Teacher Wellness Practice #10: Inhabiting the Dignified Stance of “Adequate”

By Sarah Rosenthal | Categories: Classroom Community, Thought Leadership, Wellness Tips

I have not felt like I have been able to be there for everyone in the way that they need. And I always questioned, am I doing enough? ... I think that's a teacher's existential dilemma always, but this has taken it to a whole new level. – 4/5 Teacher Ronda McIntyre, The Daily, June 12, 2020, reflecting on the experience of remote teaching during the pandemic

We educators understandably squirm when we hear terms like enough, sufficient, adequate.

It's hard to accept such terms when we know it's past time for all of us to do whatever it takes to address our country's deep-seated racial and class inequality. When we have to help all our students move toward “college- and career-ready,” no matter what. When we need and want to support our friends, families, and communities with their challenges and goals. So we push hard on multiple fronts, wear ourselves down to a nub, and still end up believing we should have been able to do more and do it better.

And yet, given the pandemic and all the resulting fallout, it's clear that getting anywhere near excellence has gone out the window. These past few months, we've all been forced in various ways to focus on just getting through the day. To some extent, we're growing accustomed to this reality.
Still, for many of us, the feeling of unease persists. How can doing something adequately or just being adequate help our students – let alone society – move forward? It doesn't compute.

I want to address this unease by sharing with you a perhaps surprising and hopefully empowering take on the word adequate, and a practice based on it.

In grad school I took a class on Emily Dickinson's poetry, and the professor geeked out in a wonderful way on the fact that adequate crops up so much in her work.

(Oh, and by the way, if you have a lingering impression of Dickinson as a dainty fainting lily, think again. This is someone who stayed up all night writing poems in the heat of inspiration, called herself "Vesuvius at home," and took an impassioned pro-Union stance during the Civil War. Think of her as very cleverly figuring out how to live the life of a brilliant artist acutely attentive to both her own inner world and the world around her, at a time when that was hardly the norm for her gender.)

Given how spare Dickinson's poems are, every word matters enormously. A single word may have somewhat different flavors in the context of different poems, yet when we pull back and view her entire body of work, we can see that these flavors enrich one another, imparting a complex taste profile. Some devoted scholars have constructed an elaborate Dickinson lexicon to help readers unpack her use of language. Here's what they offer as her shades of meaning for the word adequate:

1. Sufficient; enough.
2. Appropriate; able; capable; confident; competent; fit; qualified.
3. Ample; abundant; plentiful; generous.
4. Secure; firm; sound; strong enough to stand.

What leaps out at you about this cluster of meanings?

While you're musing on that, also consider these final words from her poem #508: “Adequate – Erect, With Will to Choose, or to reject, and I choose, just a Crown –”

Not exactly the disparaging, disappointing tone we associate, in our own rubric-riddled time, with the word adequate, am I right? For this speaker, the word is associated with dignity, choice, and rightness. Not right as in "I'm right and you're wrong" but right as in, she's taking her rightful place. And her rightful place is one of great nobility of spirit.

You'll have your own insights and questions about Dickinson's choice of words and your own ways of applying them to your situation. Here's where I'm being led:

Yes, we're encountering circumstances we never would have imagined just six months ago. The pandemic has been hard, and harder on some of us – those who have lost people; essential workers and those who have been laid off; elders; people with compromised health; students and families grappling with deep inequities in access to resources and support.

And while race and class issues were already playing out in ugly ways in the context of the pandemic, the recent ramping up of racist incidents and the moral outrage in response have pushed racial injustice front and center – where it belongs. As we wrap up months of distance learning and try to figure out what the fall will look like for our students, we're simultaneously participating in a close examination of systemic racism across every sector, including education. White educators, including me, are taking a close look at how we perpetuate racial injustice in the classroom and in our lives, and how we can remedy that. In the process of engaging with this pressing issue, our feelings may fluctuate wildly.
As I discussed in an earlier post, we need to make room for the full range of our feelings: anger, disappointment, grief, frustration, and all the rest. That in itself can build our resilience. In addition, I hope we can pause to fully acknowledge how well we're adapting to these conditions.

And I hope we can even go a step further, sensing the way that the word *adequate* can be joined with *erect*, inviting our own minds, hearts, and bodies to inhabit the dignity and strength in that stance.

