

LOOKING GOOD DILEMMA (FOCUS ON EXCELLENCE)

Ray is a middle-aged history teacher at a new pilot school. Ray believes that kids need to enjoy themselves to learn. At the same time, he is a firm believer in holding students accountable: he expects them to be on time, to complete their work, and to not settle for a mediocre grade. As an individual teacher, holding students accountable is a real challenge. The school is a pilot school, and so it “might not be around in two or three years.” In order to help the school “succeed” and make it “look good,” many teachers at Ray’s school teach “down” to students and also inflate grades so that it appears that the students are thriving academically. Although Ray is part of a tight-knit community at the school, he often feels isolated when confronted with the issue of grading.

Ray, who is in his forties, has worked for most of his career in education, most recently with young prisoners in alternative schools. He currently teaches history to tenth and eleventh graders at a new pilot school. For some, teaching students who at times need encouragement to engage deeply with the material can be discouraging, but for Ray, working at this pilot school seems easier than his previous job: the pilot school has state-of-the-art technology, enthusiastic teachers, preferential treatment in the district, and is expecting to secure a new building soon.

Ray approaches his teaching in a practical manner. He is not interested in becoming involved in students’ personal lives, but is more invested in creating lifelong learners. He believes that if he can impart enthusiasm for history, students will gain practice in writing, thinking critically, being reflective, making predictions, and finding trends and patterns. Each of these skills will help his students to become successful and prepare them for the future, a future he hopes will include higher education.

On a daily basis, Ray tries to have fun in class, because he believes that kids need to enjoy themselves to learn. He also believes that as a teacher, you get better results when you’re likable, affable, and accessible. At the same time, Ray firmly believes in accountability—holding students responsible for being on time for class, completing their work in a timely manner, and not settling

for a “C” simply because it is better than failure. He remarks: “We’re not babysitters, we’re not parents, we’re not even camp counselors: we’re teachers. We’re trying to impart knowledge of a particular subject matter. I’m not here to be a surrogate parent for these children, even though that’s basically what ends up happening a lot of times.”

Ray often struggles with how to teach the content of his course: he knows that many students at the new school are not ready for the content that is appropriate and expected of their respective grade levels; nonetheless, he does not want to expect less of his students and teach less than what they should be learning. He also does not want to perpetuate a cycle in which students are continually promoted when they are academically unprepared for the following year.

As an individual teacher, upholding accountability is a real challenge. In the community, most parents provide minimal academic support and do not have high expectations—or standards—for their children. As a result, Ray believes, students have learned that just coming to school is a sign of success and some seem to forget that they actually have to work while there. As a teacher, Ray faces conflicting responsibilities to his students, himself, to the teachers’ union, and to his school:

“I want my students to be the best. I want them to look good when they go out into the world. I want someone to say, ‘Now there’s a kid who’s really got his act together.’ And then secondly [a responsibility to myself], ‘Now there’s a guy who looks like he enjoys what he does for a living.’ Third would be [a responsibility to the union]: ‘Now there’s a group of people who feel very passionately about the work that they do and they want to protect their workers, but also provide the best quality experience for the kids in this city.’ And my fourth one is the school, because ... this is a pilot school; it might not be around in two or three years. It’s called a pilot school for a reason, and I can’t sacrifice myself or my students for the sake of something that’s still an experiment. Now, I’m not trying to be cynical. I’m just saying that’s a reality ... And I’m going to try to help it succeed, but I have to meet other needs first.”

In order to help the school succeed and make it “look good,” many teachers at Ray’s school “teach down” to the students and at the same time, inflate grades, so that it appears that students are

thriving academically. Ray admits that in addition to pressures from the school's administration, he also feels pressure from the district's central office. Ray explains:

“Administrators feel a lot of pressure to make the numbers look good. Attendance numbers. And this is not particular to [this school]. This is particular to the city. Attendance numbers get cooked; test scores get cooked. Teachers are spoken to when the average grades are too low ... A lot of administrators just look at the numbers and they'd be like, ‘Wow, seventy-five percent of your kids have failed. You must not be teaching them right.’ Well, they don't look at the other situation and say, ‘Well, they didn't pass in a single homework assignment. They didn't pass in a single paper, and they were absent forty-seven times this year.’ There's a lot of pressure on the teacher to make the students look better than they really are.”

Though Ray is part of a tight-knit community at the school and is very involved in the union, he often feels isolated and alone when confronted with the issue of grading. As much as he wants students to learn history and work to understand it, he also is aware of his students and their difficult circumstances at home, and knows that retaining their attendance is key to their personal development and future learning. Ray explains:

“One of the most amazing things about this place is that the kids actually enjoy being in this building ... [at this school]. We can't even get the kids to leave. We go to school two hours extra every day. They love hanging around here. And I can totally understand it and I can totally appreciate it, having been around different types of school environments. It's tough.”

