



Radically Shifting to Unconditional Love in School

Real Teachers, Friction, and Love.

BY JOHN BICKART | April 15, 2024

There's Friction and then, There's Love

*Telling, I became a teacher.
Listening, I became a student.
Thanking, I became a friend.*

*And then I woke up to find ...
I was Truly Teaching!*

I recently heard a podcast by Alex Shevrin Venet, where she described *Unconditional Learning* - a way of her personal experience in teaching where she did not base her regard for a student based on good behavior or academic achievement. I believe she is the next version of a true teacher - what I call, Humankind 3.0. But to be completely honest, I have witnessed this before. I taught for 7 years in an alternative school with students that sound a lot like the ones Alex describes - wounded individuals who might exhibit very bad behavior at any time. The principal at my school taught the faculty - by walking the



Raymond Bock - Principal

walk and talking the talk - to maintain relationship with every student, regardless of their behavior. Oh sure, he backed teachers up by having students receive consequences to inappropriate behavior, but he asked the teachers to give every student an absolutely clean slate the day after any infraction. He coaxed us to keep a good relationship -

perhaps even a loving one - with every student. He lived this maxim. He treated the teachers and every one of the 150 students in the school as a friend.

Learning from a Student - Community is the Key

My hook into respecting every student and finding a way to have gratitude for them - even when they present difficult behavior - is based on a belief that humankind is a community. I mean really. I think we are all connected much more than we realize in our everyday consciousness. Therefore, when one of us has a problem, we all have it. It may not be on the tip of our tongues, but somehow, we share a mind that collectively shares the problem. The many share with the one. But make no mistake, we are human, not animal. Animals share a kind of group soul that shows up as a community in that they all work together; but they do not have separate, individual choices to be with that group. Humans freely can choose community or not. In this we have the ultimate privilege to decide to share with one another - to work together for the benefit of the whole. We can exercise a spiritual privilege of helping one of our own with a problem. Therefore, the community can learn and heal itself by paying close attention to the problems of the one.

Therefore, a problem student is a resource. Because they are a problem to us, they hold the key for the community mind to heal itself, if we can heal them. Their misbehavior is our opportunity.

If you can go along with me, you can find a way to be grateful for all of them. And by the way, this works with incarcerated individuals, too.

Unconditional Relationship

A **new study** shows the devastating effect we are witnessing right now from the increased suicide rates among gen z and the beneficial correlation to functional relationships. There is plenty of friction in the world. Can school be a place that models non-friction? Do you have to like a person to love them? Can you love someone who has different values? Teachers have a chance here to model true relationship by moving past telling to listening. If the teacher can find ways to thank a student for something that is genuinely worthy of gratitude, this act is true friendship and the heart of true teaching. Can we make the radical shift to actually respecting all of our students - even the ones that do not show academic promise - even the ones that misbehave? Can we learn to love them - whoever they are - whatever behavior they present?

Unconditional Love in School

I wrote about this incredible principal and this wonderful school. It's a true story.

*Following is a Chapter #4 from my book, **The Next Version of You**, which may be republished under the Creative Commons license.*

Marvin's Sacrifice

Students in our schools have problems. Don't we all? Isn't that what life is made of? Good times and problems. But, when a student has a problem, it does not belong to that student alone. In a certain way, it belongs to all of us. The school I was working in - where the events in this essay take place - believed this. Not because this school was so liberal that we bent over backwards with some sappy cliché like, "I feel your pain." Not because it was annoying to see a problem child, and we therefore simply wanted to get rid of the pain so that we, ourselves, did not have to endure it. In at least this one school I taught in for seven years, the reason that the administration and most of the teachers believed that one student's problem belonged to all of us was that a student in pain is almost always acting out of a pre-existing, inner issue that concerns us all, whether we realize it or not. If the group were not concerned, the difficult kids could not unnerve us. In other words, the reason we feel discomfort over a problem student is that the issue he or she brings must also - one way or another - live inside some of the rest of us. Whatever particular problem arises, if we find ourselves getting really annoyed by it, then that problem must be in the larger society's consciousness, already. Therefore, it is important for us to look at it. It must be something that at least some of us have deep feelings about; otherwise, it wouldn't bother us.

