

CHALKDUST

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PREFACE

It is one of the paradoxes of teaching that, while there are certain experiences and feelings common to all of us, teachers often feel so alone.

I think that's the reason *Chalkdust* has hit such a responsive chord. One teacher after another has told me, "I read one meditation and thought, 'Yes! That's just how it is! That's exactly what it feels like!'"

This universality of what it means to be a teacher never ceases to amaze and delight me. My own teaching experience has ranged from an inner city of the industrial north, to the rural Gullah culture of coastal South Carolina, to a typical suburb west of Chicago. Yet no matter where you teach or what grade, it all comes down to this: you and your kids.

But did you ever get the feeling you're being watched? Education is much on the news these days, and it seems that almost everyone has something to say about it. Widespread interest in education is good, of course, but any discussion of education inevitably comes back to the teacher. As a result, teachers are feeling scrutinized, even blamed. Teaching is hard enough without all of this added pressure. So it is my hope that these prayers of encouragement will be just that: a source of encouragement—and even some fun.

PREFACE



No one ever said teaching is easy (at least no one who has ever taught), but the influence on young lives is beyond measure. I learned recently that one of the most common reasons people hire private detectives is to find former teachers so that these grateful students can thank them. How about that?

Chicago
March 2003

PART 1

PRAYERS FOR THE CHILDREN

Learning is a treasure that will follow its owner everywhere.

Chinese proverb

For the Slow Learner

Oh, Father,
this child is so slow,
and I am so impatient.
We are both trying hard,
and I desperately need to see some success.

If only I could see a little progress—
slow, plodding progress.
But the word he read yesterday
he can't read today.
The math concept he seemed to grasp yesterday
has slipped away today.

And somewhere inside me
discouragement is moaning, "Give up."

Help me not to listen.

Help me instead to listen for your voice
reminding me of all the good and true things
I've learned about teaching.

Remind me that progress is more a spiral staircase
than a straight flight of steps;
that learning rarely moves at a heartening pace;
that it is more likely to dip and double back,
and move on in little spurts of growth.
So help me, Father,
not to give up when we move so slowly,
or stand still,
or even seem to slip backward.

Give to me, and to this child,
the sure and steady faith to keep on trying.

But, Father, when I grit my teeth and try so hard
that I am overcome with impatience,
let me hear your still, small voice saying, "Relax!"

For the Child with Special Needs

Father, she's just like all the other kids.

Except that she has
the longest, reddest hair
in the whole class.

Except that she got
a real, live German shepherd puppy
for her birthday,
and no one else in the whole class
has a dog like that.

Except that she can
say all of "The Night Before Christmas"
whenever anybody asks her to,
without ever getting stuck.

Except that the afternoon sun
slanting in the window
glints on the metal brace
clamped around her leg.

Except for all that,
she's just like all the other kids.

For the Very Bright Child

Father,
I don't have to plead for her attention
or devise tricks to keep it.
She eagerly takes in everything I have to teach her,
and then goes off to learn more on her own.

I am delighted.

But I am also concerned,
for already I detect signs of arrogance in her.

Father,
with all her knowledge,
let her get understanding.
Keep her from assuming that intelligence
can take the place of compassion
or humor.

And as her teacher,
keep me from setting undue store by brilliance.
Let my classroom be both a relaxed
and an exciting place,
where each child—from the slowest learner to the gifted—
does the best he can,
where the challenge of learning
never overpowers the joy.

PART 2

PRAYERS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

*It is the supreme art of the teacher to awaken joy in creative
expression and knowledge.*

Albert Einstein

At the Summer Workshop

For Bill Martin, Jr.

In July,
my group wrote poems on paper rainbows.
Another group played tambourines
and sang, with brimming hearts,
“The Grand Old Duke of York.”
The leader beamed and called us by the name
Good Teachers.

In July,
September seems so far away.

Come September, there'll be seating charts
and worksheets, attendance books,
permission slips, referrals . . .
But, Father, let there always be

Tambourines! Poetry!

