

## Surrender to the Air

My first thought when I got the job was, *I can finally become Miss H.*

The summer after I was hired to teach at Brookline, I imagined myself as my favorite high school teacher, Miss Houghteling. I actually graduated from Brookline High, and Miss H. was my junior year English teacher, or, rather, our long-term sub. She was 23, the oldest of the four Houghteling sisters. She had recently graduated from Harvard, and wrote on the board things such as the "French Philosophes" and "Diderot's Encyclopedia." She was refreshingly young after years of teachers who seemed, to me, at least, to be my parents' age. She wore trendy outfits; she got excited in class; and once, when we ran out of time during a particularly dynamic discussion, she threw a piece of chalk at the clock.

When I found out that I would be teaching Honors American Literature, the very course Miss H. had taught, I envisioned the kids looking admiringly at me the way I had looked at Miss H. I imagined them hanging on my every word, spending an hour marking up T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" just to please me, finishing their junior paper a week early to get my feedback on their draft, stealing opportunities to pop by my desk for a chat. I would be the wise young woman they yearned to be like.

You know where this is going. My first year did not go that way. One section of juniors was not particularly eager to impress their English teacher (one girl decided to write her introductory letter to me about how much she hated reading), and the other group spoke effusively about how much they liked English classes in general, but they didn't seem to like *me*.

This confused me. I had gotten into teaching by working in high-need schools, and what had hooked me on the profession was the relationships I was able to develop across boundaries of class, race, and culture. I left my job in the Bronx to a round of applause from a group of black and Latino middle schoolers. In a Colorado high school with a 50% drop-out rate, I had gotten a native American boy named Andrew to read Hemingway and Keats with me when he refused to stay in class. Several of the English language learners I taught in the Czech Republic came to my wedding. Before Brookline, I thought of my ability to connect with students across boundaries as a strength. And here, where there were so many fewer boundaries to cross, connection was surprisingly difficult.

I looked to my colleagues for guidance on how to be in the classroom, but I didn't know which persona fit me. When I tried to emulate the strictness of my mentor teacher, my department head noted that I came off as intimidating. "You want students to feel supported, not judged," she said. So I tried emulating my department head. I asked students what their

weekend plans were at the start of class, as I had seen her do. While this had generated a lively conversation in her class, I got crickets. Not finding my model in English, I observed colleagues in other departments. One teacher told several long stories about his youth during a pretty unstructured lesson. A student who seemed indifferent in my class listened, rapt. I would have felt uncomfortable taking up so much space in the classroom, but maybe this was what students wanted? I had come to Brookline High thinking I knew these students, but I felt as though I had no idea who they were, what they wanted, and how I should be with them.

Last year was my fourth year at Brookline High School, and I went in with the mentality of a high school senior. I had tried out different personas, and I was just going to be myself. I had professional status, so I didn't have to worry about what others thought of me. I rewrote my introductory letter to students for the fourth time. It had been based on a template from my mentor, and much of the voice was still hers. I deleted her polished, self-assured sentences. An email Miss Houghteling had sent our class was tacked up on my bulletin board. Her sentences were similarly witty, confident, wry. But that tone was all wrong for me. I filled the document with exclamation points and used CAPS for emphasis. I let go of trying to appear erudite and put-together, like Miss H., and instead started off the year with a goofy enthusiasm more characteristic of myself.

And my juniors responded to it! This was the beautiful class I had imagined when I'd gotten the job. They asked genuine questions and joked with me. They stayed after class to pursue a point from discussion and shared funny stories when I asked about their weekends. The week before Christmas, a student started off a comment with, "Because we have such a nice community in this class..." That felt like a real win -- I had felt a sense of community, but by this point, I had absolutely no faith in my read on the classroom. It was nice to have confirmation that the students felt it, too.

Towards the end of the year, as we finished Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, we spent some time on the final line: "For now Milkman knew what Solomon knew: If you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it." We brainstormed what it meant to "surrender to the air." Get out of your comfort zone. Take risks. Let yourself be vulnerable. Own your identity. Then, I asked students to free-write about a time when they surrendered to the air or when they were unable to do so. To get them thinking, I offered an example from my own life.

