

## CHAPTER 1

# Dying to Teach

*It is usually the imagination that is wounded first, rather than the heart; it being much more sensitive.*

—Henry David Thoreau

E ducation is a habitat for heroes.

And, what else would we expect? Teaching tackles and fulfills one of the most foundational and primordial purposes of civilization. Teachers prepare children for adulthood and careers. More than that, they preserve the social order. That very milieu attracts those of heroic spirit.

That heroic dimension is why teaching provides an exceptional and recurrent focus for books and movies. Each generation of teachers can point to a printed or filmed story of heroes—*Up the Down Staircase*, *Stand and Deliver*, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, etc. Each spoke to the hero's heart in millions of boys or girls, sitting in movie theaters or curled up in Dad's reading chair.

Our MindShift team also knows those heroes. They cared enough about the story of teachers to join our team. Lynn Frickey, Dan Berens, Michelle Kinder, David Vroonland, Rachel Hucul, John Gasko, Denise Benavides, and other teachers (active or retired) knew the movies and books, and they knew the twenty-first-century educational machine that chewed teachers carefully and slowly before swallowing them up alive.



Another of those teachers, Dr. Marilyn Denison, was a long-time educator and administrator who specialized in launching new schools. She left education after two decades because of the stress. Six months into her new job with DLR Group she saw her doctor for her regular checkup. Her doctor had long been concerned about Marilyn's blood pressure. Soon after the checkup, her doctor called.

"Marilyn, what are you doing differently?"

Assuming a problem, Marilyn started to list several recent minor health issues when the doctor said, "No, that's not what I'm calling about. It's your blood work. You have NO stress markers at all. What changed?"

Marilyn told her the only thing that had changed was that she quit teaching and accepted a job she loved and a place where she was appreciated. Through subsequent conversations with her doctor, Marilyn clearly saw she had been dying to teach.

WHAT IS  
GOING ON  
WITH YOUR  
**STRESS**  
LEVELS  
?



## Who Cares?

The course of our work all over the country very naturally brought us into continuous interaction with the teachers on our team. As our work moved into stories of teacher and student trauma, as we talked to courageous and selfless educators, and walked through broken neighborhoods, we often saw our teachers suddenly look away, shake their heads, and wipe their eyes.

Sometimes it was like walking through old battlefields with the retired servicemen and women who once had fought there. In time, we all began to realize how much those old soldiers and sailors still care about those who remain in battle mode. Despite their own PTSD, some part of them wished they could return to the front.

Yet, even as we were surrounded with those genuinely intrepid teachers, we began encountering Gallup's reports that 70% of teachers have checked out and 20% are so indifferent that they poison the atmosphere. In fact, "teacher disengagement" sits at the center of the debate over school performance. So, there we were, working with teachers of generational,

geographic, ethnic, and political diversity. But, they all cared. Every one of them. Deeply. And Gallup says 70% of teachers have disengaged?

What was going on?

## **The Next Jump**

In January 2018, I attended a three-day leadership academy in New York City sponsored by Next Jump, the e-commerce company. As part of their passion for supporting educators, Next Jump's academy offers their unconventional philosophy, tools, and practices to teachers.

Next Jump's unorthodox approach grows out of their own unique history. After early success, they plunged to near bankruptcy during the dot-com crash. After surviving, Next Jump shifted its business platform from marketing to technology. That launched a period of rapid growth, an evolution that stripped away the culture which the founders built and cherished. As Charlie Kim, the driving founder, explained to our class, "We found ourselves with a small army of brilliant jerks." So, one Friday afternoon, Charlie and Meghan Messenger (another founder) fired 50% of their programmers. They started over, establishing the right culture and character, and then rebuilt the business on that new platform.

Next Jump now employs around 250 people, and those people generate \$2.5 billion in annual revenue. That is \$10 million of revenue per employee! To put this in perspective, Google makes about \$1.63 million and Walmart about \$230,000 per employee. Next Jump is clearly a cult, in the best sense of the word ("cult," as the root for culture).

The three-day academy felt like a group of little league baseball players showing up at Yankee Stadium for a day of training and workouts. It was a day of 90-mile-an-hour fastballs, magical curveballs, a lot of grins, and shaking our heads in awe of what we saw and did. The Next Jumpers were confident, transparent, genuine, and generous.

We watched young employees, just a few years out of college, quietly manifesting the poise and presence of seasoned executive leaders. That is part of their mystique and magic. Their transparency and willingness to go off script showed up the morning of our last day. Of course, that very genuine integrity and flexibility were a jolt to the group. But the whole Next Jump experience was an earthquake to my paradigm regarding employee and teacher engagement.

## “I Just Got a View of Everything I Can’t Do”

Charlie Kim kicked off the academy’s final day by telling us, “The safest thing we can do is to follow our agenda. You’ll have a great day, and at the end, we’ll shower you with books and gifts, food, and a great send-off.

“But we think we might have screwed up the whole thing. We may have lost sight of the primary reason we held this academy. It is for educators, not for the VIP guests observing. You are very good people doing good work, but you are resource-starved, time-starved.

“I feel like we showcased our healthy food, exercise, and things you cannot imagine. We plopped you into how we run. That’s why our team stepped back last night and asked, ‘Are we actually helping them?’

“Is today going to end where you educators walk away, saying, ‘Okay, that’s cool, but I just got a view of everything I can’t do.’ That’s why I reached out to Peter Chiarchiaro, our Director of Wellness, to provide a summary of the vitals we took from you yesterday. We take the same vitals with every academy. We’ve seen it for the CIA, the military, Fortune 500 companies, every group.