If a student has a problem that does not annoy us, then it was not something in our group consciousness. Take the case of vandalism. The school in which I was teaching was kept clean and in good repair. For the seven years I was there, the students helped keep it that way. It was an alternative high school where most students were emotionally upset, so they came to us, rather than stay in the mainstream schools. On occasion, a student got

rough, and a window would break. Once, a student broke the front door window when he opened it by hitting the glass too hard with his hand, instead of using the handle. I noticed that the administration replaced the glass very quickly and didn't make a big deal of it. I never heard anyone speaking to the student body at large or to individual classes about it. I didn't hear warnings or scoldings about being more careful. My sense was that the administration and faculty were minimizing the problem because they didn't feel this physical act to be something that would proliferate, so it didn't need to be addressed. In fact, just the opposite was true. It seemed that the intentional plan was not to talk about it, so that attention would refocus on the other more positive activities coming up that week. I got the feeling that everyone from the principal and director down was consciously not calling attention to the broken door. They were keeping focus on the fun we were having. This is an example of a problem that does not trigger the group consciousness enough to demand a lot of action. But let's look at the opposite kind of situation. What about a student who brings us a problem that touches a nerve in the group consciousness? That was the case with Marvin.

Marvin's first day of school was well after school had started for the year and he came with a police escort. The problem with Marvin was that he wouldn't go to school, and his mother and father couldn't get him to. So, under police threat of either going to the school with them or going to juvenile detention, he came to us. The police escorted him into the principal's office, where he announced that he would stay right where he was and not go to class. This was as far as he would go. The principal was very wise. He did not want to provoke a lot of immediate attention and energy around this specific problem, as if it were so powerful that it needed a large response. Yet, he knew that his job was to somehow get Marvin to class. He also knew that if he forced Marvin to class somehow, such as by using the police, then Marvin might return this show of force with a greater one. He might leave class later

in the day or even illegally walk off the school grounds. This would be like shooting himself in the foot. Leaving the school might send him to 'juvi' - juvenile detention. But even when the stakes were that high, we've seen students get overwhelmed and run away; so this was a real possibility.

The principal started his special brand of magic. "Marvin, why don't you try going to one class - in fact it wouldn't be a whole class - it will be about half of a class, because we're in the middle of a period right now? I'll drop you off at the class and then I'll pick you up when it's over. It will be an experiment." He even compromised with Marvin, telling him that if this experiment doesn't work, he could go home and try again another day. So, Marvin had a pretty good incentive to give it a try. Now, keep in mind, this is a principal who is very wise; he also knew Marvin's background and had a pretty good read on the magnitude of Marvin's resistance.

But, all that aside, this principal also understood that if one student is having a problem that captures the attention and emotions of others, then the whole group of us as a school, could have a problem. In fact, he was the person who taught me a main point of this essay: that a problem kid brings out a problem in us all! The principal knew that Marvin's resistance to going to school was not something to minimize. As soon as each one of us hears that a student is trying to resist coming to school, we all feel quite annoyed. "Not going to school?", we say. "Why, that's what all normal kids do!" When you feel this kind of reaction, you know that some nerve in the group consciousness is being struck. Marvin's abstinence is something that bothers all of us; it represents something we must respect as OUR problem. Respect it? Yes. For, if we treated it as an issue we all have, apparently not yet solved, then it can become an opportunity and a door to freedom for us all. If we could respect this problem, we might even have a feeling of gratitude toward someone like Marvin. We might even see him as a sacrificial poster child of our problem.

The principal was getting Marvin to try a class. The reason I know so much about this is that it was my second period physical science class Marvin was brought to. He came into my class looking around as if he expected another student to do something bad to him. He was definitely shy, definitely insecure, carrying his shoulders up around his neck as if he were in cold water. The principal asked to speak to me privately in the hall. He gave me a quick snapshot of the situation. He suggested that all I had to do was keep Marvin in class for the second half of the period.

