

Lessons Learned

Winner

By Phoebe Miller

Forward by Ruth Y.

In her thoughtful, self-aware essay, “Lessons Learned,” Phoebe Hayashi explores the process through which she revised an initial belief. From the first sentence, she places readers in the middle of quick-moving dialogue that mixes outer conversation with inner thoughts and reveals her frustration with the situation. Hayashi’s vivid language brings readers into the classroom with her as she navigates the revision of her belief that teachers are “amorphous people.” As she narrates the lesson learned, she reminds readers that those around us have lives that we may be unaware of, and, given the chance, they can teach us valuable lessons about our own complex humanity.

“...so get on that, all right?” my teacher said. I looked from the nod of agreement back to the teacher scrutinizing the attendance sheet.

Oh no. Please don’t go back to someone already called, I thought. “Haylie.” Drat! It’s been 10 minutes already. I slid further down in my seat.

“Phoebe.”

“Here!”

“Logan.”

“Here!” We’re done with a quarter. If we hurried, I thought.

“Charlie.” This could be done...

“Here!” ...before class is half done.

Pause. Just say the next name already. “Charlie, did you...” Argh! I stared at the opposite wall, resisting the urge to smack my face on the table. I needed my brain cells more than a dramatic display of aggravation. “...All right?” At the nod, she looked back at the paper. Her finger went up the list and – “Phoebe.” Oh, for Pete’s sake.

“Here. You already called me.”

My heart pounded in my ears at my audacity. When a teacher wears baggy jeans and oversized sweatshirts and comes up to your chest, that’s usually an indication of a weak teacher. But there was nothing weak about the look of exasperation directed at me before she continued with roll. Or about the way she asked me to stay behind after class was dismissed.

As I awkwardly stood in front of my teacher, I considered the asinine impulse that had led me to open my big mouth. Perhaps it was the 50-minute lesson on the use and importance of context clues, which combined extreme tedium with excessive humidity. Or maybe it was that time we sat in class after the bell rang and one-by-one repeated, “The teacher dismisses us, not the bell,” before being dismissed to charge down three flights of crowded stairs to fifth period.

Alternatively, I was being a brat. I lived vicariously through characters in the books I read, and the most stressful thing in my life was trying to catch the erratic public bus. My life’s plan was to get straight A’s through middle and high school, and graduate from any East Coast university with a degree that would help me earn a decent living. And at some point, I wanted to travel throughout Europe. All I expected of my teachers was they exert moderate control over the class and teach useful things.

After what felt like forever (and was probably two minutes at the most) she looked up from her papers at me. I looked back, considering if groveling apologies were in order. I was sorry, but not that sorry. She said, “Phoebe, I’d like you to cooperate with me.”

I’m pretty sure my face was a study. She took a deep breath and said that her job was hard enough without my smart remarks, she needed to make sure she didn’t miss anyone on roll so she went back to the last place she remembered calling, and I could understand that, right?

I didn’t, but plastered on my best fake smile, nodded agreeably, and hightailed it out of there. My attitude still left a lot to be desired, but it died a swift death two days later, when I came home from school to find that she had left a message on the phone,

saying, “Phoebe is a very diligent student. She’s very smart and I enjoy having her in my class. I believe she’ll go far in life.”

Until then, I had thought of my teachers as these amorphous people who stopped being people and became teachers as soon as they set foot on the campus. I hadn’t thought too hard about my English teacher having a separate class apart from fourth period, much less a personal life. My outrage over her involving my parents (even to praise me) turned to embarrassment at my own behavior, and a grudging admiration. She wasn’t paid to make me happy, nor was I her only problem, and she did exercise moderate control over the class and teach (sort of) useful things. My behavior sucked, and she tactfully refrained from pointing that out.

My penitence wasn’t up for apologizing, but I refrained from commentary, enthusiastically volunteered for lunch duty (anything to get out of class early) and thanked her at the end of the year for her present – and maybe for everything else as well. Because personal feelings aside, she taught me quite a bit: of how respect doesn’t require liking a person, how to embroider ideas to get symbolism from everything, and to suffer through reading Shakespeare for future college party discussions.