At the Teacher's Supply Store

Father, help me.
It's the middle of August.
I'm standing outside the teacher's supply store.
And I feel a spree coming on.
A smiling purple dinosaur (what else?)
calls to me from the window,
his speech balloon filled
by the two magic words:
“*Welcome Back!*”

Yes, it's that time again when teachers go
BACK TO SCHOOL!
And all of a sudden I'm
READY!
But that doesn't mean
I have to go crazy in there,
does it, Father?
I mean, do I really need:
 a rubber stamp smiley face that says,
 "Oops! Try again!"?
 a storytelling apron?
 a thirty-seven-inch birthdays calendar?
 a packet of origami paper?
 a packet of *any* flavor scratch-and-sniff stickers?
 a five-pound bag of plaster of Paris?
 a whole blackline-masters book on silent *e*?
Remind me, Father, of the value
of moderation.
Oh—and don't let me forget
to pick up one of those purple dinosaurs.

After Waking Up from a School Nightmare

I lie in the darkness,
the fear receding,
the relief of wakefulness flooding in.
It was only a dream.
It was only a dream.

But, Father, it's always the same dream.
I'm late and I'm lost,
rushing through vaguely familiar corridors,
clutching desperately at my armload

of falling papers,
unable to find my own classroom.

Then suddenly
I'm there.
I throw open the door.
But it's too late.
The kids have gone wild.
And I can't stop them—
not with any
“classroom management” technique.
Everything has spun
hopelessly, wildly, totally
out of control.

Oh, Father, where does it come from—
this irrational terror of the night?
No matter.
In a few hours it will be morning.
All balance will be restored.
And I will be my rational self again—
a person who day after day
for hours on end
shuts herself alone in a room
with twenty-seven children.

In My Classroom the Week Before School Starts

Awakened by the scrape
of my chalk, the room looks about
for the children.

PART 3

PRAYERS FOR SPECIAL TIMES

*Life is amazing; and the teacher had better prepare himself to be
a medium for that amazement.*

Edward Blishen, *Donkey Work*, Part 2, Chapter 5 (1983)

Sunday Night Insomnia

Oh, Father,
how is it possible
to be so wearied and so wired
all at the same time?
The luminous numbers glare at me
as if to say,
“Aren’t you sleeping *yet?*!”
How do you expect to get up for school
in the morning?!”
Yet that’s what’s keeping me awake—
having to get “up” for school.

How much easier Monday morning would be
if I could just shuffle over to my desk
with a cup of coffee and a doughnut,
write out my to-do list in peace,
piddle about with some papers,
ease myself into the week.
How much simpler teaching would be
if the kids didn’t arrive
until sometime around Tuesday afternoon.

But Monday morning they are there—
bright-eyed and bushy-tailed,
spilling book club money out of their mittens,
chattering away to me
in dialogue straight from
the theatre of the absurd:
“You know what?
Yesterday we went by my grandma’s?
But one of the fish was dead!”

Oh, Father,
I need some sleep.
I'm a teacher.
I don't have the luxury
of a sluggish Monday morning.
If anything,
I have to be brighter and bushier than they.
I am, after all, Head Squirrel.
At what point did I stop making sense?
Maybe this means I'm drifting off.
Father,
I have to get up for school tomorrow.
And I need your gifts
of strength
and peace.
And sleep.
I need some sleep . . .

On the Day of the Field Trip

Father, we're going on a field trip this morning,
and I would ask that you . . .

Excuse me a minute, Father,
someone just said that the buses are here . . .

*All right, it's time to line up.
Find your partners, please.*

Have to count noses one more time, Father.

All set? Then, let's go. Walk, Christopher.

Oh, Father, about Christopher,
please don't let him . . .

*All right, children.
Please remember that your bus number is 120.
That way, if you get separated from your group
at the museum
you'll be able to find the bus
in the parking lot.
Of course, you're not going to get separated
from your group,
but if you do,
your bus number is 120.
Now, let me hear you say it, 120.*

Oh, Father,
please don't let me lose any of them.

