

A Teacher's Reflection Book

Exercises, Stories, Invitations

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Foreword by

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*For Susan, and in memory of Donald L. Finkel
For Jim, Liz, and Chris
For our students*

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Chapter 6

How Does a Teacher Say Goodbye?

Don't cry because it's over. Smile because it happened ...
—Proverb

How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.
—Anonymous

I. Introduction

Exercise: Think about the semester most recently past.

- a) *How did you say goodbye to your class, and your students?*
- b) *How did it go? Would you change anything about it in the future?*

During a teaching life, even during a single course, teachers say many goodbyes, and those goodbyes rarely are easy. At first, this may seem odd. The work of the semester is ending or over; transitions to new classes or through graduation are long routinized. Indeed, many teachers may well not focus on goodbye, or prioritize it. Why do we, and why do we claim goodbyes are difficult?

Like most teachers, we have crawled to the end of more than a few semesters, just eking through the last class or grading the last exam. We know the fatigue, the relinquished aspirations, the depleted energy that often accompanies the end of a semester, just at a time when new energies are needed: to grade, to sum

up, to review, to complete all that was promised, to turn around and get ready for the next semester, year, class. Time marches from one “to do” item to another, as all our obligations come to roost. In the midst of all of that activity, why is goodbye important?

It’s important, because during the occasions when we’ve stopped to reflect and mark an ending or transition, we, and, we believe, our students, have been deeply enriched. Often, when we’ve paused and picked up our heads from our grinding “to do” list, we’ve experienced something remarkable, even beautiful—the spread of the semester behind us, the long journey travelled, the deep thinking, hard work, and meetings of minds that have comprised what we and our students have learned and how we’ve grown. For teachers yearning for reflection, ending times are rich in insight and unique in opportunity; that also can be true for our students. Goodbyes offer us one final way to embody our teaching goals and to perform the messages of the course. Teachers have a unique opportunity to point out and enrich goodbyes in service of their students’ learning, pausing in the flow of time to appreciate, review, and integrate.

Of course, we must be gentle with ourselves about lost opportunities at goodbye. Sometimes we are too overwhelmed or too busy, and we must respect that goodbyes cannot be forced. But our positive experiences with goodbyes convince us that a thoughtful, reflective goodbye can cap a teaching and learning experience and deepen it. In addition, planning from the start for a learning experience to include such a goodbye, and planting seeds during the course, allows goodbye to become an integral part of an entire learning experience rather than an isolated moment. It also helps emphasize what we have learned over time—that the cycle of teaching and learning can be enriched by the unique attention and possibilities offered only at the end.

Every teacher-student and teacher-class relationship ends, or changes into a new relationship entirely. Our semester is bounded by these planned, foreseen ends: final exams, graduation, end of semester gatherings. Still, like other professionals who have acknowledged the end of a relationship, we more thoroughly and

more comfortably focus on hellos to the exclusion of goodbyes. This appears to be a natural human tendency, rooted in a discomfort our society has with ending relationships and facing loss. Some commentators have suggested that our failure on a professional level to discuss endings reflects a tendency towards denial that pervades the entire process of ending a professional relationship.¹ Mental health and social work professionals now regularly study and acknowledge what they call the “termination phase” of the professional relationship.

Unlike therapists and patients, teachers and students are not used to calling an official end to a relationship. To be sure, some teachers and students will remain in touch over the succeeding years. But teachers will never again reconvene a particular class of students; most teachers lose touch with most students after they leave; and those relationships that do continue do so in a new frame: recommender, colleague, friend. Both student and teacher deeply need closure to finish a fruitful partnership in learning, at the time that it naturally ends. After carefully attempting to teach students respectfully and thoughtfully, a teacher might contradict those messages by leaving the student’s world without saying goodbye. A teacher who says farewell in a way that underscores and reflects the central values of the learning experience, seals and exponentially multiplies those messages in a bounded, coherent whole. A teacher who ignores the goodbye process can diminish the gains accomplished in the class or teacher-student relationship, and can discourage students in their later education.