Ray balances many goals in his work: he works hard to keep his students engaged, be true to his high personal standards in teaching, take into account the complicated home lives of many of his students, and be an active, thoughtful member of the union. Nonetheless, he finds that his goals are not always aligned with those of his colleagues.

Discussion Questions

What are Ray's short term and long term goals? How would you describe the conflict Ray faces in his work? What are some ways he might begin to bridge the gap between his goals and the priorities of others in his community?

FINDING THE THREAD DILEMMA (FOCUS ON ENGAGEMENT)

Sheila is a twenty-seven-year-old working actress. Sheila has been involved with the theater since she was eight, and she says she would never consider leaving the profession. Acting has helped her work through depression and through some other major challenges. She even had what she described as a “spiritual experience” during a summer spent with the Willamstown Theater Festival. Sheila explains that she had had recurring dreams throughout her whole life “with these very particular sort of mountains in them.” As she performed the lead in Princess Turandot that summer in Williamstown, she looked out over the Berkshire Mountains and realized that they were the mountains she had been seeing in her dreams. Sheila explained that it felt like she “had lost the thread and found it again.”

Sheila is a twenty-seven-year-old working actress who has been involved with the theater since she was eight. After she saw a performance of Annie at the Summerstock Starlight Theater near her home in Kansas, she wanted to take voice lessons. Her mother was concerned about her interest in theater, so Sheila received piano lessons instead. She loved everything about theater: the music, the drama, and the storytelling. During adolescence, when she (like so many teenagers) felt awkward, theater provided an element of escape. In the theater, she found a community where she felt she belonged.

Sheila wants to “give something back” to the art form that has given her so much. She hopes to contribute something new and cutting edge, and she is attracted to things that are interdisciplinary or abstract. With training in modern dance and singing, she believes she has something unique to offer. Interested in many different styles of performance, Sheila auditions for whatever comes her way. She tries to choose work that has a good script or good music. She looks for strong female characters who express heroic themes.

Sheila believes in working hard and says she can't do things “halfway.” She believes firmly in telling the truth. As she was growing up, her parents encouraged her to be truthful and promised that as long as she told the truth, they would try to be

understanding. Her acting teachers also emphasized the importance of truthfulness and pushed Sheila and others to discover and get rid of habits that “block flow.” Sheila believes that theater is all about “finding the truth.” If she is doing a scene and feels it lacks truth, she feels physically sick.

Sheila also believes in seeing the best in people. She realizes this may impede her ability to play darker roles, or to understand the less attractive sides of human nature. For example, she finds it difficult to give a good performance when she doesn’t like her character.

Sheila jokes that she will know that she has “made it” when she pays back all of her student loans. On a more serious note, she will be satisfied to become part of a company of actors. She has already received an offer to join a reparatory company, but there are other things that she would like to accomplish before making a full-time commitment. She would like to continue to work on challenging, innovative projects. Broadway plays and television opportunities offer a nice paycheck but they are not always artistically satisfying. For her, “it is all about doing good work.”

Although she talks about raising a family someday, Sheila hopes to achieve a certain level of success first. At the moment she wants to be free to travel. She is very concerned about finances. In order to “chip away” at her student loans, she is considering working in film or on television. She would never consider leaving the profession, and says she would be miserable doing anything else, because “being an actress is who I am.” Acting has helped her work through depression and through some other major challenges. She can imagine that, if she has children, she might take some time off, but this would only be temporary. Because her identity is so intricately connected to acting, Sheila doesn’t believe she could be a good mother if she left acting altogether.

On a whim, Sheila auditioned for the Williamstown Theater Festival. She was accepted into their company for a summer and it proved to be a transformative experience. She describes feeling the pure enjoyment of her work:

“That summer changed my life. It absolutely reinstilled my belief in theater, my belief in a group of young, talented, ambitious, bright artists working together and supporting one another, that

that was possible. That ensemble theater was possible at the we were at, and it was—

I actually had kind of a real spiritual experience while I was there. I had had these recurring dreams my whole life, of these kind of—not like flying dreams... with these very particular sort of mountains in them and colors. And I had never been to the Berkshires in my life, and I hadn't really known about them, but we were performing a production of Princess Turandot that summer at Williamstown, which I was playing Princess Turandot. I had the lead and it was gorgeous, it was outside, and we were in this field, it's called Buxton Field, in Williamstown, and it overlooked the Berkshire Mountains.

And I looked out over them and I realized that this was where—this is what I had been seeing in my dreams. And it was very—and I cried—this is literally what happened, and I knew that it was—I was on the path, like I had lost the thread and I found it again, you know?”

This experience helped to solidify Sheila's commitment to theater. Although she may have many challenges ahead of her—some financial, some personal—she clearly finds meaning in her work.

Discussion Questions

Sheila describes a lot of financial pressure.

Is finding meaning in her work a “luxury” that she might not be able to afford? Why or why not? Is it important to you to find meaning in your work?