*Christopher, put your name tag on, please.
You absolutely must wear your name tag.*

Let me catch my breath, Father.
They're all safely on the bus,
and we're ready to roll.

*Scoot over, Christopher,
I'll sit beside you, I think.
Yes, yes. You can have the window.*

Whew, Father.
Where was I?
Oh, yes.
Please help me to relax and have a good time.

PART 4

PRAYERS FOR THE TEACHER

I'm not a teacher: only a fellow-traveler of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead—ahead of myself as well as you.

George Bernard Shaw

For the First-Year Teacher

The first-year teacher
looks a little lost, Father—
as if they might have forgotten
to tell her a few things
in teacher training.
They certainly forgot with me!
But I've picked up a bit of know-how
over the years,
and I'd like to pass along
what I've learned.

Dear First-Year Teacher,

Your training is not over; it's just beginning. A good teacher must first and always be a learner. And you learn to teach by teaching. There is no other way.

So you must come to your first job now with both humility and confidence—humility because you don't know it all, and confidence because you know more than you think you do.

As you've no doubt painfully discovered, teachers are not as valued and respected by our society as they should be. Well, the way to begin changing that is to first of all respect yourself and your work. Your work is of immeasurable and lasting importance. (How many people can say that?) And you have the heart and soul of a teacher. You're a professional. So begin, without being rigid, to develop a point of view, a personal philosophy of education. Then trust your instincts. Who knows better about what succeeds in your classroom than you?

A word about personality: As a teacher, you really need to have one. In fact, a touch of megalomania doesn't hurt. You need to come into the classroom each day with the attitude that "I'm the Teacher, and I'm in charge here." You don't have to be nasty about it, of

Don't be dismayed if you find yourself saying no a lot more than you'd like to. It's all because you have this *group*. Sure, you'd like to tell the individual kid he can stretch his legs and get a drink of water, but if you do, you could be killed in the stampede.

Speaking of the group, it's very important to accept the class you get. This doesn't mean that you won't work with them or push them to do and be their best. But it does mean that thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's class because she has higher reading groups and few behavior problems. Your kids are *your* kids.

Never let yourself slip into a Them-against-Me mentality. While a classroom may be more like a benevolent dictatorship than a democracy, you *are* all in this learning-thing together. Don't start thinking that the kids are out to get you. They're not.

Having said that . . .

You will from time to time have *absolutely rotten* days. And if a nonteaching friend says in bewilderment, "They're just little kids; how bad can they be?" don't even try to explain.

Naturally, some of your best friends will be teachers because you all understand what the world of school is like. But important as it may be to talk through your teaching experiences, be careful not to rehash your days. Talk about something else sometimes!

It's easy to feel as a teacher, especially in your first year, that your job has swallowed you alive.

Let me explain why you're feeling overwhelmed. It's because you're overwhelmed. It's a best-kept secret, but let's bring it out in the open. There's no way in the world you can cover everything the state or local school district tells you that you have to cover. And it seems to be getting worse instead of better. How many times have you heard someone with a cause (maybe a perfectly good cause) say, "We've got to address this in our *schools*"?

So it all adds up to more hours than there are. This means that you have to set realistic goals and priorities. You can't do this all

PRAYERS FOR THE TEACHER

on your own. You have to get a feel from the principal and the other teachers as to what's most important, where to concentrate your time and effort.

Tune in to what the other teachers are doing around you, but be careful not to compare yourself too much with others. A topflight teacher can make you feel inadequate; a lousy teacher can make you feel smug. It's not just a matter of how many hours a teacher puts in, so don't set undue store by that. In every school there's someone who stays till six o'clock every night, and there's someone else who adamantly leaves at three o'clock carrying home nothing but her purse. Neither extreme is realistic, and somehow (through trial and error, I guess) you have to find what works for you.

