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Introduction: The Energy to Teach

We teach who we are.

—Parker Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*

Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. We have to ask questions, admit to not knowing, risk being told that we shouldn't be asking, and, sometimes, make discoveries that lead to discomfort.

—Brené Brown, *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*

As the quotation above from Brené Brown reminds us, the work of teachers in recent years has caused us to grapple with a lot of emotions related to vulnerability. I have certainly experienced more than my share of these emotions lately. During the five years it took me to create this planner, I left the traditional public high school where I had taught in-person for more than twenty-five years to take a position in a small public-school program in our district on a college campus where, after only six months, I had to learn to teach all my classes online for more than a year during the COVID-19 pandemic. When we returned a year later, our program was temporarily relocated to a cluster of sad portables in a remote parking lot of the adult school. We now had to teach hybrid classes and we struggled to create lessons that worked with half the class in-person and the other half on Zoom, most of their cameras switched off.

At my new school, I taught only seventy students but shared the responsibility with my other colleagues for managing the school, meeting weekly with the thirty-five advisees we had, and attending the almost daily team meetings we scheduled to discuss everything from the needs of specific students to overhauling the interview process during which we would be meeting with the 160 applicants for the next year. Oh, and of course, we had to create a new curriculum during this period, which entailed a lot of meetings, collaboration, and thinking about what to do, how, why, and by when to do it.

Throughout it all, I was creating this planner, refining it to meet the evolving needs and very real challenges of teaching students who, like your own no doubt, struggled with their mental health in general and in response to the pandemic in particular. By the end of the most recent year, my planner felt like one of those suitcases with stickers all over it, each one not so much a place I had traveled to but a challenge I had faced—and overcome. By year's end, the planner resembled a weathered and heavily stamped passport or much-used journal that documented my adventures, complete with notes from students and photos from memorable occasions (such as my daughter's wedding!) taped here and there to remind me that I cannot teach well if I am not living well outside

of school. Each year's *Teaching Better Day by Day* planner is, in other words, both the story of and souvenir that reflects and honors all that I did and learned.

The planner evolved as my own personal and professional needs did during the five years I spent creating it. Some years, in addition to teaching, I served on committees at school or the district level; the past three years I took on responsibility for advising the yearbook, a job that challenged my organizational skills in ways I had not anticipated. During the first year I was creating the early prototype of the planner, I was out for a spell on jury duty during the spring semester. Then, I returned to school only to find out soon thereafter that I had caught a little cancer, which had me out for six weeks and during which I did my best to still plan the curriculum of the course. Through all these challenges and changes, both personal and professional, I found this planner a great comfort and companion. When new situations arose, such as the year I was due for a full, year-long evaluation by our administrators, I turned to this planner to help me manage the different demands. When it did not have the features or functions I needed at such a time, I revised it to better meet not just *my* but *our* needs, for we are in this work together, my friends. After all, whatever I need a planner to do, you will no doubt need as well. So, as I designed it, I constantly analyzed my own needs and observed those of my colleagues to better understand and create a planner that would help you better address your needs.

There are few problems that society does not lay at teachers' feet and expect us to solve. A 2021 RAND survey found that teaching has now become *the* most stressful occupation, with teachers almost three times more likely than other adults to report symptoms of depression (Steiner and Woo). Throughout the *Planner* you will find weekly checks and a range of suggested ways to help you protect the energy you need to continue to be the teacher you are.