Unfortunately, the reality that goodbyes occur regularly in a teacher’s life doesn’t make them any easier. And because students have so much less experience with saying goodbye, facilitating goodbyes can be challenging for teachers. Unlike our students, who only go through school once, we can see goodbyes coming, have time to plan for them, and have more experience with their challenges. Being better placed to point out an ending and make the best use of it, we need to attend to its design.

Since we think goodbyes are such a significant element in educational experiences, and since they come at the end of those ex-

periences, we've chosen to close this book with our reflections on these critical, difficult, and wistful staples of a teaching life.

II. Invitations for Thinking about Goodbye

Here are ten prompts. Take a moment and jot down your responses to them. Try for detail: when was it; where were you; who was your interlocutor; what were your feelings; what do you feel/think now?

1. What did you do to end your last class?
2. What was the most fulfilling goodbye you ever said? The least?
3. Can you remember a time when you wanted to say goodbye but didn't?
4. Can you remember an important goodbye a teacher said to you? A note in your Yearbook? A final handshake at graduation?
5. Can you remember a time when a student said goodbye to you? Jean remembers one.

Jean had worked closely with Matt, a student who first represented asylum clients under her supervision and then worked as her research assistant on a chapter in her book on representing children about ending the lawyer-child client relationship. They discussed, daily, the complications of saying goodbye in the professional relationship, the unexpected complexity of the process, the propensity to deny the necessity of termination, and creative solutions to breaking through that denial. As graduation approached, Matt got a job in town and prepared to study for the bar.

At Matt's graduation, Jean, full of pride and emotion, warmly greeted Matt and his parents. As she hugged Matt, she said, "Thank heavens, this isn't the end—since you're staying in town." Matt stopped short, looked her straight in the eye, and said, "NO! We know better. We must say good-

bye now, because our relationship is fundamentally changing. Please say goodbye to me! When we get together later, we'll start our new relationship."

6. Can you remember a time when a goodbye made an important difference in a relationship?
7. Have you been at a session in which you were intrigued by a goodbye someone said or an exercise someone facilitated?
8. Complete the following sentence twelve times: When I think about goodbye, I feel _____.
9. Do you have a favorite goodbye from a book? A movie? The theatre?
10. I don't understand why goodbye merits so much attention. Do you agree?

Consider the following story, told by one of Jean's research assistants.

In one course, her teacher had walked into class the first day and just started into the substance of the law—no prologue, no introductions, no broad context. It was as if he was continuing a conversation that the students would join immediately. On the last day of class, the teacher spoke about substance until the last moment of the lecture, finished a sentence, and walked out.

Even when we don't plan for and don't explicitly say goodbye to our students, we're still always saying goodbye. We offer end of term reviews; we examine our students; we grade them; we may provide feedback on their papers or review their exams. Even walking out of class at the end of term without saying a word is a goodbye. This particular goodbye actually did send a consistent message with its companion hello; it performed the message of an ongoing discourse in the field that the students had entered, and then left. Like our curriculum, each of these activities sends a message, tells our students what we care about.

Remember our concern about entrainment, at the beginning of a semester? Were you successful in achieving a collaborative rhythm with your students? Now, as they leave, to start other classes, to graduate, while you maintain the steady academic life, goodbye requires letting go of walking in step with your students. What particular challenges will that pose for you?

Think about your end of term activities and reflect on the messages they may send to your students. Are they the messages you want to send? The ones you want to say goodbye with?

III. Ideas for Last Classes/Meetings

Here are several ideas we've used in final classes, usually small seminars.

A. A Closing Circle

A closing circle offers everyone a space in which to say a parting thought. Often this is best done without notice, so people don't feel required to write a speech or be thorough in their thoughts. We prefer spontaneous statements in the moment. Here are several possible structures for the closing circle:

- Start in a circle. The first person goes and every person can pass or say something. At the end quickly ask if the people who passed want to add anything.
- Variation. Ask anyone to start and then ask anyone to go next as they feel moved. In all the variations, the first person often sets a tone.
- Variation. Ask for moment of beauty from the semester
- Variation. Ask: "What have you learned this semester, or what are you taking away?"

