



## Living, loving, and leading in the wild and dazzling middle grades: An open letter to prospective and newer middle grades teachers

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## ***Living, loving, and leading in the wild and dazzling middle grades: An open letter to prospective and newer middle grades teachers***

**Note from the Editors** *In the tradition of an introduction to each issue, this invited column serves as an editorial overview for the articles that follow. Tracy Smith served as the keynote speaker at the Collegiate Middle Level Association National Conference at Appalachian State University in April of 2014. Her speech provided an inspirational, candid, and personal perspective on our profession. The following work, an adaptation of her speech, serves as an anchor for this special themed issue of Middle School Journal that shares examples of innovative practices in middle level teacher education.*

Mary Oliver, who won the Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1983 and is known for her intimate observations of the natural world, once confessed, “What I want in my life is to be willing to be dazzled—to cast aside the weight of facts and maybe even to float a little above this difficult world” (Oliver, 1990). Two years later, in one of her most famous, poetic lines, she inquired, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” (Oliver, 1992).

Those of you reading this text have likely chosen a path of living wildly, of being dazzled. You have chosen the path in the middle. People have undoubtedly questioned your choice, wondering why in the world you would want to teach middle school. “Those kids are crazy,” they have said. But you see the brilliance, the beauty, the promise of youth. You are willing to be dazzled. You have drawn your line in the sand. You have staked your claim. With your one wild and precious life, you have decided to LIVE, LOVE, and LEAD in the middle level grades.

And you are not alone. You have an amazing heritage. Your middle grades family tree has deep roots and far-reaching branches. Though the call for specialized education for young adolescents came over a century ago, the Middle School Movement that many of you experienced in your own young adolescent years had its beginning in the 1960s, at a time when America was experiencing chaos and revolution as well as a 20th century Enlightenment of sorts. The 1960s were characterized by revolutionary ways of thinking and real change in the cultural fabric of American life. Young people in the 1960s were not content to follow in the footsteps of the generation ahead of them; they wanted change. It was an exciting time on college campuses, where people felt free to question ... well, everything. The Civil Rights, Anti-War, Peace,

and Women’s Rights Movements gained momentum. Young people were increasingly sensitive to the needs of marginalized groups.

Another significant social movement emerged out of this chaotic, progressive, and fertile environment: the Middle Grades Movement. A group of visionaries whom I have come to call Middle Grades Legacy Leaders (Smith & McEwin, 2011) realized that the young adolescent developmental stage was critically important to the healthy development of ethical, responsible leaders in America—and that no one was paying attention to them or their needs. At the time, young adolescence was not a field of study in anthropology, sociology, medicine, or even education. Young professors and other educators of the “hippie generation” began to envision a specialized school in the middle grades. In July 1963, Dr. William Alexander, noted curriculum authority and chairperson for the Department of Education at the George Peabody College for Teachers in Nashville, Tennessee, delivered a speech at a conference on the junior high school held at Cornell University. In what proved to be a landmark address, Alexander proposed a “new school in the middle,” one with its own status in the K–12 vertical system of American education, rather than a “junior” version of another level of schooling. This speech provided the catalyst and is considered to be the start of the Middle School Movement (Smith & McEwin, 2011).

That original speech was delivered over half a century ago. Now, middle schools are commonplace. Very few junior high schools exist in America today. And yet, I am worried that we have lost our zest, our spirit, our momentum and purpose—to serve and understand the needs of young adolescents. But, I’m hopeful, too. I see signs of that same “hippie” spirit that embraces counter-culturalism, and I am optimistic that the current generation of middle level educators will reject the structuralism, standardization, and pessimism that currently have a stranglehold on public education in favor of a quest to honor and celebrate human spirit, intellect, and potential—particularly those characteristics of young adolescents that make them so *wild* and *dazzling*.

What is it like to be a middle grades educator in 2017? Right now, everything about education in America seems uncertain and insecure. John F. Kennedy (Woolley & Peters, n.d.) once recalled an old saying that “the course

of civilization is a race between catastrophe and education. In a democracy such as ours, we must make sure that education wins the race.”

I do not want to be political here, but I have to contextualize my comments within a political climate in America that feels near catastrophe in this moment ... dismissive of the power of *individual* teachers and education more generally—to win the race and to transform the lives of students and citizens. But thankfully, my hope is not in legislators. *My hope* today is in the hearts and lives of you, the courageous ones, who are taking up the mantle of education, democracy, and humanity.

Bertrand Russell (1940) called teachers the “guardians of civilization.” Helen Caldicott, Australian physician, author, and activist asserted that teachers “are the most responsible and important members of society because their professional efforts affect the fate of the earth” (Gruwell, 2011). In recent years, the citizens of Newtown, Connecticut and tornado-stricken Oklahoma called teachers heroes. Andy Rooney said that “most of us end up with no more than five or six people who remember us. Teachers have thousands of people who remember them for the rest of their lives” (Lederer, 2011). Without a doubt, teachers matter. You matter.