So, what is this planner offering you? In its pages you will find:

- The **Preparing to Teach** section, which features tools to help you organize essential information (The Teacher's Homepage); track the time, money, and energy that school demands; understand and implement the Six Commitments that form the core of the *Planner* and your work as a teacher; establish both a personal and professional focus for the year ahead; and plan your typical week before the year begins—because to be well, teach well, and work well with others requires that you *be* well yourself.
- **The Year Section**, where you will find the "Look SMARTE" 12-month calendar to help you sketch out or keep track of the year; the "Look Ahead" 12-month calendar where you can make notes for *next* year as you learn your way through the year at-hand; the "Look at the Big Picture" calendar, which encourages you to dream out the next five years of not your classes but your life; and the "Look Long" calendar pages where you will sketch out your units for the current year on your own or in collaboration with your colleagues.
- **The Months Section**, which includes a full two-page monthly calendar; "Personal Professional Development" (PPD) pages where you will find the insights and suggestions of key thinkers about pressing issues, such as Culturally Responsive Teaching, Blended Learning, Disciplinary Literacy, or Social Emotional Learning, along with space to reflect on and apply such ideas to your own classroom; "Work Well" pages designed to facilitate your preparation for the month ahead both personally and professionally by helping you take note of what is working well and what you need to work on; and, finally, a section dedicated specifically to managing

your kids, classroom, and curriculum with a different emphasis and set of strategies you can employ each month. In addition to these general features in the Months Section, you will find several pages dedicated to reflecting on the semester just ending and the one to come; these pages appear near the end of the semester and, again, at the end of the year.

- **The Week Section**, where you can identify students of concern; plan out the week for your different classes; identify your priorities using the quad diagram; and, depending on the week, evaluate your well-being or learn how to use one of the six different tools meant to help you be more organized and effective. At the end of each grading period (six weeks), you will find two full pages where you can make notes about the grading period just finishing or the one to come—or both!
- **The Daily Plan Section**, which introduces you to several templates created to help you design effective, engaging, and cohesive units and the individual daily lessons that are the building blocks of such units. Here you will also find examples of how to use the templates and access the digital versions of them, along with samples from my own classes.

I have long been obsessed by the challenges we face as teachers who strive to be effective in the classroom and still maintain a life outside. As a husband who has been happily married for thirty-five years, a father of three now-grown children, and someone who has helped my wife care for her ninety-five-year-old mother during the fifteen years she has lived with us, I am offering you a tool to help you continue to enjoy, find meaning in, and grow in your role as a classroom teacher while maintaining the energy you need to do all the other things you do—or hope to do. This is only the latest and most ambitious iteration of my efforts to manage time, my classes, and my life that has consumed me since I began teaching so long ago.

The *Planner* also offers teachers—and their teams, departments, or schools—a means of collaborating, a way to have the conversations about instruction and all the related aspects of our work that we gather to help each other solve. For example, a team or department might decide ahead of time to read and do some reflecting in response to one of the Personal Professional Development (PPD) readings, such as Jennifer Abrams's *Having Hard Conversations* (2009) or Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (2015). At the meeting, you and your colleagues would use the PPD reading and your own responses to help you and others engage in a thoughtful conversation about how that reading applies to your own class or your department's needs at that time. In addition, those same questions and features throughout the planner that invite discussion with colleagues also provide you with the opportunity to have such conversations with yourself as you reflect periodically on your work and teaching. Such occasions to reflect—at the end of a week, a month, a grading period, a semester—have been a great salvation for me, giving me the time and space, however briefly, to examine my teaching, my relationships, and my own wellbeing.

In his book *Atomic Habits: An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones* (2018), James Clear argues that all deep, sustainable, and crucial improvement comes in tiny increments. Drawing on his study of world-class cyclists, Clear insists that we cannot become suddenly great at something that is complex; rather, as he shows, it is through the small but consistent efforts to improve our performance by just 1 percent each time we step into the classroom (or get on the bike to train or compete) that we advance toward becoming world-class teachers. After thirty-five years in the classroom, having taught just about every level and type of class there is in-person and online, having learned all that I have along the way from books, workshops, conferences, and colleagues,

I can assure you that the best we can do is get just a little bit better day by day—if we make the right effort. Such improvement is not accidental but is, instead, the consequence of purposeful reflection and intentional practice each day, year in and year out.