A LIFE WORTH LIVING DILEMMA (FOCUS ON ETHICS)

Dr. Bernard Lown is a cardiology professor and practicing cardiologist in his seventies who lives and works in the Boston area. Years ago, Lown had a patient who was an artist, a painter, who Lown felt needed an operation. The operation was extremely successful, and Lown considered the case resolved. However, when his patient came in for a follow-up appointment, it turned out that, as a result of his surgery, this man had lost the use of his right hand. He could no longer paint, and now “life wasn’t worth living.” Years later, Lown remembered the painter when he met with another patient who had been told by her other doctors that she needed a risky heart operation Lown asked her what she wanted to do with the rest of her life; she was a professor, and she quickly responded that she wanted to summarize her life’s work. He encouraged her to pursue her writing in the time she had left, and to avoid the operation. She lived six more years, and completed her writing in that time.

Dr. Bernard Lown is in his seventies, and is a cardiology professor and practicing cardiologist. Born in Lithuania, Lown moved to the United States with his family in the 1930s. Lown has had a very distinguished career, though he says he “got into a lot of trouble everywhere” in his life because of his radical approach to social justice and social change. For example, during graduate school, he worked in a blood bank, where he was appalled to discover that the blood was kept segregated by race: blood donated by white people was labeled with a “W” blood donated by African-Americans was labeled with a “C,” for colored. Lown decided he wanted to do something about this, “I decided to wage my own guerilla warfare, and what I did is when we’d run low on white blood, I would take a crayon to convert the C into a W.” This went on for some time before the blood bank staff figured out what Lown was doing. He was kicked out of medical school, though fortunately he was reinstated after members of the staff went to bat for him. Lown says he does not regret his actions in the least:

“[Y]ou make the decision that ... there are more important things than academic advancement. So, I advanced academically. But it was far later than I would have done, had I not been active,

radical in my social activities. Would I do it differently? No. Never. Because the rewards were so enormous— there is nothing quite comparable.”

In fact, his penchant for radical social activism does not seem to have slowed him down too much: Lown is the winner of a Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, an organization he co-founded. He is also the recipient of a United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization Peace Education Prize, a George F. Kennan Award, a Ghandi Peace Prize, and the first Cardinal Medeiros Peace Award. He co-founded Physicians for Social Responsibility and was a founding member of the Ad Hoc Committee to Defend Health Care. In addition, he invented the cardioverter, a defibrillator that helps to prevent heart attacks, and he published a book, *The Lost Art of Healing*.

Lown says that he chose medicine because he “wanted to do good” and he saw medicine as one way to do so. Even so, he has had experiences during his practice after which he has questioned whether he did the right thing. Lown speaks of one particular situation he faced in his practice that deeply disturbed him, and has since made him more cautious as a practitioner. One of his patients was a visual artist, a painter, who suffered from angina, a condition that prevented him from being able to eat. This man’s angina was extremely bad, so bad that Lown had “never seen the likes of it.” Lown could tell that this man needed an operation, and fast. At the time, he viewed the situation as “an open-and-shut case.” He sent the man in for an operation, which was extremely successful, and Lown thought the case was resolved.

However, when his patient came in for a follow-up, he “cursed” Lown, and accused him of being a bad doctor. “He was so distraught. He said, ‘You’re not a good doctor; you’ve done me the greatest evil you can do to a person. You’ve destroyed me as a human being.’” It turned out that, as a result of his surgery, the man had had a small stroke and had lost the use of his right hand. The result was that he could no longer paint:

“With the angina, he could paint; he wouldn’t have angina when he painted. Couldn’t eat, but he could paint. Now he couldn’t [paint]. And life wasn’t worth living.”

Lown reflects that, faced with the same situation again, he would be “much more careful in outlining ... risks” to his patient. As it turned out, he had another patient a few years later who was facing the prospect of a risky heart operation, without which, her other doctors told her, she would die “within three months.” When she came to see Lown for a consultation, he approached her case from a different angle. “I said to her, ‘What do you want to do with the rest of your life?’” The patient was a prominent professor at a Boston university, and she quickly responded, “I want to summarize my life’s work.” Lown asked her how long she thought that would take, and she said that she thought it would take her a year. He told her he thought she had that much time to live. He advised her to not undergo the operation, and instead to pursue her writing in the time that she had left:

“And, she did. She lived six years and she wrote up all the things she needed. But I knew if she’s operated on, it’s too uncertain. She may have a little stroke, and that experience [with the painter] helped guide me.”

As accomplished as Lown was, he still needed to take the time to reflect on his approach to work and consider the speed with which he was making decisions about other people’s lives.

Discussion Questions:

What do you think about Dr. Lown’s decisions? In going forward, do you think there are additional factors he should take into consideration in his work? How would you suggest he advise young surgeons, who are just starting out in the field?