A challenge has been issued in this letter, a challenge to new and veteran middle level teachers—How will you live, love, and lead as a middle grades educator?

I became a teacher more than 25 years ago, years before many current middle school teachers were born. In the first few years, I was often asked, “Why did you become a teacher?” Early on, my head spun with ideals of changing the world using education and the classroom as my forum.

But when I truly stop to consider why I became a teacher, the best reasons I can find are the names of the teachers who changed *my* life ... Mr. Gallimore, Dr. Eggers, Ms. Zizzi, Ms. Morgan, Dr. Pennell, Mr. Ferguson.... These are the reasons. Unselfishly, they helped me develop the skills that transformed my future. Their actions show the kind of difference teachers can make in students’ lives.

When I was born, my teenaged parents lived in one room in the basement of a small grocery store. Outside, at one end of the cinderblock building, was a room with a dirt floor. Against one wall of that room was a small cement slab with our commode on it. Soft drink crates were stacked around the improvised bathroom so my parents could walk on them instead of the dirt floor. At the other end of the building was a small storage room where our makeshift shower was. In the main room, there was a sink, a few cabinets, and a wire with a sheet hanging over it that served as our “closet.”

My mother left high school in her senior year because she was expecting me. My dad was attending a local

community college and was working for his parents who ran the store upstairs. When I cried at night, my mom would sit with me outside in the car so Daddy could get some sleep.

Although my childhood remained challenging, I found a sanctuary when I started school. There, I had access to colorful books; a clean classroom with shiny, waxed linoleum floors; and a warm meal at lunchtime. I was poor, but public education was free, and at a very early age, I somehow decided not to squander a priceless opportunity.

Rather than looking at my unfashionable clothes and hairstyle and imposing on me labels like “unfortunate” or “underprivileged,” or the more recent “under-resourced,” most of my teachers saw the potential hidden inside me—and they beckoned that part of me to come out. My teachers challenged me to learn all that I could. Because of their encouragement and support, I received scholarships sufficient to fund my bachelor’s degree. I graduated with a B.A. degree in Secondary English Education from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill ... and I became a teacher, too.

When I was a student of these wonderful teachers, I could not have articulated the ideas I am sharing with you now. Without these teachers, I would not even be trying. I want to challenge you to be all you can for your students. When you grow weary (and you sometimes will), please remember my story and the ways my teachers were the conduit of my success. Or better yet, *create your own story* ... be the teacher that your students remember for challenging them to become their personal best.

About 20 years ago, one of my eighth-grade language arts students wrote a poem called “The Tide of Life,” a part of which follows:

I am the bottle in the distance  
I flow with the water’s tide  
Bobbing in this vast blue sea  
I search for something deep inside.

I am the bearer of a message  
Forever locked within  
If only I knew what it said  
This journey would not begin.

Floating smoothly on my way  
Trying to find out why I’m here  
I’m frightened to be on my own  
I’m overcome by fear.

A rush of frothy water swells  
To try and knock me down  
I have not a hand to hold  
My screams now have no sound.

It encases me in its perilous grip  
And tosses me about

Will my journey end like this?  
Will anyone help me out?

Lashing from its brutal hold  
I fly into open air  
I never thought I'd make it through  
Without somebody there.

Gliding smoothly once again  
My apprehension gone  
I thought I was a feeble one  
But my hard times proved me wrong.  
As I see the great light ahead  
My awaited destiny  
A feeling of joy rushes through  
For what I've come to be.

To me the message is revealed  
Things I hid throughout my life  
As I read I think about  
What I learned from all my strife.

I wrote the message on my own  
Through jubilation and onslaught  
I found out that what I am inside  
Is more than what I thought.

The purpose of my journey is found  
The reason why I live  
Now I'm proud of what I am  
And this message that I give.

I remember sitting with Heather, reading her poem. She waited for my reaction, and I do not think she was disappointed. Genuinely, I was moved by her honesty, her progress, her attention to her own feelings and our lessons on poetry. Like the poet, Mary Oliver, whose words provided an introduction to this letter, I was a careful observer of natural beauty in my world, the world of my middle grades classroom. In that moment, I remember thinking that *all* my students are exquisite, fragile bottles—with secret, precious, resplendent messages inside. I remember the weight of that realization, not just in that moment, during our conference, but for days and weeks and years. One of the lines was imprinted in my memory that day: “I found out that what I am inside/Is more than what I thought.” What an amazing discovery for this incredible young person. Likely, most of us chose to become teachers because we want to make a difference in the world, in the lives of others. What will astonish you and catch you completely off guard at times is what a deep, profound difference your students will make in your life—if you are willing to be dazzled. I now have more than a quarter-century worth of precious memories and moments with students who have touched and changed my life.

