

OK, here's your memory test for the morning: Try to come up with your strongest memory from when you were in school. I'm not claiming to be psychic, of course, but I can tell you one thing about the reminiscence you've conjured. It probably didn't happen in a classroom. People tend to remember football games they attended, an incident in a hallway, or the time they were exiled to the principal's office, but they don't usually remember a particularly enthralling lecture or a grueling exam. In other words, we don't remember the vast majority of the events that actually make up school; we remember the incidentals.

So it's true what the Italian poet and novelist, Cesare Pavese, said: "We do not remember days, we remember moments."

Allow me to share two such moments with you. I had recently enrolled in Kindergarten at Cleveland Elementary in Sioux Falls. The dearest woman I have ever met outside of my own family, Mrs. Tenneboe, has explained to her little ones that, when we are out for recess, we are expected to stay on the blacktop playground nearest the Kindergarten wing of the massive elementary school. Back then, in a school that served oceans of children—somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 at a time—we had only two pieces of playground equipment and after a week, we were bored with the one in our area. So another student and I decided that blacktop was blacktop and that no one would notice our excursion to the other playground equipment--'monkey bars' we called them-- on the big kid side of the tracks. Somebody did notice, Mrs. Tenneboe. We were, of course, in tears as soon as we saw her approach but all she said as she hugged us both was, "Please promise you'll stay close from now on for I worry about you." We promised and we kept it every half-day for the rest of the year. I don't remember learning to sit quietly on the floor. I don't remember learning to print my name. I don't remember a single lesson from my half-day Kindergarten experience but I do remember how Mrs. Tenneboe made me feel that day. She made me feel loved.

She did it one other time too. A couple of years after graduating from high school, I happened to be standing at a corner in Sioux Falls, waiting to cross a street. Mrs. Tenneboe, coming from the other direction, took one look at me, and said, "Well, Joseph, how have you been?" I stood, mouth agape, for at least two reasons. First, Mrs. Tenneboe had been ancient when I was in her Kindergarten class. Yet, she hadn't aged a day. (In fact, I now know she was 52 when I was her student. That makes her only 8 years older than I am now. Oh, dear.) Second, Mrs. Tenneboe had 60 students, 30 in each of her half-day sections. That means she was able to not only remember one student out of 60 she had in class 15 years before but also discern his visage through the enormous changes that occur between Kindergarten and college. (Though, arguably, the pudgy face, bowl-cut hair and ill-fitting clothes in both settings may have given me away. Come to think of it, they may still give me away.) After a few pleasantries and an unexpected hug, she walked away. And I blushed. Not out of embarrassment or unease but because of how she made me feel. That hadn't changed either. I still felt like a little boy and I still felt loved.

Last Tuesday, just a week before Christmas, Mrs. Tenneboe died. She was 91. I feel a bit stupid in admitting that when I read her obituary, I was genuinely surprised to discover that she had a first name. She was not Mrs. Tenneboe, she was Agnes Tenneboe. Agnes. It means pure and it is generally associated with the Latin form of the name, Agnus, which means lamb. What a perfect first name for a Kindergarten teacher, even if none of her children ever stop to consider if she has one.

In the last months, the Mitchell Schools have seen their own losses. Bob Brooks two months ago and Bonnie Stewart, just last week. Something interesting and comforting happens when teachers and principals pass away. Their deaths jolt us out of our daily routine and send us back into our memories. Hundreds or even thousands of former students lift their heads out of the current minutiae of the day and pause to remember what they did with their lives, what they meant to us, and how they made us feel then and still make us feel today.

These are memories not soon forgotten.