

# The New Teacher

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This essay is about Sam and me. Sam is an adult I have known and been close to since his childhood. Mostly, I think that I'm the teacher in this relationship. But at times, I adopt a counselor role. At other times, Sam is the teacher and I am the learner, or perhaps, we each take on both roles simultaneously. My goal in this story is to attempt to reveal a deep truth about Teaching in the larger sense of helping someone in his true becoming. By *becoming*, I picture you or me arriving at a point where we could say, "For now, I am on my way to becoming the person I have it in me to be! Who knows what the next version of me looks like. But for now, I am pleased with myself." I believe this should be the goal of teaching, but often this goal is overlooked or minimized. Often, teaching is not so much about developing your person; it is about developing skills and amassing information. While this is also good, I believe the teacher and the profession of teaching should be much more; that it should ask more of us. Therefore, this story is as much about the Teacher's becoming as it is about the pupil's.

Sam did not want to learn from me. He wasn't my student in the conventional sense. As life often has it, we were thrown together. We were two people who might not otherwise meet except that circumstance provides for it. Sam wanted to keep his freedom, privacy, and control. If I tried to tell him something, he listened as long as he figured it was consistent with what he wanted to do. If I gave him a directive, he listened only if the request fit with his own agenda. If I tried to persuade him toward some action, he, at best, passively performed, keeping control by hiding his feelings and reactions. The stakes were high, for Sam struggled with addictive gambling and abused alcohol and drugs. This was not a minor matter. It went on for years, and though he was actually honest about it, he just couldn't stop. Loved ones tried to help him, and he tried to use their help, but no matter how many friends and how many times they tried, again and again, he found himself stuck again - back in a hole. In the past, I have had a lot of experience and success as a teacher in a variety of schools, and as a result felt sure I could reach and change him.

I tried, I tried to teach Sam what to do, but I couldn't help him in the way he needed. Something wasn't right between us; something prevented me from being the effective teacher, and him the responsive student. I don't know exactly what happened, really, to change this

situation. Perhaps, the change occurred because we switched roles somewhere along our journey. Sam became my teacher. That is, at some point, I found that I began to notice things that Sam could do that I could not; things that I could learn from him. All of a sudden, Sam became interesting to me in a new way. Yes, there were things about Sam that I didn't like and didn't respect - things I just pitied him for, because of his addictive problems. But when I focused on the things that he *could* do that I couldn't - things I counted on from him – there was a shift. I admired the honest way he could look into your eyes and say something with no hint of bullshit. I valued the remarkable way he could organize himself. And the way he could sell an idea and convince anybody of anything was truly inspirational. When I looked at those traits, I found I appreciated and needed Sam, regardless of any problems that stood between us. And once I started to look at those assets and actually start to use Sam to change and grow myself, Sam started to open up - at least some parts of him started to open up. I realized that although he might be lying to me when he was saying, "I didn't drink too much last night," in another way, he was somehow being more open and alive and honorable than almost anybody I knew.

You have to understand - and I guess I had to come to understand – that if you asked Sam, "You got some extra money?" or, "You got some extra time?" - if you requested something of Sam, he'd give you the shirt off his back. He'd bend over backwards until he had nothing left. He was absolutely vulnerable to someone who needs help - just because he was. It might be this very ability not to say no that got him in trouble in the first place, constantly relapsing whenever he would try to dig out from under his addictive behaviors. So ... maybe Sam's greatest asset was his tragic flaw. Who am I to say? I couldn't see Sam while I was trying to tell him the 'truth' about his problems. When I started seeking how truly good Sam was, and the only thing I tried to give him was my love, something changed. I remembered that a good friend of mine once wrote something like, “Don't seek love and give truth, seek truth and give love.”

And then one day it happened. We had a serious talk about how Sam was changing me. We were both looking at his strengths. Letting them sink in. Realizing that he added dimensions to what I aspire to become in my next version of myself - what I've always wanted to become. That's when the conversation turned. As soon as I started to value Sam for the gifts he brought to me, something shifted. He started to value me as a teacher. The catalyst may have been that I was now treating him as my teacher. I saw how he could change my life, and that somehow seemed to cause him to ask me into his life to help him in his own becoming.