B. Completing the Circle

You might link hello and goodbye by repeating an exercise with which you began the course. For example, you might open the

course asking students to write down their goals for the course and to save them. During the last class you can ask them to look at those goals and reflect on whether they've been met, or revised, and to reflect on what that might mean for them.

At the retreat described in the Preface and Chapter 1, we had asked the participants to take a piece of ribbon or yarn and tie a knot in it for each issue they hoped to reflect upon during the retreat. During the second half of the retreat, we invited them back to the art table and asked them to use the ribbon or yarn make a talisman to memorialize the lessons of the retreat.

One participant wrote us later, "I think of that retreat daily, honestly, as I have, hanging on my fridge, the 'talisman' ... that many of us made on our half-day 'off.' The words still ring true to me daily, 'Let go, move on, stay home, slow down, reflect'—I've done all 5 of these things since that retreat, and I'm better for it."

As reported in Chapter 1, Mark often begins a course, asking students to write down what they're looking forward to in a life in the law, what they're fearful of, and what they're looking forward to and fearful of in the course. Students write their responses, then share them with a small group, after which Mark invites comments. Similarly to the goals exercise, on the last day, you might repeat all or part of this one.

By the way, did you write down answers to the opening questions of this book when you looked at our first chapter? If so, take a look at those reflections and thoughts now. They may offer ideas for ending this phase of your reflection process, or for starting a new cycle of reflection.

C. Jean's Goodbye and Coupon

As a clinical law teacher, Jean works closely with her students in their first semester, talking and emailing multiple times daily, deeply planning, debriefing and reflecting on intense emotional topics concerning her child clients' anguish at being separated from their families, or her asylum client's struggle to recount the maltreatment and fear that caused her to leave her home country. Early in her career, she discovered that the transition from the end

of an intense semester together to a semester of little or no contact, or the transition that comes when a student is graduating, was invariably awkward and difficult for her. On the one hand, the work had ended, new students awaited her, and it was time to end this relationship and begin others. Jean is an irregular correspondent and, as a full-time professor with small children at home, she knew that she would only disappoint students who expected their relationship to continue at the same level of intensity and consistency. On the other hand, her intense experience with each student gave her both substantial insight into the student's strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes as professionals, and a deep investment in their prosperity and happiness after law school. How to say a proper goodbye?

Jean decided to offer an unusual solution that involved making a promise she knew she could keep. As the end of the working relationship approached, she talked about her limited availability in the future, and committed to be available for references and letters of recommendation, but warned that other tasks would be harder to complete. However, she did offer each student a "coupon" for future use. "At some point in the future, maybe 5 days, 5 weeks, 5 months, or 5 years, you may encounter a moment when you think that input from me would make a substantial useful difference. At that point, email or call me, and let me know that you are cashing your coupon. On that date, you move to the top of my priority list, along with my current students, current clients, and family, and I will get back to you immediately."

D. Postcards and Silent Witness

In *A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins composes a series of postcards, the kind you write but do not send. You've already seen several; here are two more examples:

Dear Students,

When I pay attention to the subject matter in class, instead of to you, I get excited, think of an idea that just *has* to be said, blurt it out, and, more often than not, kill

something. As in the Dickinson poem: "My life had stood/A loaded gun/In corners ..."

When I speak the report is so loud it deafens. No one can hear anything but what I said. Discussion dies. It seems it's either you or me, my authority or your power to speak. What do I do that shuts people up? Or is this a false dilemma? Help!