A few years ago, I received an e-mail from the now-grown-up poet who had written “The Tide of Life.” She wrote:

Hi!! I'm not sure if you remember me (it's been a while) but I was in your 8th grade class. You probably do; I stayed over at your house once, and you also had a little cookout for our class when we were “graduating” middle school. Anyway, I was writing to say hello, and to let you know a few things about what an influence you were on me and my career choices. First off, congratulations on your position at ASU! It's amazing that you're a professor now! Funny thing is, I am also teaching English. I graduated from UNCW this past May. I had started my college career as a business major, and by the end of my sophomore year, I realized that I had gone all wrong; I changed my major to English with the secondary certification, and I am so happy that I did. But I wanted to let you know that every now and then, I think of the kind of teacher you were. When I'm having a bad day teaching or I feel like I'm not reaching the kids, I think of things you did to keep us involved. And I've realized, you really probably were the first teacher I ever had to make an impact and have it stick with me. In your class, you encouraged me to push myself harder and to find my talents, and for that I will be forever grateful, because it's that encouragement that sparked my motivation to read and write more. I am now in a career that I love, and that I look forward to every day. You got me really interested in studying, and it was in your class that I realized what my strong subject area was. I had a few really good professors in college (I am sure you are now being that professor for some of your students!) that I am also grateful for. So, to make a long story short, thank you SO much for being such a wonderful teacher, and a great influence on so many of us.... You still stand out in my mind as my favorite teacher—10 years after I was in your class. I really hope that I can have the kind of impact that you had on me, on at least one child that I will teach. Thanks again.

You will have students like this one in your classes. This young woman's message to me a decade after she was in eighth grade affirms the importance of our collective work as middle level educators. The way we orchestrate the experiences of our students in these critical years in the middle influences the paths and decisions of their adult lives—as well as the other lives with whom theirs intertwine: “It was in your class I realized what my strengths were,” she said. Every day, you will influence your students' lives. From my experiences as a student and a teacher, I'd like to ask you to consider a few roles for yourself.

## **First, I hope you will live as an advocate ...**

When I was in first grade, I had a great advocate. Her name was Mrs. Zizzi. (Isn't that a wonderful name? It's a lot more interesting than Smith.) Please do not think I'm

lying when I tell you I had to walk to school. I really did. I went to elementary school in Florida, so it wasn't uphill either way and we didn't have snow. But in Florida, we certainly had RAIN! I remember one morning when I was walking to school, we had a typical Florida downpour. Not that it would have mattered with that kind of rain and wind, but I didn't have an umbrella. When I got to school, I was soaked. My hair was wet, my clothes were wet, my skin was saturated. My shoes squeaked when I walked into Mrs. Zizzi's classroom. "Oh, Tracy," she said, "we have to get you some dry clothes. Come with me." I followed her dutifully, but I was a bit concerned about going with a teacher to the office. Even in first grade, I knew there was a stigma associated with "going to the office."

Mrs. Zizzi led me to an inner office and introduced me to another person. I think she was a school guidance counselor. Mrs. Zizzi explained that I needed to go to the clothes closet to pick out something special to wear for the day. I think I saw these two women exchange a look of understanding (perhaps even a wink) that I had seen grown-ups exchange before. I followed the counselor to another room in the office. I am sure the room was not as big as I remember it, but when she opened the door, it looked amazing to my first-grade eyes! It was a room full of beautiful, second-hand clothes and shoes! She told me to go on in and to pick anything I wanted to wear for the day. It took me a very long time to select an outfit. I'd never seen so many clothes in one place before. Each time I tried a new ensemble, my new adult friend would ooh and ahh and tell me how beautiful I looked. Finally, I made a selection.

I really do not remember much about the final choice, but I'll never forget the experience. The counselor helped me brush out my stringy hair and sent me back to class. It was late in the morning by then. I remember I was asked to take care of the clothes and to take them home, wash them, and return them so someone else could use them. When I returned to class, Mrs. Zizzi could not say enough about how good I looked. And I did feel beautiful. Still, I knew Mrs. Zizzi valued me before my costume change. What a great way to begin my school experience. How fortunate I was to have a teacher advocate like Mrs. Zizzi.

