



emotionally healthy environments

I have a confession to make. I often wait until the absolute last minute to complete this column, and often even a bit past the deadline. (Josh Hartford and Sheilah Thomas are sensitive, kind, and tolerant editors.) Part of the reason for this is of course simple procrastination, but the real reason is that if I wait, eventually the article simply comes to me and it feels like I just record it. I have learned that I can waste a lot of time trying to force it and the lack of inspiration is probably apparent in the end product. On the other hand, if I keep the topic hovering in my consciousness and go through my days, what I need to write appears before me.

The experience held true this time as well. I spent several hours yesterday attempting to complete the column, but today I attended the graduation ceremony at Carolina Friends School and what I needed to say about emotionally healthy environments came from the words of the parents who spoke at that assembly.

Carolina Friends School is a Quaker school in rural Orange County. Graduation ceremonies take place in the context of a Meeting For Worship. The graduates, friends, families, and teachers sit in silent waiting and if anyone is moved to speak, they rise and offer their message to the group. At the end of about an hour, diplomas are handed out and the meeting closes with a few moments of silence. There is no processing, there are no speeches, and no graduate is honored above the rest. It may sound a bit strange, but most people describe it as a deep and meaningful experience.

Often, as today, many of the messages are tributes to the school's philosophy and the teachers who have guided and mentored the students along the way. As I listened to the messages today, I realized that the parents were describing the essential ingredients of an emotionally healthy environment.

These days, I believe, there is altogether too much focus on end-of-grade testing as the hallmark of a good school. Carolina Friends School does no formal testing and does not even assign grades. The focus of the school is on creating an emotionally healthy environment that nurtures children, imbues a love of learning for its own sake, and fosters a sense of responsibility to oneself, the community, and the world. What follows is my rendering of a composite of the qualities the parents said they valued about the school. I believe the parents described the essentials of an emotionally healthy environment.

Loving environment: The teacher's vision statement opens with: "Love is our process and our subject matter, it embodies everything we do." Love for oneself and others, for the environment and the world is fostered. I believe that loving relationships are by far the most important ingredient of an emotionally healthy environment.

Respect: Respect flows naturally from and is a necessary ingredient of a loving environment. Respect means recognizing and celebrating differences, honoring the opinions and feelings of others and taking care of one's body, mind and spirit.

Equality: Each person is honored for the unique contribution he or she makes to the world.

Freedom: Students are encouraged to think for themselves, to question and to formulate their own beliefs based on their values and to express those beliefs and to honor the beliefs of others.

Continuing Revelation of Truth: Questioning, redefining, rethinking things creates a dynamic environment.

Responsibility: Students are taught early on that they can and should contribute to the world in a way that will make it a better place.

Carolina Friends School is not alone in attempting to foster a healthy school community, but it does have the freedom to buck the tide of focusing on grades and standardized testing as the primary measures of a good school. Some children will never make good grades or do well on standardized testing. I fear the focus on testing and grades would make it seem to those students that they are simply failures and that we are writing them off. Every person has a unique contribution to make to this world. I wish that our schools would not place so narrow a definition upon success.

Just as Carolina Friends School tries to create an emotionally healthy environment that fosters learning and creativity, we can all attempt to find or create healthy environments for ourselves and our families. Just as grades and standardized tests do not define the worth of a student, emotionally healthy environments are not defined by money or status. Emotionally healthy environments encourage each of us to be the best that we can be and to make a difference in the world. If you have found a healthy community, you are fortunate indeed. If you find yourself yearning for such a community, don't be satisfied until you find one or, perhaps even better, create one for yourself.