Sincerely,
Jane

Dear Colleagues:

Here's a joke I remember from junior high school, or maybe it was college. A woman went to the doctor and said, "Doctor, I have this enormous desire to eat pancakes. I just can't get enough of them. What can I do?" "Well," said the doctor, "that doesn't sound too serious. How many pancakes are we talking about?" "Oh," said the woman, "at home I have sixteen chests full." When it comes to knowledge, we are like that woman. At home we have sixteen chests full, and we're dying to get our hands on sixteen more. But since even one cold pancake is too many, why are we doing this?

Jane²

In his last classes, Mark often distributes a group of these postcards, which have been mounted on cardboard to look like postcards, each with a number indicating the sequence in which they appear. He asks each student with a card to read his aloud, and we proceed through the sequence. Mark then invites students to write their own postcards, and if they're willing, to place them on a board or a wall, ideally around the room.

Class ends with a "silent witness," during which class members move quietly and read the postcards, without comment. Often the postcards are moving, offering glimpses into each person's experience of their education or of an important relationship, celebrated or mourned. A collective moment of reflection.

IV. Goodbye: A Unique Moment of Reflection

The above exercises suggest that it's in the moment of ending that we fully feel the losses and gifts of an experience. However, some goodbyes are much longer than these. Mark is on a sabbatical, following which he'll retire. Anticipating this time, he's gradually been reducing his university commitments. In what follows, he reflects on his impending retirement.

A Long Goodbye

Five words: Relief, Concern, Gratitude, Fulfillment, Disappointment. Conflicting emotions, each of which I have felt during the past several months, separately, and occasionally, simultaneously.

I feel them now, sitting in my almost empty office, soon to leave it forever. I'm retiring. Almost retiring. First a sabbatical, an officeless sabbatical;³ then retirement. This follows several years teaching all courses in one term, in turn followed by reducing my commitment to ¾ time, and now, a half sabbatical. Downsizing gradually: a long goodbye. One for which I've tried to prepare.

*I've always felt it important at the end of a course, to offer an opportunity for my students and myself to achieve closure. Even at the end of a class. For example, borrowing an idea from my friend Don Finkel,⁴ in *Legal Imagination*, which is a writing course, I set aside the last 15 minutes of each class for students to record in a (private) journal their thoughts and responses to that day's readings and class discussion. Several moments of silent reflection.*

At the end of a course, I've used activities we describe in this book: letter to self, postcards and silent witness, facilitating a closing circle, with each person saying to their peers and to me whatever they'd like to say.

But a year of goodbye—how to do that? Start with Hello, I thought. Mark this year as special. An idea presented itself immediately. In the previous winter, in a course on persuasion, I had traded on Jean's "Thing of Beauty." For the first five minutes of each class, a student would bring to class something that to them was beautiful, present it, and explain why they found it beautiful. I transposed that

to Five Minutes of Persuasion. The students quickly embraced the idea, and we experienced paintings, photographic essays, songs, and in one case, an original, beautiful musical composition, performed on flute, accompanied by a piano recording, also played by this student.

Sarah's composition and performance were deeply moving, and when the course ended, I asked her if she'd be willing to perform it as the students walked into the first class of my final teaching year. She agreed, and that moving, special hello marked the beginning of a special final year.

We followed that celebratory moment each week with Jean's "Thing of Beauty." The sense of ritual and celebration established in those first five minutes deepened and enriched what for most students always had been a course with intense personal meaning. As one student put it:

*The Thing of Beauty allowed our class to speak to each other in a way that you don't usually find in Law School. By choosing something that we thought was beautiful and explaining it to the class, we were encouraged to open our minds and our hearts to one another. We peered into each other's souls and in turn we established trust, honesty, respect and confidence. In short, we built a community. Maybe it didn't change our lives, but it sure was a nice way to start the day.**

* From class written responses to my request for feedback on whether Thing of Beauty had affected their learning experience in the course. Here are two other responses.