The key conversation where we both noticed the switch took place on the phone. We started the conversation as if we were interested in how each other was doing. I don't think he was really interested, and the fact is that I wasn't really interested, either. This pattern had occurred several times over many years, and we both were used to a low level of authenticity. But get this - our lack of authenticity was not from a lack of good heartedness - here were two good people trying as we might, simply missing the mark. We wanted to connect. We just kept missing.

I asked Sam when he thought he would get away from the drugs.

He said, "Don't start."

I pursued, "How can we talk about other things? This whole conversation is so false!"

"I know, so let's just hang up. It was good talking to you."

"Wait ..." And then it happened. Into my mind, like fresh air, the intuitive, spontaneous thought floated, *"Instead of giving Sam some more truth, is there anything you don't know? How about giving Sam some love and ask him for what he has that you don't?"* "Sam, how do you do it? I could never. How do you keep being such a great father to your kids? You help others, despite these massive odds."

"What? What are you saying?"

"I admire how you get up in the morning! And I just remembered how you ran your little brother's birthday party all those years ago, when you were so young, yourself. And that job where so many people reported to you. You had their jobs on your shoulders. How did you make the numbers?"

"Look, you lock your eye on the goal - you keep your focus."

And there it was: perhaps his greatest strength and greatest weakness, in one statement. This is the way Sam is addictive. But, this is also the way that Sam is great! But even better - the conversation had shifted to where Sam was teaching me! This was the turn. A turn in the conversation, yes, but more importantly, a turn in our relationship. At least for the moment. Sam is the teacher and I'm the student.

"That's it, Sam! And you're incredibly good at it!" Now, I marvel at the fact that I'm interested in Sam in new way. For good reason. Genuinely. "But, Sam - we've got a moment here. Can you feel it?"

Of course he feels it.

"Yeah, we're talking," he softens. "Now what?"

"Now we plan. What's next, Sam?" Now either the roles switch back to me as teacher or both of us are the teacher. "I mean, we both know you've got to stop the drugs. And we both know, that only you can do it - yourself! But look at the strength you've got when you lead people! You are a leader in a way I could never be. You get people to be successful and do the hard stuff! Imagine if you could turn that toward getting people to get off drugs and addictions and move toward their strengths. Imagine moving to your strong suit, then turning others around!"

Silence. But, good silence.

"Sam, this is where you are really, really good. In fact, you may be the best person I know at turning others. Remember how Michael, Wendy, and John listen to you? Look at me - right now. You are turning me. Think about it. Do I listen to anyone? Or, am I always telling everyone my truth. You've got me. Right now, Sam, I'm changing. I'm seeing you. You're the model, man. Right now. So, do it. Do it, Sam - do what you've got to do."

He did it. He went to rehab. Then, we spent the next nine months together in what is increasingly becoming recognized as the all-important post-rehab after-care. It did not go perfectly - or maybe it did. In any case, it went constructively. The two of us lived together, worked together, talked together, and respected each other. This began a renewed relationship between us and all of a sudden he could draw on my true strengths. The way I can stand firm - the way I can make a change in my life and not relapse. The way I can have a dogged loyalty and perseverance, yet stay open and vulnerable. So, we acknowledged our mutual vulnerability. And this made it possible to recognize and then draw on each other's strengths.

How had this happened? Conversation with a friend and former teacher helped me put it all into perspective. In addition to focusing on Sam's strengths, my stance as the "teacher" who could show him the error of his ways was undercutting my power to help him. I believe I couldn't touch Sam's real Self until I was a little more in touch with my own Self. I needed to be vulnerable enough to acknowledge my own weakness. My stance as "teacher" precluded that self-awareness and acknowledgment. The picture I had of myself in that role made me feel I had to maintain authority as the one who knows and "gives truth". It was a lesson of pure gold to see the difference between "giving truth" and "giving love". So what truth did I have to seek? I had to honestly confront my inability to reach Sam authentically. It seems to me that it was a

realization of my lack of power – not “having the answer” – that shifted my awareness to Sam’s virtues and empowered the relationship. By admitting my own weakness, I no longer had to project it onto him – as teacher to student – and perhaps that shift evoked his higher Self. Making this clearer shed light for me on the secret of transformative teaching. The transformation of Sam to the next version of himself required my transforming. And as we both helped each other to transform, we had true relationship. I was a student at one moment and a teacher in the next. "This was true teaching," I thought, "to be vulnerable enough to truly be transformed by another." Perhaps this reciprocal dynamic is part of an essential aspect of The New Teacher.