

People.

The man had taught adults in the Workers' Compensation programs, who were re-entering the workforce. He taught English, math, and computer skills, including computer software programs, at the local Junior College. Eighty percent of his time seemed to be spent providing empathy to his students, which helped them climb out of the deep rut of their old lives and onto the path of their new ones. The rest was him teaching and them learning, but without his empathy, would they have learned the classes?

He remembered a woman coming for her first day of classes. She was unkempt and dishevelled, her hair was not brushed, nor were her teeth, and she looked like she was wearing a potato sack. That she was suffering emotionally was clear to see. The man asked the new class members to introduce themselves, and when it came to her, she recounted her story of being happy, with a good job, home, and her twenty-four-year-old son was living with her. One day, three years ago, while driving home, his car left the road, crashed into a tree, and he was dead. She hadn't worked since; her life was a mess and had no meaning. Finally, Workers Compensation told her to take this educational opportunity or her benefits would be cut off.

Several days passed, and she came to class with her hair brushed. The next day, she had brushed her teeth, showered, and was wearing a clean, flowery dress. After six weeks, she graduated at the top of her class academically, and she was gone. However, several weeks later, she came to class to tell him she had landed a job and to express her gratitude. And then, surprisingly, she returned several months later, walked in while he was teaching, and introduced herself to the class. Turning to the class but pointing at the man, she said, "You all listen to this man. He knows what he's doing. I came in here a physical and emotional wreck, but I left with my life and my dignity back, and yesterday I was promoted to office manager." With that, she hugged

the man, and turning again to the class, she said, holding back tears of happiness. “Listen to this man.” With that said, the people in class stood and clapped, only stopping and sitting after she left.

The man used experiences like hers as the road signs pointing him in the right direction. Here was a former student telling his class that he was a good teacher. He had many similar experiences, and he found teaching satisfying.

As he sat drinking his morning coffee, he recalled that he had always tried to help people on their life's journey. His innate, built-in response to those he met was to listen, not just to understand who they were, but also to identify if there was a place for him in their life, and theirs in his. He offered his happiness, optimism, curiosity, knowledge and wisdom, freely and honestly.

He remembered that the generation before and the one after his had exchanged their knowledge and wisdom, as well as communication in general, through conversations that were usually friendly, generally optimistic, and intellectual. While there were confrontational exchanges, they were rare.

The man was a lifelong loner. He liked having a few friends in his life, which necessitated that he weigh the experiences people recounted to him before offering his friendship, knowledge, and wisdom in areas he deemed appropriate. There were people he met whom he wanted to keep, and there were those whom he couldn't wait to leave. He understood that his feeling responsible for the well-being of others was over, and he physically relaxed. Finally, after reviewing the many successes and failures of his life, he decided it was time, past time even, to have friends and acquaintances without responsibility, and to accept people as they are, or to leave them as they are. He finished his coffee and went out to tend to his garden.