

MAINTAINING A LIFE: MARGARET METZGER'S MESSAGE TO BEGINNING TEACHERS

I read this article years ago, and it profoundly influenced the way I looked at the development of teachers as they move from beginners to becoming more proficient teachers. You will find some wisdom and more questions in these *letters from Margaret to Christine*.

Letters from Margaret to Christine: <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Maintaining+a+life.-a018107897>

I assigned this article to the student teachers in my graduate course and asked them to write letters to Margaret with their response to her message. I mailed them to her, and she most graciously responded by writing a letter to my class. This is her message.

Dear Future Teachers,

Carol sent me copies of your final essay for the course. I was honored that my writing was used as a prompt. In your essays, I was impressed by your enthusiasm, honesty, and ideas. You have creative ideas about your classrooms, and you are asking the right questions about teaching.

One new teacher once said to me, "It's too much to ask of a new teacher to look at the importance of student work. I can barely call attendance, and you want the cosmos? Be reasonable." Another new teacher, a thirty-five-year-old, six-foot, ex businessman, also told me that I was expecting too much. After I watched his class, I asked what was going on between two feuding girls, whether he had checked with counselors about a depressed boy, what he knew about the most aggressive kid, etc. The teacher replied, "I'm sure you were right. I don't know enough about the individuals. I haven't looked into backgrounds. But I can't. I'm just trying to get everyone on the same page. I can't think of them as individuals yet, but only as a group. I'm herding cats here."

These two men reminded me that the job of the first-year teacher is not excellence but survival. Teaching is a hugely complicated job, with demands from the state, the parents, the curriculum, and the diverse population, etc., etc., etc. And the great unfairness is that a brand-new teacher gets the same job description as a twenty-year veteran!

New teachers are exhausted, frustrated, lonely, and self-doubting. I cried a lot. As you improve, your standards go up and up. At first, you are grateful for the silent kids who just do what they are told. Later, you worry about them, knowing that passivity is a major discipline problem. At first you plan lessons for the group; much later you plan alternative lessons for differentiated learning. At first you secretly try to fill class hours; later, you worry that you never have enough class time. At first, you can't handle the paper load; later, you still can't handle the paper load—but you might have some routines.

You will never be perfect, or even done improving. When I retired for health reasons after forty-two years, I was still working on my teaching, still swearing that I would get it right next year. As new teachers, your first job is to stay in teaching. We lose 50 percent of our teachers in the first five years.

So, how can you stay in teaching and get better? Number one: forgive yourself. You are going to make mistakes—in every area. The question is how would you respond to those mistakes? Will you get better? Lower your standards? Blame the kids? Blame the school or the state? Wallow in self-hatred? Chuck the whole profession?

Instead, when things go wrong, try to create a theory for failure. Try to understand failure as your chance to learn. What is the problem?

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Catalog perennial troubles, such as not completing homework, finishing work at different times, losing materials, cheating, disrupting class, etc. Keep a list of problems. In the summer, when you can breathe and think, create rules and routines to solve the problems.

Also, during the year, write down what worked well. You think you will remember, but you won't.

I am trying to say that you won't solve all the problems at first. Prioritize what you have to solve in order to stay in the profession. For me, first, I had to solve discipline and paperwork. But what must be solved is different for all teachers.

Again, congratulations for choosing such an interesting profession. Take good care of yourselves. At the very least, be as forgiving and gentle with yourselves as you are with your students.

With respect,

Margaret Metzger