

It happens most years when the weather cools and the trees begin to change color—students crying in my office. There’s something about midterms, shortening days, approaching deadlines that can elicit tears. This year I walked one student over to our campus counseling center; another had to drop my course; a third just needed to let off some steam. I remind myself to stay rigorous about boundaries. I try to stay still, asking a question or two, nodding my head, affirming when I can. When I was a kid and needed this, my mom would say, “don’t fight it so hard, just cry a minute.” And so that’s what I find myself saying to my students when I can see their tears brim.

I notice in almost every case that students seem relieved afterwards. Sometimes they’re embarrassed, often they apologize.

Mostly it’s as if the air’s been cleared. We can think lucidly again and talk together about how to improve their writing. They can learn. So what’s happening when this happens? Maybe, when I briefly hold their frustration or fear or sadness, they can stretch and readjust themselves and pick up their burdens again. Maybe they’re reassured I didn’t melt or they didn’t melt in the presence of such potent feelings. And maybe it’s simply the relief of slowing down a moment. Regardless, if the student stays in my course, they usually start doing better work.

I’ve long thought that learning was one of the most powerful emotional experiences we have as human beings. Learning is expansion and transformation. How can feelings not be involved? I remember in detail a lecture on the Athenian Parthenon in my undergraduate course not because I have a good memory but because I had such a visceral reaction to the beauty of the Parthenon—its grandeur, antiquity, and enduring power made me cry. To deeply learn about the Parthenon or cell division or Melville is to have something more than an intellectual experience.

Once, a class of students said to me they didn’t want our semester together to conclude. Intrigued, I asked why. “This classroom feels like a holy space where we can be ourselves and learn,” one student replied. Perhaps she and the others were grateful we’d invited not only our intellects into the classroom, but our hearts as well, invited what’s deeply and thrillingly human.

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