? Are you crying?” my principal turns to notice my red face as the fading notes of the senior video resound in the auditorium around us. I shake my head, but I can’t hide it. It’s early Sunday morning as Project Graduation comes to an end, and I’m a mess. I wish I could stop myself, but I’ve figured out it is just part of who I am: when it comes to good byes, I’m liquid. The seniors begin to file out and each one stops to shake Jack’s hand. They say, “Good bye Mr. Loynd, thank you.” I’m glad they recognize his dedication; he’s an inspiring leader. I cower behind him though, trying to avoid this ending with these kids.

It doesn’t last for long.

“Mrs. Kittle?” I turn and it’s Timmy White, bleach blonde hair and that shy smile with his hand out, “Thank you for everything.” Yeah, you’d be crying too. Little Timmy who was so silent in my 8th grade that I wondered if he’d ever break out became the king of mountain biking and confidence. I loved it when he died his hair and became a defining captain of our hockey team. Tim is taller than I am now and off to college, and I got to watch it happen. He came back through the line just to say thanks. Boy, I’ll miss him.

Tanner is careful to shake all of our hands and offer thanks. He’s been a joy to coach in writing. I love this kid: his sense of humor, his perseverance and his kindness; I’m not ready to let him go. The video we watched was produced by his mother Theresa, and it was filled with footage from preschool parades, elementary school, family photos and then homecoming, senior prom, and even graduation, but when it was spliced together you could see how fast it goes, from the first bus ride to kindergarten to the tossing of black caps into a blue sky. We only have them for a few moments and then they are gone. This is the hardest part about being a teacher: at some point you just have to let them go.

Close on Tanner’s heels is Torin. I’m crying again even before he reaches out to give me a tight hug. He says, “You know we’ll still see each other.” I do know, but it won’t ever be like this. Torin was always bouncing in his seat in my language arts class at age 12. He even bounced as he wrote, so full of joyful energy he couldn’t contain himself. Lanky and tall, I knew he’d command the baseball field by senior year. None of us expected leukemia, chemotherapy, and a frail frame pausing before a set of two stairs to collect his strength on his way to class. This was a long year, but Torin has made a slow recovery. He’s off to study journalism and I’ll miss watching him from afar, willing him to be well. I’ll miss reading his stories, correcting his punctuation, and telling him to quit talking. But mostly I’ll miss listening to him play his guitar in the lobby and thanking God that he’s breathing every single time I see him.

I missed seeing several others. On purpose. I would have hugged them and leaked my blubbery nose all over their shoulders. I know that Adam and Kyle are off to the Air Force and we are a country at war. I can’t say good-bye. I know Carrie and Katelyn and Krystal helped me believe in myself as a teacher when I was filled with doubt, and I don’t know how to thank them. I

know that Cathleen's graduation was a gargantuan force of will, more than most adults I know would be capable of, considering all she had to overcome. I know too many kids who have desperately ill parents who may not be here to guide them much longer. Teaching has allowed me to counsel and encourage kids, but mostly just to listen to their stories. They are filled with compassion and fear, just like we are. I would like to protect them from the adult lessons that will come, but we know I can't. It is time to clean my room for summer vacation and put my yearbook on the shelf.

I watched the students sprint to their cars in the early morning light and then listened to peeling tires on Main Street. "See ya Mrs. Kittle!" Matt yelled out his window with a wave, roaring the engine of his battered pick up truck. I smiled and called one last, "Be careful," which I'm sure he ignored.

I carried half cups of coffee to the trash. I slapped each theatre seat upright and discovered donut remains on paper plates, a few napkins, and one gym bag full of clothes. When I made it all the way to the front near the stage I turned back and looked at the seats, dark and silent, row upon row. They seemed so empty. Waiting. They need that next bunch of loud teenagers to fill them up.

I'm waiting, too.

I'm already looking over my class list for the fall and imagining beginning again. I can't predict that experience: which essays will inspire me, which stories my students will bravely tell, which experiences will leave us howling with laughter. My classroom will be filled with wonder, frustration, and joy; I'm sure of it. I know I will love my new students fiercely, more than most folks would say I should. I will cry when they leave. Every year. How could I do it any differently? Teaching allows me briefly into the lives of amazing kids, and I'm thankful every day for all they have to teach me.

I won't forget that.

Or them.

Teaching pulses with rhythm. Each summer an ending with kids you've grown to love. Each fall a beginning when anything is possible. Twenty years ago when I stood before my first class of students I didn't know if I'd make it to the end of the first day. I still feel that way sometimes. But I also love the discovery, the challenges, the kids. Especially the kids.

I am a teacher. This water is magical, dimpled with light. In the midst of darkness there is always a dawn, a reason to keep trying.