“Let me read Peter’s summary:

*This group’s energy efficiency is bad, very bad. It sucks, to be blunt. Of the twenty people, sixteen are in a survival state, four are in varying states of alarm, and none are thriving. The four alarmed ones are very distressed. To have 20% of any group on hyper on-guard state is a really bad sign. These teachers and educators seem to be in a major fight-or-flight mode. This is a super-humble group. The takeaway? This group needs recovery program times 1000. These educators are the least energy-efficient of the groups we’ve seen. This is backed by blood pressure tests.*

Then Charlie continued, “If that is true, we want to help you. So, could you somehow let us know what would help you?”

Then, as requested, the teachers began to talk.

From Jess: “My value priorities for my students are to foster nuance and inquiry; slow, deep, and thoughtful learning. But your tools and approach to feedback support a different value than what I’m trying to craft on a day-to-day basis. That’s the part I’m struggling with the most.”

Then Joe spoke, “You’ve been able to build a feedback culture from the bottom up. It works the way you want it to work. But, in a heavily

routinized school system, where the feedback structure will not change, I am asking how Next Jump's approach can work in *my* world.

"I was really fascinated to hear how frankly ad hoc your system is. You can send an email, you can do this, you can do all these other things. In our environment, if someone sends a candid email, alarm bells will go off all the way up the ladder because it has. . . (pause) *implications*."

"Hi, I'm Robert. I think we all recognize that schools run a different culture. So, there is naturally a lot of resistance to adding anything unless they have a high degree of confidence it will create value. I would be interested in going around the room and letting every person share one idea that you learned in this workshop that you think can realistically be used in your school. I'm starving for ideas to enhance what we're doing."

Then Charlie spoke up, "The two industries we have aligned ourselves with, and give most of our company resources to, are the military and education. Both recruit very good people in the line of service.

"But, it's like the flight attendant's announcement before takeoff, 'In case of an emergency the oxygen masks will drop down. First, place the oxygen mask on yourself and *then* help others.' Humans are wired to serve other humans, which is what you do in education. The same is true for the military. However, you can't help someone else if your cup is empty.

"But, people in education forget to take care of themselves. They forget that when you don't take care of yourself, you can't go far in helping others."

## **Wounded Warriors**

When Charlie read the group's test results and interpreted the data, shoulders sagged, and heads dropped around the room. I heard long and slow exhales. We all saw that "survival," just barely getting by, had become the norm. No one could recall what normal felt like.

That pried the lid off; we began to hear stories from the front lines. One teacher told us, "I used to work in schools designated as turnaround schools, where the culture was very aggressive and chaotic. There was no trust. It was all upstream and taxing. I tried as best I could to build a loving and accepting culture. Now, I'm just tired. These schools have an 80% failure rate. Mine was 50%. How can I feel good about that?"

Most of the teachers were in a constant fight-or-flight mode, the autonomic nervous system's response to perceived danger. The report described the teachers as "barely hanging on."

When the academy finished, I immediately called Bill Latham. "Bill, what if disengagement isn't the problem? What if everyone has been working on the wrong problem for the last several decades? What if the real problem is battle fatigue that *looks like* disengagement? What if teachers are not *disengaged* but *over-engaged*? What if they care too much?"

And Bill responded, "If that's true, we've built a multi-billion-dollar industry committed to solving the wrong problem!"

## **"A Thousand Invisible Betrayals of Purpose"**

The educational-industrial complex thought it was grappling with teacher disengagement. But, they were wrong. The premise was flawed. So, they had leaned their ladder on the wrong wall. It was a good ladder; nothing wrong with it at all. Except that it was giving the specialists and their power tools access to the wrong work area.

Gallup's 2018 Teacher Wellbeing Index reports that 67% of teachers and 80% of administrators work under high stress. These demands interfere with home life for three-quarters of them. The same percentage have experienced a variety of physical and mental symptoms and one quarter received a medical diagnosis from their general practitioner.

And no schools and districts we saw have plans for tackling the problem. The approaches are reactive, too late, and ineffective. To compound the problem, many teachers feel that raising red flags about stress would hurt their careers.

The most common daily manifestations come in the form of insomnia, irritability, tearfulness, difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, dizziness, and anxiety. This condition has made teaching the fourth most stressful job behind working parents, active military, and police officers.<sup>1</sup> And, most teachers are also working parents.

In fact, teachers have been absorbing the erosions of their physical energy, mental health, and souls. Dr. Jeff Jernigan, author and counselor, describes burnout as "A thousand invisible betrayals of purpose that go unnoticed until it is too late."<sup>2</sup>

All the signs show too many teachers have no buffer remaining. The cartilage is gone; they are bone-on-bone. And, because they are so exhausted and wounded, students with deep needs have no place to go. That condition places education on a collision course between the students who need care and the teachers who have nothing left to give.

### **Wrapping Up**

- Education, by the nature of its call, becomes a gathering place for heroes.
- They serve society's highest needs and aspirations, preparing children for adulthood and careers. More than that, they preserve the social order.
- But, somewhere, our society got the idea that educators disengaged from that high calling. That judgment resulted from a misdiagnosis.
- Teachers care too much, not too little.

### **Practical Reflections**

1. Think about the times you bought the disengagement story. Did anything about that ring false to you? Do you think exhaustion or battle fatigue might have been a better diagnosis or explanation?
2. If you are a teacher, and had been part of the Next Jump Academy, would your vital signs have told the same story?
3. If not, why not? How do you defy the odds?

## **Notes**

1. Linda C. Brinson, "10 Most Stressful Jobs in America." HowStuffWorks, Oct. 12, 2010. [www.money.howstuffworks.com/10-most-stressful-jobs-in-america7.htm](http://www.money.howstuffworks.com/10-most-stressful-jobs-in-america7.htm)
2. Dr. Jernigan's presentation to the WELCOA Summit, August 16, 2018.