Though this planner has places where it asks you to jot down a goal, the truth is that it is really the ritual of the jotting—not the goal you jot down—that makes the difference, for as Clear (2018) reiterates throughout his book, “goals are about the results you want to achieve, [but] systems are about the processes that lead to those goals” (p. 23).

Let me be clear and honest here: I have worked hard these many years to crack the secret code of time and teaching, trying every planner and app, every design and device that came along. The truth is, however, that we can never clear the list, empty the inbox, get all those papers graded and entered. The virtue is in the effort we make toward our own ongoing improvement. Of all the books I read in the course of my research for this planner, the one that stands out as the most honest and reasonable is Oliver Burkeman’s *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* (2021), in which he declares that:

Productivity is a trap. Becoming more efficient just makes you more rushed, and trying to clear the decks simply makes them fill up again faster. Nobody in the history of humanity has ever achieved “work-life balance,” whatever that might be, and you certainly won’t get there by copying the “six things successful people do before 7:00 a.m.” The day will never arrive when you finally have everything under control—when the flood of emails has been contained; when your to-do lists have stopped getting longer; when you’re meeting all your obligations at work and in your home life; when nobody’s angry with you for missing a deadline or dropping the ball; and when the fully optimized person you’ve become can turn, at long last, to the things life is really supposed to be about. (p. 13)

The *Teaching Better Day by Day* planner and all that I have done and learned along the way from books, colleagues, and mentors has taught me the truth and usefulness of this passage from Burkeman’s book. After all these years in the classroom, I am still learning, still loving the work, still finding through my relationship with my work, my students, and my wife and family, the sense of meaning and purpose that David Whyte (2009) insists is to be found through the “three marriages” to our Work, our Self, and Other people (p. 10).

It is these three “marriages” that are inevitably on my mind (or in my heart) when I sit down on Sundays to reflect on the previous week or begin drafting the week to come. I realize we have all become digital ninjas, able to open and juggle multiple apps simultaneously while sipping our now-lukewarm latte and writing an email to a parent. Planning on paper, using this planner to think about my role, our work, or what I want kids to learn—this is work that benefits from slowing down, from being disrupted just enough to make us the intentional, deliberate, and creative teachers we are or strive to become. As you can see from the examples of my own lessons that you will find in the Daily section, I use the computer to do all sorts of work for my class; however, when I sit down with my own version of this planner and a colleague or members of my team, I don’t want a screen between us the whole time. I want to give them my full attention and feel free to engage in the messy thinking that is natural to that phase of our work as teachers. Then, once the ideas have been refined, I will translate my notes from the pages in the planner into the Daily Agenda or unit design template intended for more public use or consumption.

So, think of this planner as a place to compose your curriculum and also to chart the course of your life in the year(s) to come. The new teacher I once was would have been so grateful for the guidance this planner offers. The department chair I was long ago would have found a way to get one for everyone in the department so we could use it for the more focused conversations that the Personal Professional Development feature throughout the *Planner* invites us to have. I would have given one to every student teacher I ever had, for they never arrived with much of a map of the territory from the university that sent them. When I was an instructional coach, meeting with and observing teachers during their evaluation years, I would have used what little money I had available to buy each teacher a copy to help them track and reflect on their progress during the year.

In these ways, I hope anyone using the *Planner* will be better able to locate and keep alive within themselves the “energy to teach” that Don Graves (2001) wrote about in his book by the same name. As he said of the participants in his long-term study of teachers (of whom I was one), “not all teachers suffer from a lack of energy. Some are able to transcend the most difficult circumstances and foster significant learning in their students. There are also teachers who are part of a building or system with a clear vision for learning. They give energy to each other and continually transform goals to match their vision for children” (p. 3).

I hope this planner and the invitations it extends to you can give you the energy that creating and using it has given me these past five years. Our work these days demands that we be agile as we attempt to transform the many challenges we encounter daily into a story which I hope, as you complete each year’s *Teaching Better Day by Day* planner, feels rewarding, meaningful, and as important as you and the work you do every day.

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