I enjoy the Thing of Beauty, because I consider it an opportunity to learn more about the personalities and interests of our classmates. Otherwise, there isn't much opportunity to learn about each other's talents and interests in such a way. I find the Thing of Beauty adds extra depth and context to the people in class beyond their comments on a particular school subject and creates more of a bond between us. It reminds me that there are aspects of law school that aren't just about mass-producing lawyers by pumping us full of information and marking us against one another. It humanizes us and generates respect among peers, which is important for the legal profession, but sadly, the current model of entering and getting through law school and landing a job drives us to view each

Early on in that fall term class and in the two winter term classes, I told everyone that this was my last teaching year and that I hoped we would have fun. That felt liberating, and in each course, I felt more relaxed and carefree, more honest and open, than in any other year. I think those courses were better for it. I certainly was.

Wanting to signal in my last class that the end of the course was the end of forty-one years teaching, I chose a moment of silence, accompanied by a recording of Sarah's music.

I left feeling I had done what I needed to do.

That process has felt good, satisfying. But I don't think I'm finished. Strong emotions persist. Hence the Five Words listed above.

Relief

I no longer have to walk into a classroom. But don't I love teaching? Yes; what I love is being excited by an idea, asking a question

other as constant competitors for the same positions. Those who don't bother taking the time to get to know their colleagues as people tend to retain this competitive mentality once they get out into the working world. Therefore, I think the Thing of Beauty is important to our learning and hopefully people will consider the larger context of this exercise after law school.

The 'thing of beauty' fit in well with the theme of the course, especially since one of our first assignments involved finding a beautiful piece of writing. It set a nice tone to the class, and marked the evolution between the first class, when many of us did not know each other, until about half way through the class when it became apparent that people's comfort levels had increased. People seemed unsure as to how to react to the thing of beauty at the beginning, I think because we are not used to this honest, unpretentious tone in a law school class. From a group perspective, I think the thing of beauty contributed to breaking the ice between members of the class. From an individual perspective, I think it was an interesting exercise. I spent a long time thinking about what my particular contribution should be; what I think is beautiful, and what would be well received by the class. I spent more time thinking about how to explain what I think is "beautiful", why I think something in particular is beautiful, than I did actually picking the thing itself, and practicing it. That in itself is something that led me to reflect quite a bit on this exercise, adding another dimension to the thing of beauty.

that prompts reflection and productive conversation, experiencing my students developing distinctive voices, observing them as they struggle to form a community.

I don't love preparing for classes and find myself less and less looking forward to them. Nor do I enjoy looking at omnipresent laptops rather than full faces, even when we've developed a class protocol for using them.

I don't like feeling stressed as I try to balance my commitments to my teaching and to my family. I notice how much more relaxed I am when I'm away from it.

And sometimes, more often lately, I don't feel I belong. I'm too many generations distant from the current group of students, and although I have a ten-year-old daughter, don't "get" them.

Mostly, though, I'm tired.

Concern

What will I do now? Fritter my time away? I've always relied on the daily routine imposed by teaching to keep me organized, regulated. Sabbaticals have been a nightmare. Even summers can be problematic. And with a lovely computer screen beckoning ...

Yes, there's the gym, and there are children and grandchildren to visit, as well as one child at home, but will I be faithful?

I'm losing my office. It's been a refuge—a safe, comforting space. It's my preferred writing space. I have a lovely study at home, but I've yet to establish a writing rhythm there. And my wife is moving her study upstairs, next to mine. She's a writer and will spend her days and evenings there. How will that feel? Will I be able to relax into my space?

Colleagues. They're not my closest friends, but I've enjoyed the frequent brief exchanges. At the office, I'm recognized. What will it mean not to have that?

And of course, there's aging ...

Fulfillment

When my ex-wife and I drove into Kingston in July 1969, we looked at each other and said, "One year." Forty-one years later, we're both still here. Happy to be here.

How fulfilled? I've been able to grow as a teacher. I began teaching as I'd been taught, even more ferociously, half believing that showing people what was wrong with their arguments, pressing them to respond on the spot, produced meaningful learning. Half believing, because I also sensed teaching as I did was more about proving how smart I was than about helping students learn, more about responding to my own insecurity than expressing any deeply felt convictions about learning.

