

Kerry Savage

Power Autobiography

Like any teacher, my time in the classroom was a rollercoaster ride. To switch metaphors, each year, class, hour, even minute, elicited quite the cocktail of emotions. Some warm and sweet, some cold or bitter, some seemed impossible to handle. Though none of these ever made me forget.

Looking back, there is one particular period of time that I always come back to, the one that will always center me when I am looking to simultaneously navigate the system we are in and identify the ways in which we need to dismantle it.

As the second semester of my second year of teaching approached, I reached out to a trusted colleague to share my concerns about coming back from winter break. It was something to the effect of, "What am I doing? How am I supposed to do this? I need help." For brevity's sake, this colleague graciously pointed out what had already gone well this year, that there were challenges but the kids felt loved and they were (for the most part) growing academically, and that she had a unit plan she could share that she thought I'd be really excited about. I looked it over, and she was right. My whole attitude flipped upside down. Note: the power of asking for help.

It was a deftly triangulated persuasion unit that revolved around the book *A Long Walk to Water*. This book is based on the true story of Salva, a Lost Boy from Sudan, and his journey overcoming unimaginable hardship and then giving back to his community and his home. The story spoke to issues including water and food scarcity, violence, losing your family, feeling alone and alienated in a new place or culture, and more. While on the surface, this world looked very different from Charlotte, North Carolina, students instantly made connections to their own lives - be in their fear while walking to school, the joy of a good meal or a big hug from a loved one, the challenges that come from a long journey from their home country to America, or the hurt it feels when something or someone you love is taken from you. They talked with reverence about how their experiences connected to Salva's, what advice they would give him, what lessons they could learn from his journey. They saw straight through their differences, and independently honed in on the ways in which they were the same. Note: the power of connection.

As they read this book, they also became experts on water scarcity. They researched to find answers: How did this affect children, their families, or their villages? What were the challenges? What were the solutions? Vocabulary was critical here. They quizzed each other and played games to learn these new words, and they laughed along the way. Overtime, they used elevated language like desertification, empowerment, displacement, contamination, and



irrigation on a regular basis. They'd high five each other when they got the answer right, and they beamed after showing their completed fact sheets, covered in statistics they thought were the most important to share if they were going to persuade others to do something about the problem. Note: the power of joy.

Once they finished the book, they wrote letters to adults in the community asking them to donate to Charity Water, which helped bring clean water to communities without it. They each described the urgent need, what that meant for the children and families who were living in the water crisis, and made heartfelt, thoughtful cases for why giving any amount would make a difference.

Teachers, family members, coaches, and the like chipped in. We were only inching towards our goal: \$400, just about \$5 per student. Spoiler - we got there, but there is a \$5 within that collective pot that I must highlight.

A student, who I'll call Lucia, was missing school a lot. Her family needed to consistently relocate because they were fearful of ICE, and the moving around was time-consuming, and expensive. Some times, she noted, she was either just too tired to come to school, or felt like she had to help her mother out with her work at home - cooking, cleaning, or taking care of her younger siblings.

During the donation period, Lucia came up to me and handed me a five dollar bill. Because we needed to make all payments online through the organization's website, my students knew they should bring any cash donations to me and I would deposit it and note the name of the donor if applicable. I asked her who she wrote her letter to to give the credit. She said, with her head down, "This is my birthday money."

I waited for her to look at me so she could see my face to completely understand how awe-inspired I was by her and tell her how proud I was of her decision. Together with the other teachers, we celebrated her selfless act, but what still sticks with me is that her initial reaction was that she was disappointed - upset she couldn't do more. Her heart was with Salva and his community, and she wanted to be a part of the solution. Eventually she took pride in her action, which inspired some students to do the same thing.

That is the power of love and compassion. Students who gave literally everything they had to help others. The pride they took in making a difference.

I will always remember that day.

I'll remember how different those few months would have been if I didn't ask for help. I certainly wasn't the brainchild, I was lucky to be able to build on something beautiful.



I'll remember that all young people have all of those powers within them - to identify and follow their passions, to connect with others different than themselves, to find joy in unusual or silly places, to selflessly support others - all reminding us the world is a better and softer place when we all take care of each other. Each and every one of those young hearts and minds holds endless potential - and adults have the power to cultivate it.

In an age where so many of our children or a member of their family live with existential threats, be it gunshots on their way home, ICE agents or their cages, lead exposure in their homes or toxins in the air, I think about how we, as adults, don't always live up to that power. Right now, the most powerful person in the world is wielding his power to incite hate and division, and he is changing lives forever. I, myself, as a trusted adult in that classroom, held great power. Sometimes, I think I used it for good. Other times, even with good intentions, I wasn't a good enough teacher for my students. I didn't have the understanding, the relationships, or the presence they deserved, at least at that time. It left me with questions on where my power was best used.

With all of that said, I will always remember that sixty 11-year olds came together to raise enough money to provide clean water to a village an ocean away. I remember that the power of humility, connection, joy, love and compassion will always trump the power of fear. Education is what builds all of those things, it is what tilts that scale. It is on us to ensure more children and families have access to books that allow children to explore those things and learning experiences that foster them - and for more than just one unit in school. It is our job to cultivate that power for them every class, every day, every year, and for students to realize that power within themselves. The power to change their life - as well as the lives of others - forever and for good.

