

Adjacent opportunities (16.4)

The favorite teacher

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We never forget our favorite teacher. They open us to the possible, the unimagined, the wisdom of the ages. They influence how we think and often what we're even willing to consider. It's difficult to view these relationships as other than karmic. Not predestined, or fated but somehow through the chain of interactions that have made up our lives, we find ourselves in the presence of such people and for a whole host of complex reasons, we're ready to receive their teaching.

The linkage within such connections is powerful – this is no mere information transfer. The openness that arises is built on confidence and a mutual conviction that what will emerge will be of benefit for a lifetime.

In writing about adjacent opportunities for over a decade, now, I have spoken with dozens of notable authorities, and sought guidance and input from many trusted advisors. One who has actually read each and every one of these brief explorations has been my wife, Laura, who for the past 35 years has also been an exemplary teacher, and one of those *"best teachers ever"* to hundreds of students. The exemplary term is truly justified here, not only courtesy of the many accolades she has received, but by all the letters, emails and Facebook posts from past students who have written again and again about how positively and impactfully she has influenced their life. How she was their favorite teacher.

It previously never dawned on me to write about the adjacent opportunities she creates with all these young people, many of whom are far more interested in being online than on task. For many of those 35 years of teaching she has focused her energies on science. She is a firm believer in hands on, manipulation and direct experience. That she makes these experiments fun has inspired more than one note from parents proclaiming, "I don't know how you've done it, but science is now my child's favorite subject." The complexity of these thousands of loving and extremely patient interactions with an equal number of developing minds is something beyond imaginable.

We spend a great deal of time and language in *E:CO* describing complex interactions, emergence and the coherence that takes place, usually in words that are arcane at their best. We use metaphor and narrative to explain, chastise, and cajole. We pour over and quote the work of others to justify thinking that whether right or wrong we take the leap to think. But without that favorite teacher, we would undoubtedly never be writing in these pages.

"Reading is important but there's a difference between that kind of learning and engaging in interactions that might have multiple possibilities emerge." Laura said when I told her I wanted to write about her work. "You simply don't get that if you read a book. It's in the *Ahas* arising from the interactions between teacher and student where real and deep learning takes place. My job is to keep them open-minded especially when they think they know. They really don't have the wisdom, but rather a factual-based set of knowledge. What we create together is an investigation, from many different perspectives, about how we get to truth."

Today, Laura is teaching science to students who are described as 2e – twice exceptional. They are highly gifted and often show-up as what we might call "quirky." These are the kids that in a traditional school would have been shoved in lockers, ridiculed by insensitive dolts and often placed in classes for the remedial or "special" learners. Their asynchronous development might cast them far outside the relationships of their more neuro-typical peers. But at Bridges Academy in Studio City, where Laura teaches and these students arrive every morning, they are treated exceptionally.

This means that how Laura approaches each classroom day is very different than in a more traditional learning environment. "I have to be aware of the complexity of each student and prepare my lessons with a wide variety of modalities and differentiation, because when the need arises I have to have things ready to pull out on the spot. I have to be much more flexible in my thinking and my expectations of these kids. It's a continual cycle between taking a higher holistic view, so I can see all the various work going on in the classroom, and then coming back down with the right tool to inspire them, interacting, and then going back to that higher level again to see what might have emerged."

This is definitely not a simple process, especially when these students are showing-up with ADD, registering on the Asperger's spectrum, or have a whole host of learning disabilities that often challenge description. But rather than being treated with derision and rejection, their unconventionalities are allowed to resolve and their brilliance to shine. Laura loves these kids with all their peculiarities and idiosyncrasies. She interacts with them as they are. Engages them how they learn, with unbelievable patience and yes, love. And what emerges are students ready to be filled with more knowledge, greater wisdom and an eagerness to understand the world they encounter.

If these were just the words of a proud husband, they could be easily dismissed. But the constant stream of appreciation from parent and student alike is a clear demonstration that having that extraordinary teacher/student relationship unleashes a torrent of possibilities that might otherwise have never shown-up.

If we were to think back, there was undoubtedly one or two teachers in the past who inspired and motivated us to reach beyond ourselves. Who because of their direct connection with us, moved us to a place of greater wisdom, a worldview that opened our mind to new opportunities, or simply encouraged us to know what we know, better. And in so doing they allowed us to build a confidence in ourselves and our capabilities that to this day echoes in our thinking and the decisions we make.

Being a favorite teacher is not just a function of niceness, it's a willingness to be open, patient, knowledgeable, and courageous. *Courage*, "from the heart." Funny how the connection to our most critical thinking, begins when someone is willing to reach out and meet us heart to heart.

It's always the right time to let that special teacher know how important they were to who you are today. Laura loves it when she gets that Facebook post from a student she had thirty-five years ago – "You know, Laura, you were my absolutely favorite teacher and you changed my life forever!" Now, that's the stuff of real emergent phenomena.