We have a choice about how we meet these complex, interwoven current issues. We do not need to harden ourselves, go soft, or give up. With time and practice, we can internalize a bit more of the remarkable dignity Dickinson inhabited, so that becomes the way we walk in the world. This stance lifts our spirits, which in turn supports us in continuing to bring our best to our teaching and to the world. And it helps us inspire a similarly dignified stance in those around us.

This week’s practice is another two-fer: It’s an effective and efficient way to practice being present, while also giving you the opportunity to inhabit the dignified stance I’m talking about. I advise picking a daily, small task such as brushing your teeth or unloading the dishwasher; then do the practice as you execute that task. It’s also good to pick a morning task to increase the likelihood of follow-through and to experience the benefits of the practice during the rest of your day. I advise doing it alone to reduce self-consciousness and increase your focus.

### Inhabiting the Dignified Stance of “Adequate”

- Briefly review the shades of meaning associated with Dickinson’s use of the word *adequate*. (Experiment with this step; if you find it makes you feel too cerebral, drop it.)
- Using the example of brushing teeth, bring your awareness to your body standing at the sink.
  - You might visualize someone with graceful, elegant bearing such as a dancer or public speaker you’ve seen, and picture yourself inhabiting their graceful elegance.
  - You might notice your back straightening up a bit; the weight of your arms and hands hanging down and the way simply becoming aware of that helps your shoulders relax and lower; the way your feet rest solidly on the floor.
- Do the task in slow motion, making a conscious choice before you do each step. Before reaching for your toothbrush, *decide* you are ready to do so. Next, *choose* to reach for the toothpaste, to unscrew the cap, and so on.
- As you continue, remain aware of your human dignity and your ability to choose. You have to brush your teeth or they’ll rot, but you are actually still making the choice to care for yourself in this way. And you can also choose every gesture you make in the process. You don’t need a gold medal from your dentist – you’re just doing what needs to be done, as mindfully as you can, before turning your attention to the next thing.
- Continue for one minute, or until the task is done, whichever you prefer.
- Pause and check in with yourself. How do you feel compared to before you started?
- Set your intention to bring some of this dignity and conscious awareness of choices into the rest of your day.
- As you transition back into your day, move a bit slowly and gently at first to smooth the transition into your ordinary pace.

I suggest that you check in with yourself or a buddy during the week about how it is going, and again at the end of the week to debrief the experience.
How did it feel to experiment with this inhabiting the dignified stance of “adequate”? Turn to your imaginary or real partner!

You might be thinking:

“I did think of Emily Dickinson as a fragile flower hiding behind the windows in her little white dresses, so it was cool to learn she was actually a powerhouse.”

“I’m folding a bit of laundry daily. Moving slowly changes everything! I notice how I criticize myself for not doing it neatly enough – and that actually, the way I do it is ‘adequate’ as in ‘good enough.’ I’m also noting that since I’m moving more deliberately I do end up folding more neatly, and that’s like Dickinson’s sense of ‘adequate’ as ‘competent’ and ‘confident’.”

“I felt impatient with this activity. I don’t like moving that slowly. I also felt silly, even though I did it alone. This one isn’t for me.”

“This practice reminds me of theater exercises I did in an acting workshop once. I like inhabiting the presence of someone I think of as especially dignified. Even just doing that creates a positive shift in my thoughts and feelings.”

“I’m confused. ‘Adequate’ can mean all of these different things. I find myself distracted by trying to keep in mind all the possible meanings of the word and how they might relate to the practice.”

“I like to reread the list of synonyms after I do the practice because I can see which words came to the fore this time. It changes a little every day, but there’s definitely an overall theme. All the meanings seem to add up to the idea of showing up and doing my best in each situation, and that being something to respect and appreciate.”

After a week, if you enjoy this practice, you might wish to continue it. Next week’s post in the Teacher Wellness Blog Series will revisit the practices we’ve introduced in this series and discuss ways to support your self-development moving forward.

You may wish to join our Collaborative Classroom Facebook community group, where we come together with educators using our programs to offer support, share resources, and answer questions every day. If you join, please feel free to share your experiences and reflections about the practices in the Teacher Wellness blog series.