"When I was a junior, I had a huge crush on this kid in my English class," I began.

"Oooh!" they shouted.

I told them about how I was a VERY good kid, but that this boy I had a crush on was kind of a pothead. One time he asked me to hang out with him and his friends after school, and I really wanted to go, but I was afraid of putting myself in this situation where they might smoke, and I wouldn't know how to say no. I was afraid of what they would think of me, that they would judge me. So I just told him that I couldn't go, that I had to do homework.

In telling this story, I felt again my high school self's insecurity. It was a personal story, and I got a little nervous as I spoke, but I could see that it hit home: the students listened with genuine interest. "I wasn't able to surrender to the air," I concluded, "to step out of my comfort zone and own my identity."

"And then what happened? That's it?"

"You lost your chance at true love!"

"Is that why you came back to teach here? Coming full circle?"

We had a playful back-and-forth; then, I heard out their stories. They listened and responded to one another. We were still talking as class ended, and no one moved to pack up his things.

I remembered Miss H. throwing the chalk at the clock. It was not something I would do; that was not my personality. But somehow in surrendering to the air -- in offering these students my authentic self -- I fostered the same atmosphere I had so appreciated in her class. I did not gain students' admiration with the French Philosophes or a Harvard diploma, but somehow in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- my vulnerability, they liked me anyway.

It was partly because I'd gotten used to teaching students who weren't necessarily motivated by the college admissions process. Instead of focusing on SAT words or how an essay would prepare students for college-level work, I had to make literature relevant to their lives *now*: the texts became a springboard to talk about our experiences and the dilemmas that confront us; these conversations enabled me to build relationships. But at Brookline the reading sometimes felt like a platform for students to "earn participation points" or negotiate how to get partial credit on late homework. Students were unresponsive when I talked about "how to lead a meaningful life," but they sat up straighter when I mentioned that there would be a test. And I was contributing to this culture by emphasizing all the wrong rationales for learning: tests, college admissions, grades. [explain how the way that kids were approaching school was influencing the type of teacher I was]

### Ms. Gorlin.

This was the atmosphere I remembered from Ms. H's class. At this point, she would have thrown the chalk at the clock, but it was not something I would do; that was not my personality. I still don't have a clear sense of who Ms. Gorlin is, but I hope that by surrendering to the air -- by offering the students my authentic self -- I will figure it out. I did not gain their admiration with the French Philosophes or a Harvard diploma, but somehow in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- my vulnerability, they liked me anyway.

These bright, scholarly kids would have adored Miss H. But I could not be her. **The best thing I could do for them was to surrender to the air -- to offer them my authentic self.** I did not gain their admiration with the French Philosophes or a Harvard diploma, but somehow in spite of -- or perhaps because of -- my vulnerability, they liked me anyway.

-->Expand metaphor about riding the air: finding your authentic way of moving through this world (teaching)

charming voice, funny

what is it about this Brookline kids? Kids smelled fear/searching? Why did it work with other kids vs. these kids?

--> strategic compliance at Brookline -- I didn't know how to handle it.

--> transition about letter

--> some more authentic version of ourselves helps us perceive the room better b/c we're not so focused on subtext

--> being yourself frees up mental space to be present

About fitting into a district and doing things like they do vs. coming to be yourself and doing things like they do.

--> thought of Brookline students as more like self, having more similarities -- trying to be a teacher to myself vs. being myself as a teacher.

Coming back to where you started=more complicated than what it's supposed to be

Space to mention that I don't have it all figured out.

What can I keep from what I had in this class? --> don't need to say explicitly

--> own success

[Predictably, at a school like BHS, every teacher had his own idea about how best to relate to students...distinct way of relating to students.]

[Set up section: Ex. Everyone, including myself, was telling me how I should be. Multiple voices, multiple images.]

10 min. mark for reading