

A Message to My Students

(Editor's note: As the nation pauses to commemorate the tragic loss of life that occurred on September 11, 2001, the following article is as applicable now as during the turbulent time in which it was written.)

I was recently on a return trip from serving the needs of the poor and marginalized people in a foreign country. The work was hard, but rewarding. I returned home on September 9, 2001, just days before the tragedies that befell New York, Washington, D.C. and Pennsylvania. With God's grace, I returned to my teaching position at a very small college in the Midwest.

In the months after the 9-11 attacks, I, like many other Americans, reflected upon those tragic events and asked myself how I would live my life differently. I wondered if my friends and family knew what I thought and felt about them. Since I am a teacher, this was probably a thought most people had or have had since that time. Since I am a teacher, as was my father before me, I began to wonder if my students knew what I thought and felt about them. If you're reading this - I thought you should know.

As your teacher, it may appear that I am more interested in facts and figures, since this is what we spend most of our time talking about. However, I think more about each of you as individuals. I have hopes, dreams and aspirations about your futures that might surprise you. Sure, I write difficult exams, and it may seem as if I like making life difficult for you, but I pray for the success of each and every one of you.

Remember how I would walk up and down the aisles of the classroom to hand out the exams? I tried to make eye contact with each of you as I handed you an exam booklet, and often said in a low voice, "Good luck." Remember how I'd walk quietly (well - except for my squeaky right shoe) through the aisles of chairs filled with your nervous bodies? That was me - silently saying your name to myself, wishing you well, and praying for your success.

Remember how we'd discuss, laugh, and sometimes argue our points to one another during a lecture? That was my way of sharing with you the factual information I thought was important for you to know, while respecting your individuality in how to access it and learn that information on your own. And in those moments, you showed yourselves to be blessings. As a blessing, I recognized that each of you possessed the ability to bring prosperity in any of its forms to those with whom you came in contact. In many cases, your blessings are to bring healing to those you touch. You should know that I feel this in my heart about you!

I never tried to be a monument to superior education; how lifeless and self-serving that would be! My tact toward teaching was to set a proverbial banquet before you - an educational feast fit for royalty - and then invite you as my celebrated guests! And I was honored to have you accept my invitations. We were like the Knights of the Round Table on a shared quest, traveling different paths. There was majesty - one might even say, "valor" - in the way you accepted my challenges. A real education, in my way of thinking, imparts more than "things for the head." A true education imparts "things of the heart" as well. Many of you found that your heads and hearts were compatible with each other, and therein live your blessings.

Sometimes we lost sight of these important thoughts and feelings, and sometimes we simply never expressed them to each other. Maybe it is the pursuit of passing grades, graduation credits, hour requirements or extracurricular activities, including your family obligations. I wanted to let you know how I felt - before something ever happens to us. I don't want any of us to have to guess about what it has meant to have you in my life!

I want you to always remember that an education is something that should empower you; it should never be used to limit or intimidate you. Your education should allow you to be a blessing to those you touch and with whom you share your lives. You have enriched my life in ways you may never know.

Be diligent in your studies; you have blessings to bestow on others.

Your Friend and Teacher,

Andrew Bonci, DC
Kansas City, Missouri
abonci@yahoo.com

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