Speaking of what works, we should say a word about curriculum. A healthy skepticism is in order. I once had a textbook manual tell me that while I was working with a small math group at the front of the room, another small group could be at the back of the room unsupervised, building a table. Nope.

Make careful lesson plans, but be prepared to "go with the flow."

That's because everything takes longer than it should. (If you allow fifteen minutes to carve the jack-o'-lantern, it will take fifteen minutes just to spread out the newspapers.)

That's because nothing takes up as much time as it should. (If you pass out paper-and-pencil puzzles to fill a dragging afternoon, two minutes later the kids will all be waving the thing in the air, yelling, "FIN-ISHED!")

You have to go with the flow because each teaching day is an experience unto itself, full of surprises. A bat in the multipurpose room, for example, is an interruption to be reckoned with. So you might as well do a mini-science lesson on bats.

But most of all, you have to go with the flow because your kids need you to attend to them. They might have something on their minds—any little thing from the "misty, moisty morning" to a snap-

shot of someone's new puppy. And it makes them restless until they've had a chance to be heard and have received an acknowledgement from you. So listen to your kids. And pay attention to the small stuff of life.

Teaching. Surely one of the toughest and most rewarding jobs in the world! What am I forgetting? Oh, yes. Don't skip lunch.

Well, Father,
 that's what I've picked up
 over the years.
 I don't know if it will be
 of any help to her.
 But I *do* know this:
 The most important help
 any teacher can have
 is a sense of your presence
 in the everydayness
 of classroom life.
 The first-year teacher
 looks a little lost, Father.
 Watch over her.

For Renewal

Oh, Father!
 The fights over who took whose pencil,
 the pushing in the lunch line,
 the papers turned in with no name,
 the tattletales,
 the whining,
 the skinned knees,
 the runny noses . . .

PART 5

PRAYERS FOR PARENTS AND OTHER GROWN - U P S

*A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where
his influence stops.*

Henry Brooks Adams

For the Parents of a Gifted Child

Father, truly it must be unnerving
to have a child that smart,
to gaze on one's own offspring,
as they do,
with tickled awe.
We've met to decide what's best for him.
We, who don't know what to make of him.
Omniscient God,
what shall we do for this child?
Enrichment programs?
Private lessons?
Skipped grades?
Special classes?
His parents wonder what to give this boy
to whom so much has already been given.
But maybe there is still one thing.
And maybe it's something only they can give.
And maybe it's the smartest gift of all—
Childhood.

For the Parents of a Struggling Child

Father,
they come to the parent-teacher conference
warily,
wearily,
knowing full well
what they're not going to hear.
They won't hear
that their son is in the top reading group,
or that he's a whiz at math,

or that his penmanship is flawless,
or that he's entering the science fair,
or that he was last to sit down
at the spelling bee.

But Father,
let them hear what I have to say.

Let them hear
that even though school is hard for him
(and probably always will be),
he never gives up.
He struggles on until he gets it,
and what he's learned, he's *earned*;
it's his to keep.

Let them hear
that this report card doesn't mean
their son's not good enough.
Rather, this standard of measurement
isn't good enough to measure him.

Father,
let me say
and let them hear
that he's as fine and brave and good a person
as ever I've met.

They came this evening
warily,
wearily.
Let them go home satisfied
and proud.

For the Parent of a Coddled Child

He lifts her over the snowdrifts
 when maybe the thing to do
 is bundle her up,
 wish her well,
 and let her plow on through.

For the Troubled Parents

How shall I put it, Lord?
 On the great worksheet of life,
 these people don't color inside the lines.
 They are,
 in the parlance of the teachers' lounge,
 the wacko parents,
 the lunatic fringe,
 who can make a teacher's life miserable.
 So we laugh to help ourselves feel better.
 But it's an uneasy laugh at best.
 Because these are troubled people,
 and their kids are growing up
 in troubled homes.
 We know we can't make the problem go away.
 So we laugh.
 Who can help them, Lord, but you?
 Grant me the grace,
 when I'm tempted to hold them in derision,
 to hold them out to you
 in prayer.