

Director's Report

The Hug

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Hug: to clasp or hold closely, especially in the arms, as in affection; embrace; to stay close to, a close affectionate embrace.

From the Old Norse hugga, to comfort.

—American Heritage Dictionary

A few semesters ago, I had a young man, an athlete with the soul of a poet, in my American Literature class. He attended class regularly, participated in class discussion, and submitted his work on time. He often stayed after to talk poetry, embarrassed, I suppose, to respond too enthusiastically in class. I was surprised,



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therefore, when he didn't show up for the final exam. Later that afternoon, he came to my office. "Where is everyone?" he asked, looking terrified. "No one was in the room to take the final."

"You missed it. It was this morning," I said. "I was wondering where you were."

"Oh no!" he cried. "How could I have been that stupid? How did I mess this one up?"

"It's OK," I said. "Let's find you a quiet place. You can take the exam now."

"I can? You'd let me do that?"

I smiled at him, and he just sort of wilted. When he recovered, he enfolded me in the biggest hug I have ever received. At first I didn't know how to respond—I was so taken aback. But then I realized that big guy was just a little boy who needed comfort. Although I often connect to my students through touch, I had never before been hugged by a college student. It wasn't difficult to figure out what to do, however. I just patted his back and told him everything was fine. He had tears in his eyes when he finally let go.

This whole scene had been observed by two other professors in the hallway. One smiled and nodded knowingly. The other shook her head and looked at me disdainfully.

"You're not doing him a favor, you know," she said. "He's got to learn to take responsibility for himself sooner or later." I hadn't considered what I'd done a favor for this young man. I was responding to him with care, the way I'd respond to any child who was in trouble. I muttered something about determining each case on an individual basis and went about my business. The relief that had flooded through him and that emerged in that

hug was enough for me to justify my granting him his unspoken wish. It was evident to me that he cared about his work and this class. And it made me feel good to express my care for him. This kind of "educational love," according to Otto Bollnow, incorporates "patience, hope, serenity, humor, and goodness." He also says that this relationship with the student "does not relax the situation by lowering demands." He refers to it instead as "a sensitive watchfulness," which is possible at all levels of education.

What happens during a hug? Two arms reach out in an embrace and enfold another. Bodies connect and are comforted. This is not a common occurrence between teacher and student. My student might have been embarrassed after this spontaneous display of emotion, but he wasn't. I'm sure he saw me as *in loco parentis*, someone who cared for and about him throughout the semester in the absence of his own parents. He is some other person's child, but during the time he spends with me during the semester, he is mine. Why shouldn't college be a place where students find nurturance, care, sympathy and compassion, a place to get a hug when one is needed? Just as we model appropriate moral and ethical behavior for our children, we have the opportunity to model caring behavior for our students to create a caring, nurturing curriculum and a caring, nurturing world.

Even though both of my children are now grown, I still think about the ways I want them to be treated, the decisions I want made on their behalf. I still want them treated with care and sympathy, with compassion and respect. I want their value recognized. I want their sense of humor given the space to arise. I want them seen beyond the faces in the crowd, seen beneath to their uniqueness, their worth. I want them to recognize that worth in themselves. I hope that I am creating a space in the classroom for other people's children's worth to emerge. I hope that the curricular decisions I am making allow this space to happen.

Like parents, we teachers care for our students as well as about them and hope that we can guide them to care for and about themselves. And we hope their education will be a moral as well as an intellectual one, one which attends to body, mind and spirit. Nell Noddings, in her book *The Challenge to Care in the Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, writes, "Education should be organized around themes of care rather than traditional disciplines" (p. 173). "As human beings," she says, "we care what happens to us ... for adolescents these are among the most pressing questions: What am I? What kind of person will I be? Who will love me? How do others see me? Yet schools spend more time on the quadratic formula than on any of these existential questions" (p. 20).

There is so much to cover in a course each semester—there are tests, outcomes, performance assessments. How can we care for our students, develop this human relationship with them, and still teach them what they will need to know about writing? There is so much that they don't yet know. There are so many ways to answer this question, but I hope I can help fill some of the gaps in their knowledge while at the same time guide them to an uncovering and understanding of who they are in the world.