

Remarks

Good morning. I bring you greetings from the All-Island School Committee. Convocations, first faculty meetings, openings of school are exciting. I experienced 38 of them in my school career. It's a mixture of hope, planning, and fear. A little fear is a good thing.

You don't need me to tell you that people look at teaching and teachers in very different ways. But I'm going to tell you two of my experiences that for me are the bookends.

I was at a dinner party, seated next to a woman I didn't know. In the way strangers do, we made small talk. Where are you from? Do you know so-and-so? What do you do? She said she ran her own quite successful business. I said that I was an English teacher. "Oh," she said with a little frown, "Have you always been a teacher? Didn't you ever work?"

That's one. Here's the other. On registration day of my first teaching job, at a private boarding school in Hawaii, I met the parents of the students who would be my advisees for that year. I remember one man as vividly as if it were just last fall, and it was almost 50 years ago. His son was to be in my ninth-grade English class. A Chinese-American, the father stood before me with a wide-brimmed hat held in front of his chest with two hands, and bowed over it respectfully. He called me "sir." Everything about his deferential demeanor said that he was in the presence of a superior. In our brief conversation, he told me that I was to be sure that his son followed all my instructions. If there was the slightest deviation, I was to let him know, and he would see to it that there were no more deviations. I was not yet 22 years old and had not yet stood in front of my first class.

I learned later that he was in charge of Volcano National Park, a huge and important park featuring two active volcanoes. The wide-brimmed hat was a park ranger's hat, but he bowed to me over it as if it were a day laborer's tattered straw and I were the owner of a sugar plantation. His salary that year was probably ten times mine — his authority and responsibility, many times greater than that. But in Chinese culture, teachers are respected.

Throughout that first year, I tried my best to live up to that man's respect. In some ways, I'm still trying.

Those are the bookends of my experience. You all have, or will have, your own. Translate this advice to your own experiences: Forgive that foolish woman who doesn't think teaching is real work, and try your best to earn the respect shown by that Chinese-American park ranger.

Have a great year.