My sense for how to handle Marvin was very similar to what the principal had done. I pretty much ignored him and tried not to call attention to him as some special case. I understood that might make him feel on edge and ignite his resistance. I also didn't want to signal the class to behave very differently and start watching Marvin. So I started to resume teaching the class as usual. But it wasn't usual. It wasn't at all usual. In the next 20 minutes, I noticed an increasingly UNusual occurrence. I felt a flood of ideas popping into my head that were different from the way I would have handled the same topic on a normal day. Although this stream of new ideas was unusual today, I must say that over the years, I have come to expect such promptings. Some of what I call "my best ideas" appear to have an origin outside my ordinary experience; yet they pop into my mind in a way that makes it possible for me to use my normal vocabulary to describe a totally new perception. I have spent the last forty years cultivating the ground of my mind to receive such promptings. Perhaps they are the most fun and the most insightful ideas I get. Moreover, part of every class I teach is devoted to showing my students how to cultivate this ground in and for themselves. I show them how to expect the new, hope for better ideas than before, and hold one's mind in a still readiness that is not solely full of chatter from past experiences.

As I covered the points in my lesson plan, each point seemed to come out of my mouth with a wording that was more

about feelings than about the science lesson itself. Analogies came to mind that loosely explained the physical science examples we were talking about, but also slanted more toward personal, psychological matters. The lesson was about how scientists use parent-child relationships to describe physical forces and causes. For example, a scientist might explain the force of gravity causing the motion of a planet, or the electromagnetic force causing the movement of electrons, by comparing these forces to parents. "In both cases," I said, "the force is like the will of the parent and the object it moves is like the child." As I looked around the classroom, I saw students who have serious parent issues glaze over, tear up, or get that escapist look as if they were trying to avoid something. Any good teacher could have seen what I saw. But today something was different. My mind suddenly received instructions - or maybe they are better described as suggestions - that continued the analogies between science and human parents. Somewhat to my surprise, I found myself saying, "You know kids, once gravity gets hold of a planet, it pretty much forces the planet to move the way it wants it to. It's like a parent that makes you do something, even if you have totally other ideas." Now, I checked the room for a reaction. With a loaded statement like that, it's very unlikely NOT to get a strong reaction from teenagers. But then the real fun started. I pushed further, "But you know, gravity is just a force. Its JOB is to force things. It seems to have been made to always force things. If you wish it to be something else, you will be sorely disappointed. Wait a minute. Imagine this. Try going up to gravity and saying, 'Hey gravity, could you pleeeeeeeeeeease just this once not force me down. How about it. Just don't pull me down this one time.' Do you really think gravity would listen? Would it make an exception just for you? I mean, seriously, you want gravity to not be gravity? Forget about it. You could spend your whole life dependent on the hopes that gravity will some day stop forcing you the way it always does; and it will only lead to disappointment. Your only hope with gravity is to become

independent of gravity's behavior. You must protect yourself from becoming dependent on the fact that it will inevitably do its job." I ended my lesson with the obvious correlation to psychology - "Hey kids, does this sound like I'm talking about your parents?"

As I relayed these new ideas I was receiving, Marvin suddenly came alive. He asked his first question. With a twinkle in his eyes, as if he were trying to be challenging, he asked, "Are science teachers always sure about what they tell the students?" He seemed to wish to see if I would accept his challenge or not. I immediately took it up and answered his question.

"Decidedly not! I think all teachers, all people, and even parents get all kinds of things wrong. And the best thing about a group of us all gathered here is that we scientists are supposed to be gathered in the name of truth. So Marvin, that means you're allowed to challenge whenever you want. You might be the reason I get something right today!" The class chuckled. "Seriously though, even if you border on being disrespectful, it's probably better to get out your thought." Then, I explained to him that in my class, we also deal with personal problems, even though it was a physical science class, because everything that is important for a human to learn, relates ultimately, to the individual person. I told him that, in my class, we respect the differences in every person - even when a student asks questions whose relevance is hidden from the teacher. Then I addressed the whole class, saying, "What I don't understand, still deserves respect. If you have a problem, how are you going to face it if you have disrespected it? You won't look into it more. You will run away from it. You will be putting it back into the shadow - into the blindspot, where it was before - where it could hurt you repeatedly." I told the class that the way to solve a problem is to drag it out into the open, into the light, out of the shadow, and respect that there is a good reason that you're having that problem!

You should have seen Marvin. His face visibly changed. You could see that a light went on. Only, my perception was that it wasn't a light in his mind, at first - it was in his heart. I believe Marvin first felt something, then he thought something. I believe that after his heart opened, something dawned in his mind. He had a strategy. Marvin needed school to work on his problems. He needed a group gathering.