I've changed, become less interested in proving myself, more interested in exploring how I can encourage students to become more confident in their abilities. I've become quieter, more patient, more encouraging, and, I think, a better version of my earlier self. I like myself better, feel more integrated. Growing as a teacher has meant growing as a person.

I've felt recognized, by peers and by students. The surface recognition has come as awards: national, provincial, university-wide. What's mattered more deeply has been what's accompanied those awards: the supporting letters people have written. Learning what their experiences with me have meant to them as persons as well as students or colleagues, hearing that they've experienced me as authentic.

I think I've done as much as I can, improved and developed as much as I'm able.

Disappointment

Only one: No recognition, sometimes even hostility, from my Deans. Despite winning those teaching awards, I'm one of the lower paid faculty members for my age and experience. Were they research awards, I'd be among the highest. I'm disappointed for myself and more important, disappointed that despite claiming to value teaching and research equally, my university doesn't.

Even being recognized for my research has been a struggle. I had to institute a grievance against one Dean's "merit" award to get him, and the University, to acknowledge that the workshops I'd developed as a result of my faculty development and teaching and learning research did constitute research.

Finally, I've been disappointed that since my first Dean stepped down, none of the succeeding Deans has understood their mandate to include walking into my office (or the offices of most of my col-

leagues) to ask how I'm doing and ask what they could do to support me. To perform the message they assert, that they're interested in having all colleagues succeed. That's not the institution I had hoped my faculty would be.

Gratitude

To my first Dean, who stuck with me, recommending me for tenure, even though I hadn't written anything.⁵ It took me 10 years to find my voice.⁶ This was the Dean who did walk into my office, who was interested in me.

To Don Finkel, for more than thirty years of friendship and provocative conversations about teaching and learning; to my wife, Susan Olding, for ongoing support, challenge, writing advice, and listening; and to Jean, for the gift of friendship, and for unending inspiration.

To my students, who, sometimes grudgingly, accepted my invitation to give themselves permission to bring what they cared about to what they were learning. When they did, they produced distinctive, imaginative, insightful work. Their increased confidence was palpable.

*I have a sixth word, a phrase actually: **Nothing to Prove.** As I write, that's how I feel. At least for now.*

V. Conclusion

We've come to the end; how to say goodbye? We've decided to offer two goodbyes, one from each of us. Here goes.

Jean: Reflection never ends! As our teaching continues, the reflection only deepens and widens, to link and mirror new experiences with old, new insights with old, new challenges with old. Dear partners in reflection offer so much wisdom, collective memory, and encouragement. In the end, reflection gives me courage—to question, to try, to risk. Thank you for your openness to these ruminations and invitations. I wish for each of you richness in insight, energy in the daily and gratitude for this life in teaching.

Mark: As I've mentioned, I often end my courses with a Postcard exercise. At the reflection retreat where I first met Jean, we also ended that way. Although this book isn't a course or a retreat, it has echoes of both. Consequently, it feels appropriate for me to end it with a postcard.

Dear Colleagues,

Learning to trust myself and to speak and write in a voice that feels authentic hasn't been easy, but both have been gifts I cherish. I hope they will prove the same for you. Please remember that while teaching can seem a solitary activity, you are not alone.

Warm wishes,
Mark

Notes

1. For more on termination of relationships in social work and other professions, see Jean's chapter on "Leaving the Child's World," in *Representing Children in Child Protective Proceedings*.
2. Jane Tompkins, *A Life in School: What the Teacher Learned* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1996), 144, and 149–50.
3. Although I asked to retain my office during my sabbatical, my Dean wanted me out. At first resentful, I now think it's for the best. Let the future be now.
4. Don Finkel, now deceased, was a long-time faculty member at Evergreen State College and the author of *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook, 2000).
5. Those were the days. That wouldn't be possible now. Right place, right time.
6. For an account of the precipitating event, see my essay, "Discerning the Gift."