

Wendy T. Harper
Virtue: Ren

Me: Do you want to get better at math?

Student: Yes, I really do.

Me: And do you understand that this won't be easy?

Student: Yes, but I want to be better.

Me: Okay, then let's get started.

This is the conversation that occurred before I began to tutor my first student. I was in my second year of high school and he was one year my junior. My Biology Honors teacher Mr. Leonard recruited me to tutor a student named Darren* failing Math A (a required Regents class) after-school and Saturday mornings. Despite my reservations on my lack of formal experience, I accepted the position. The first session consisted of introductions and warm-up exercises. During the second, I observed that he was having difficulty solving basic mathematical problems and I asked him about his knowledge of the multiplication table and his reply "Some in elementary" left me in shock. When he arrived for our third session, I asked him to set aside the assigned handouts; for the next few weeks, we were covering multiplication and fractions. Multiplication is the backbone of mathematics and fractions are the best vehicle to test drive knowledge of multiplication. Initially, his math teacher opposed the deviation from his assignments. However, Mr. Leonard supported the change. For the next few weeks, Darren worked extremely hard studying on his own and during sessions. As Regents examinations approached, we shifted focus to multiplication review and tackling practice exams. On the last day of school, Darren came to excitedly to tell me he passed both his math class and the Math A Regents exam. In one

semester, his grade went from a 55 to a 75 and he couldn't be happier. In that moment, I realized two things: (A) I helped another human being realize their potential and (B) I wanted to do it again.

Nine years later, I am fulfilling that wish, having worked in non-profit with students from elementary, to the graduate level. In addition, I volunteer with New York Cares, committing to projects that are often education-related. The bulk of my collective experience has been with "at-risk" populations. Apart of the reason I feel so much personal investment is due to my ability to relate. When I was an infant, my mother was informed that I would never be able to talk. At the age of six, I began to speak. At the age of nine, my mother was told I had a form of dyslexia that would severely hinder my academic performance. I went on to obtain high marks on standardized exams and even skip a grade. Ultimately, I graduated high school with honors, and obtained acceptance letters from some of the best educational institutions for higher learning. My mother's commitment to my education and belief that there was no limit what I could achieve, played a significant role in surpassing my barriers. In addition, I have had some great educators who not only believed in my ability to succeed, inspired me to love learning. Unfortunately, some people do not have that encouraging force in their lives, and that is something I am committed to change.

I practice Ren in two senses. One is through my professional and volunteer experience. Second is through a constant acknowledgement of value in human life. Often, this will consist of expressing gratitude, reminding family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances of their good attributes. Often, practicing the Virtue of Ren in this sense can vary from a simple "Thank you,

much appreciated," to a more detailed, "You are so great at _____." People need to be consistently reminded of their unique and outstanding qualities, which translate into support and eventually empowerment. I also place great emphasis on two holidays: Thanksgiving and Christmas because in essence, each holiday is an expression of gratefulness and love for our fellow man.

Yet, increasingly, people are devaluing each other. Single mothers are being stigmatized and accused of being parasites on society at large (Murray, 1984). In reality, those who receive public assistance are negatively taxed by 100% (for every dollar they earn, they lose a dollar in benefits) (Moffit, 2003; Gordon, 1994). Researchers are afraid of discussing their plight, from fear of further stigmatization (Edin & Lein 1997). In appearance, practicing Love and Benevolence is simple. For this reason, the virtue of Ren is overlooked, the simple things often the first forgotten. A "Thank You" is replaced with silence and compliments ousted by complacency and complaints.

My biggest opposition in practicing Ren is stigma and complacency. Often, my students are branded as "handicapped," "at-risk," and sometimes, less pleasant terms. The only thing my students were at-risk of was not realizing their potential. To facilitate this self-discovery, I made a personal vow to ensure that they were afforded a comfortable setting, met with open-mindedness and amiability. While completing full-time graduate coursework and interning at NYCT, I worked with Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP), Long Island University chapter. Working with LIU GEAR UP allowed me to see the affects of negative stigma surrounding poverty. One of my responsibilities in managing the

Summer Enrichment program was developing workshops to assist underserved students in the college application process. During the FAFSA workshops, I observed students indicating obscure figures for their parent's income. I spoke with each student individually to understand the occurrence. The answers were the same; they were uncomfortable with their parent's annual incomes. After discussing the purpose of completing the financial aid application, students were still hesitant about providing financial information. To my students, prospective aid was viewed as "hand-outs" and "charity."

Sometimes these obstacles are met through indirect means (e.g. a politically slanted newspaper article). Other times, people embody one or both concepts. Either a person is operating with ideology that is one-dimensional or the person does not consciously recognize the worth of each living creature, animal or human. I attempt to thwart these obstacles through a greater focus on my service to society and facilitating healthy debates, on class, race, and equality within my circle. After all, one of the most important things I learned from theorist Karl Marx is the detrimental consequence of complacency. "History does nothing, it does not possess immense riches, it does not fight battles. It is men, real, living who do all this" (Marx, 1977).

References

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