## **Next, I hope you will love as a benefactor ...**

A *benefactor* is a person or other entity providing money or other benefits to someone; the person receiving them is called a beneficiary. In his 1937 inaugural address, Franklin Roosevelt said, "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have

much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little" (*Inaugural Addresses of the Presidents of the United States*). I suppose, for a time, I was a student who had too little. But, in third grade, my teacher and benefactor was Mr. Ferguson. Every day before lunch, Mr. Ferguson would ask us to sit in a circle around his rocking chair, and he would read aloud to us. I have such vivid and fond memories of Mr. Ferguson reading aloud to the class and bringing to life E.B. White's barnyard tale of an unlikely friendship between a pig and a spider. Mr. Ferguson, my benefactor, gave me a wonderful gift that year. He gave me a love of reading. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince* once wrote, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea" (Saubt-Exupéry & Howard, 2000). Every day of third grade, I longed for those 30 minutes, sitting at the feet of my teacher while he made stories come to life. As a teacher myself, I read aloud often, so that I could convey voices of characters to students and bring those characters to life. I knew eighth grade might be the last chance to bestow on them a love of reading. I wanted them to *long* to read, to experience literature and stories, as I had. I wanted them to feel the tension in the courtroom as Atticus Finch taught his children, his neighbors, and generations of Harper Lee's readers what real courage is.

Now, as a mother, every night my daughters and I know we will visit new places and times, we'll meet new friends in the pages of the books we share. We long to connect with the settings, the characters, and each other. I have Mr. Ferguson to thank for that. I am Mr. Ferguson's *beneficiary*, and I will forever be grateful.

## **I hope you will lead as an activist ...**

In his Day of Affirmation speech in 1966 in Capetown, South Africa, Robert Kennedy made this statement:

Let no one be discouraged by the belief that there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills—against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence... Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation... It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man (or a woman) stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he (or she) sends a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current



which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Some days, as a teacher, you will feel that you are not making a dent in the problems your students face. But remember, when you take action, even a small action, you stir the water of complacency.

One year, I taught a student named Mark. He was in my eighth-grade language arts class. Mark tried to hide from me, the way unsuccessful students try to hide from their teachers. They hide when a question is asked to the class. They hide when their teachers scan the faces of the students to check for understanding. But, in my class, it was hard to hide for long. Each week, I spent time conferencing with students and helping them set personal goals for themselves. I quickly learned why Mark was hiding. He could not read or write very well. But he had been very successful at hiding. In spite of his academic difficulties that were really very obvious, he had never been referred for evaluation. It took nearly a year to get the necessary permission and to conduct the evaluations to identify Mark's needs.

Along the way, others kept saying to me, "Why are you pushing for this? He's going to the high school next year. He probably won't stay in school very long after that. You are spending too much time on this." I have to admit that I felt like giving up a few times. But then, I'd see Mark. He started coming to my classroom in the mornings, asking me to read something he'd written at home the night before. Of course, he still had a lot of errors in his work, but he was making so much progress. I kept thinking of how much he might be able to do if he were given the time and attention he needed—and that, now, he longed for. When the evaluation was complete, we discovered that Mark had an IQ of only 68. Was it a miracle that he had gotten to the eighth grade?

He came to my room when he found out about his evaluation. All he asked was, "Mrs. Smith, do I have to leave your classroom? Will you let me stay until the end of this year?" Of course, I let him stay. When he went to high school, he was given some special assistance. Unfortunately, I found out that he didn't return for his sophomore year. When I heard this news, I heard those voices of cynicism in my head: "See, I told you it was a waste of time. He quit anyway." I silenced those voices with my anger, however. Why hadn't someone helped Mark before the eighth grade? What might he have done if someone had tried to help him earlier? There was no indication in his file that anyone ever had. He was passed along because he was great at hiding. Of course, Mark could never hide that way now, with the emphasis on testing and accountability. But why do we have to be coerced into action? I do not regret the time I spent on Mark's behalf. In the eighth grade, he created a portfolio of writings and reading

responses. He was so proud of his work. No one can take that away from him. Please be an activist for your students.

The influence you have on your students and by proxy, their families and communities, is far-reaching and profound. Please do not underestimate that. Advocate for your students, give them the tools they need to learn for a lifetime, challenge them to achieve.

I am not going to lie to you. Teaching is not all butterflies and rainbows. Right now, education is under attack. President Bill Clinton once said, "There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America" (Office of the Federal Register, 1994). I agree—and YOU are what is right with America.

Movements have been variously defined as groups of individuals in a certain time and place, characterized by (1) a common goal of changing social conditions through (2) advocacy and other individual actions; a group of people who consciously, and at their own cost, connect to change the status quo; and an ongoing, informal group action that is inspired by a passionately shared idea and directed toward positive change. What we have here in this readership, is the makings of a Movement—a group inspired by a passionately shared idea, directed toward positive change.

We are half a century into the Middle School Movement, and frankly, we've lost momentum. There is still plenty to do in your wild and precious life to improve and enrich the lives of young adolescents.

Some days your job as a teacher will invigorate you; some days it will exhaust you. On those exhausting days, try to remember that you are in the middle grades family, a family of hippies, intellectuals, heroes, advocates, benefactors, and activists. Remember your heritage and remember that you are the co-authors of your students' futures. Live to love and lead them.

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