

Friday Reflection

5/17/2019

No doubt one of the main purposes of a public high school is to educate and prepare our students for life beyond twelfth grade. However, this week I was reminded this must all occur in the context of a relationally connected community. Seniors are finding themselves becoming reflective and sentimental. Many of them are realizing how impactful the past four years have been for them relationally as much as anything. The thought of leaving their friends, mentors, and what they know is scary. Some expressed to me both their excitement and angst as graduation approaches.

The past seven days also reminded me of how important the Tiller community is for those connected to it. I encountered multiple impacting experiences that all seemed to be somehow mysteriously connected, all pointing to the reality of the pain and hope that exists. The common threads were pain, relational connection, and the role those connections play in turning pain into something positive.

Last Saturday afternoon seemed to set into motion this week of both pain and hope. The Tustin High School family, SoCal Water Polo Club, and the Altamarino family held a touching ceremony for Cesar, our head water polo coach who recently passed away. Around 700 people gathered to mourn the passing of Cesar, but also to celebrate his life. Friends and family shared eloquent expressions of love for Cesar, and the appreciation for what he added to this world. It was obvious by the end of the speeches offered in both English and Spanish that Cesar's legacy will live on in the hearts and minds of all those who had the privilege of knowing him. I was particularly impacted by his mother who concluded the heartfelt presentations. She referred to conversations she had with Cesar when they were living apart. She would share the pain and guilt of leaving him alone in a far away place. Cesar would respond by sharing how it was okay because he was not alone. His mother thought he was only trying to console her, and never really understood how he could say that. She shared on the podium as she looked out over the hundreds of people connected to Cesar that it all made sense. Cesar was not alone because he was plugged into a community of people who challenged him, cared for him, and believed in him. Now as an adult, he challenged, cared for, and believed in other generations of Tillers. It was not possible for me to sit through that ceremony and without considering what really matters in this life and the next. Knowing and being known, being connected are far more important than any accomplishment; Cesar helped teach me that again.

Monday morning brought yet another source of pain for our Tiller community. We found out over the weekend that one of our beloved teachers lost her baby girl, Aurora, just before delivery. So many had celebrated the life of this special little girl and were anticipating her arrival, including the sophomore students in each of her classes. Again, we were reminded of what really matters. While there is a place for strategy and celebrating accomplishments, none of that mattered at our faculty meeting on Monday. Being connected and supporting our hurting teacher and family was the focus.

One of the ways that I could support was helping to inform the students about Aurora. As I shared with students the news as compassionately as I could, I could see the impact on their faces. The love and respect they had for their English teacher emanated from their faces. Those few minutes I spent in each of those classes is etched on my mind forever. I saw the expressed compassion for their teacher through body language, audible words, and written communication.

Ironically, the classes I visited had been listening to a Ted Talk by a woman who was sharing about some intense pain in her life, including the loss of a baby. According to the students, the speaker shared how she used this pain in her life to motivate her and help her become a richer and stronger person. Somehow, it didn't seem like an accident that this Talk was in the lesson plans developed completely prior to the reason I was in the classroom in the first place.

The mysteriousness of the week continued as I participated in a reflection/celebration of new teachers. One of our new teachers openly shared about significant pain in his life, and how he has used that experience to connect with and impact students this year. As tears rolled down his cheeks, I could sense both his pain of the past and his compassion for his current students.

Shortly after meeting with our new teachers, I visited with a Tiller parent connected to the swim program. Not only did she share about the impact of Cesar's passing, but she also shared about her personal experience of losing a baby very shortly after birth. She talked about both the pain that is always with her, and how she uses it for good.

As if I hadn't quite gotten the message at that point, I visited an English classroom where I knew students were doing some reflection as seniors. I only had time to watch the complete video of one student, Jackie Tlatenchi. She spoke beautifully about her high school experience and how much she learned. She also shared through powerful visuals and effective verbal communication the impact of her cousin. She explained that he was a significant part of her life, so when he passed away, it was particularly painful. She communicated this pain tactfully and authentically. She also continued to talk about how she has used that pain for good in her life. She expressed how his life and death has motivated her to push through pain and turn it into a positive force in her life.

The perspective forced on us all in recent weeks really helped to look at significant events more realistically. For example, I am sure that Crystal Millar was really bummed about her performance at CIF Finals due to her injuries. I know that Giuliano Coria, who had an amazing season in tennis, didn't expect it to end in a tough fought 2nd round CIF match. However, I hope they are able to reflect on what they accomplished and realize in the end that it was just a game. More importantly, it was an opportunity to engage with coaches and other athletes and form bonds that only occur while hanging out between such competitive events. I was proud of both these athletes for what they accomplished, but more importantly, I am grateful for my opportunities to learn more about them as people this year.

Finally, last night we celebrated our students who performed well academically over their four years in high school. We have some impressive students, and it was great to honor them and their families last night. However, in the context of this week, I hope that these students appreciate the connections they made in high school. The students honored last night worked extremely hard and disciplined themselves to do what needed to be done in order to achieve outstanding accomplishments. For most, their lives will be forever different because of the trajectory they have established. However, I hope they will remember the importance of staying connected.

This Saturday will be Senior Reflections, and I appreciate the emphasis that will be placed on looking back. I also know that many will be looking forward. However, I am reminded of how important it is to look around and be connected. For some, pain is the current reality, and it is important to support one another to help each other turn painful experiences into positive forces. I am grateful for this week. I wish many of the recent events had not happened, but I am grateful for lessons I am learning and the relationships being formed to navigate difficult waters. Despite the pain this week, it was great to be a Tiller!

Go Tillers!

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