Over many talks later that year, I realized that on that day, Marvin saw that his problems needed to be dragged out into the light to be visible to others. He realized that a classroom full of people was a perfect place to solve his problem. After all, if he didn't respect himself and his agenda enough to bring it out into the clearing of the group, he might not solve it. But also, our talks explored how his solution was the very thing that so many of us are working on - finding respect for ourselves and our shadows. Once Marvin could see that his problem was something we all need to talk about, he relaxed. And once he saw that it was useful to bring problems out into the open so they could really be worked on - he was on a mission. His classes became counseling sessions - but not in a way that took over the class. In subtle ways he and I worked behind the scenes, where the science lesson simply drew parallels to human problems.

This attention to Marvin wasn't at the expense of the other students; in fact, it had a good effect on the whole class. They had the look and feel of a group that has just witnessed one person doing a seriously good deed for another. It was as if the good deed was done to and for each one of them. I heard that human beings in the presence of a good deed have an increase in endorphin secretion. Well, maybe that is what happened to the class. They seemed to relax and take in a deep breath. The room became a little more of a safe place. It was almost as if the ceiling lifted a bit and the light in the room brightened. It seemed that they were processing the possibility that this much care and attention would one day be given to each of them.

I have noticed over the years that when many students are gathered in classrooms, the cafeteria, or in front of the school at bus time, the group at large seems to notice and respond to acts of kindness. They seem to 'pay it forward'. My observation, however, is that this is definitely quite subtle. And I am sure that, even if it is true, the group response is rather complex. Perhaps the group as a whole senses the act of kindness, but different individuals in the group respond according to how the act benefits them personally.

Marvin stayed for that half of my class, then he stayed the whole day. He proposed to the principal that if he could be in the course that I taught he would come to the school. It was a deal. Marvin had lunch with me every day for a while, and then, little by little, he started to make friends with other students. Eventually, he became one of the many students blending in, having a good time.

I believe that Marvin represented a problem that challenged us all. In this, he was strong, not weak. His strength came out initially in how hard he resisted going to school. But his real strength was in waiting until he saw a real solution to his problem and not settling for being what we often call normal. Normal. You know, that's doing what the larger group is always expecting you to do. Marvin held out until he could see an authentic way forward. I believe the problem that Marvin exposed to the rest of us - a problem we all have - was that in large measure, we don't fully enjoy ourselves or feel that we belong, because we don't believe we deserve respect. We often go along with the rules merely because it's the normal thing to do; it's expected of us. Marvin was willing to not be normal until he could see a way to respect himself and be respected by others. By resisting going to school, Marvin had made a statement: "Perhaps you are just going along with the program, but you don't necessarily believe in what you're doing. You may not even respect yourselves and what you do." He challenged one of our basic norms: that every child automatically goes to school, simply because it is expected of him or her. And that

challenge was what we all needed to hear and see played out before us, as if performed on a stage. Our group may have been experiencing this resistance subconsciously, but it took someone willing to sacrifice himself for the group to bring it out into the open.

You may be thinking that I am glorifying a simple act of misbehavior. Here is a young man who refused to go to school. I know that you may be saying, "How do you get from there to Marvin's sacrifice for the group?"

It's not that Marvin was necessarily conscious of his beneficent act of serving the whole group this way; nevertheless, when the group consciousness is calling, perhaps screaming something out, someone has to do the dirty work of acting out the part. Marvin bothered us very much by challenging the norm. Why did he do it? Why do any of us do what we do? I believe that on some level - on some deep level - we know that the group - the oneness to which we claim we belong - always needs help. There are things that we just can't do on our own. In Marvin's case, we needed somebody to stand out and be the poster child of our collective cry, "I want to respect myself!" We needed Marvin to stand out from all of us and say, "I want to do things because I believe in them and not do them if I don't believe in them." We needed somebody to be sacrificed and look *very not normal* and get in trouble, so that we all could rise to the occasion. Anyone working with Marvin directly had to bring respect or else he would not engage. Marvin's challenge asked us to come to him with an open mind and assume that what he brought had the possibility of guiding the group. He further asked - demanded - that as we respected, and opened our minds, we also trusted that there was value in the guidance. And in this trust, we were further expected to respond. In this case, we did. Marvin won; we all won.

Unconditional love of a student? If not, what are the conditions?

About the Author



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John Bickart, Ph.D., likes to work in the background and let good ideas speak for themselves. He believes that children, and sometimes adults, know what they want and that they empower themselves when they listen to their hearts.

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