

# The Teacher

## By

### Raymond M. Fox GC-C

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My first grief experience on a deep level was when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It was a teacher I had in the fourth grade that I had become close with. Mrs. K. was a genuine person, a person that helped me considerably. She helped in more ways than I could of expected.

Mrs. K. was a special needs teacher, all that have read of me know that I was a special needs child. Also a newlywed, she was on top of the world during my 4<sup>th</sup> grade year when we first met. That was when I first returned to school after my accident that changed my life forever. A truly tough time. Awkward by any measure but even more so for a 9 year old.

Somehow I think that since she felt so great, she also felt that I should too. I was anything but amiable to such notions at that time. Looking back, the biggest problem I had at the time was being embarrassed about how I looked. Indeed, I was a sight back in those days of elementary school in the '80s. Kids are sometimes cruel as well. Ya see, back in those days it was unheard of and truly unprecedented that a quadriplegic be so able and just out there. Technology nor social advancement in overall acceptance of persons such as myself had developed to the level it is today.

People just weren't used to seeing folks like myself, much less one on a ventilator. The real problem at that time was how I felt when being stared at. People, especially children, are just curious and 'tis their nature to stare. Sometimes rudely and sometimes not. I remember being stared at much during those first weeks back in school. That was the initial problems I encountered.

One day, when things got particularly bad, I asked if she could make them stop staring. I was truly upset. She informed me, wisely so, that that wasn't the answer. She said I was no different than anybody and to be treated differently to fix a

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problem wasn't the answer. She gave me the absolute best solution, one that I still implement to this very day. Stare back. Just stare back, she said. Boy does it work wonders.

It was from that point that we became close, friends in a truly wonderful way. She always treated me as equal rather than the traditional teacher/student way. We still had our bouts but friends nonetheless. Then late into 5<sup>th</sup> grade she and her husband found out that she was pregnant. A truly joyous time for them as it would be for any young couple. I was happy for her.

However, things didn't stay joyous for too long as Mrs. K. fell ill. After many tests and whatnot she discovered that she had leukemia. Pregnant and just finding out she had leukemia, just horrible. Hope wasn't dashed though. She just needed a bone marrow transplant and the best donor would be the baby growing within her womb. She would just have to hang on through delivery and until the baby reached her first birthday.

Mrs. K. was a fighter, fought with everything she had and even became stronger with the birth of her daughter. Things looked truly promising. She was still sick but hope wasn't gone. We talked even then but she did become sicker and we both somehow knew that she'd stop interacting with people because of being tired and having a new baby and all. In 7<sup>th</sup> grade Mrs. K. succumbed to the cancer, her daughter was 7 months old.

I can still remember one of the last things she said to me. Told me to keep on staring back. A poignant reminder to always fight, never settle for the way things others would have for you. Can't say I ever had a friend like her again, even now. I'll miss her always though. I think of her often.

I say that's my first grief experience still. Most wonder why, after all I've been through before that point. Well, children are remarkably resilient and my grief over my own losses weren't thought of with any depth until later. I went through a lot after her

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death. I know now I went through the stages of denial and into acceptance.

Thinking back now, I also over idealized Mrs. K. for a time. That's normal for a grief response. Fortunately I was able to pass through that and come to a balance of seeing the good and the bad of her. Our relationship, while special and meaningful to me, was anything but ideal. We clashed much and fought almost weekly.

I learned much from her. I learned that there is an inherent generosity to the human spirit. One of its many faces is the face of the teacher. She didn't teach me the typical stuff in school but she taught me much in the way of how to live life. I believe that this small contribution from her, in life and death, has also given me a better grief response to my own trials. I've achieved a good grief resolution with her. I've also achieved continuing good grief responses ongoing with my life because of her and how I ultimately came to terms with her death.

Thank you Mrs. K.... thank you.