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TEACH LIKE YOUR HAIR'S ON FIRE

The Methods and Madness
Inside Room 56

RAFE ESQUITH

VIKING
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AUTHOR’S NOTE: Although this book is based on true events, the students and teachers described are either composites of individuals I have observed over twenty-five years of teaching or their names and characteristics have been changed. Any attempt by an individual to identify him or herself would be a mistake. The only individual flaws in this book are my own.


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ith experience, patience, and lessons learned from failure, you can create a classroom based on trust. The students know you to be fair. You’re dependable. The kids know that with you around, they’re safe and they are going to learn something. A classroom based on trust and devoid of fear is a fantastic place for kids to learn.

But a foundation of trust is not an end result. It is not even a middle ground; it is only a good first step. We’ve all seen this time and time again: Students do a terrific job with a fine teacher, but one day the teacher calls in sick or has to attend a meeting. A substitute takes over, and the classroom that had previously functioned so well turns into a scene from *Animal House*.

Sadly, I’ve actually encountered teachers who are proud of this. They think it shows what wonderful teachers they are—that they can control kids when others cannot. Recently, I heard a teacher brag, “My kids only watch films with me. They say it’s not good if I’m not around.” This is a teacher who has forgotten that we may lead the class, but the students determine if a class is outstanding or mediocre.

Over the years, I have tried many different ways to develop a classroom culture in which students behaved well for all the right
reasons. This alone is a tall order. Given a school environment in which kids urinate all over the bathroom floor, write on desks, and quite frankly don’t want to be in school at all, it is difficult to find a common language by which to develop morality.

And then I found it. Most teaching victories come as a result of years of difficult and painful labor—there are very few “educational eurekas,” where the lightbulb blazes over your head and you know where to go. But one glorious evening it happened to me.

I had been planning lessons around my favorite book, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and was reading a study guide that analyzed the novel’s characters in relation to Lawrence Kohlberg’s Six Levels of Moral Development. I just loved it. The Six Levels were simple, easy to understand, and, most important, perfectly applicable to teaching young people exactly what I wanted them to learn. I quickly incorporated the Six Levels into my class, and today they are the glue that holds it together. Trust is always the foundation, but the Six Levels are the building blocks that help my kids grow as both students and people. I even used the Six Levels in raising my own children, and I am extremely proud of how they turned out.

I teach my students the Six Levels on the first day of class. I do not expect the kids to actually apply them to their own behavior immediately. Unlike simplistic approaches that tell us, “If you follow these twenty-seven rules, you too can have a successful child,” the Six Levels take a lifetime of effort. They are a beautiful road map, and I am constantly amazed at how well my students respond to them.

**Level I. I Don’t Want to Get in Trouble**

Most students are trained from the minute they enter school to be Level I thinkers. Practically all of their behavior is based on the fact that they want to avoid trouble. “Quiet down!” they frantically tell
one another. “The teacher’s coming!” They do homework to stay out of trouble. They walk in a line to keep the teacher happy. They listen in class to stay in the good graces of their instructor. And we teachers and parents reinforce this constantly by promising them trouble if they don’t toe the line. “Wait till your father gets home,” indeed.

But is this good teaching? Level I thinking is based on fear. Eventually we want our children to behave well not because they fear punishment but because they believe it is right.

On the first day of class, the kids are quick to admit that they have spent most of their lives at Level I. Of course, some have moved on, yet all of the children admit that “not getting in trouble” is still a guiding force in their behavior. Think back to your own childhood. How many of us really finished homework assignments (particularly the mindless ones) because it was the right thing to do? More often than not, weren’t we simply trying to stay out of trouble?

I remember vividly my first year of teaching. One day I had to attend a math training meeting, and my class fell apart when I was away. The next time I had to miss class, I wanted to be sure the kids wouldn’t “make me look bad” again. I promised them with ferocious certainty that those who did not listen to the substitute or do their work would suffer dire consequences upon my return. It worked superficially, but the children had learned nothing except to fear my anger and power. It took time to realize that this strategy was not really effective. Like many veteran teachers, I am embarrassed to think about the foolishness of my early years.

Now, on the first day of class, I begin a partnership with the children. After I request their trust and pledge my own, I ask the children to leave Level I thinking behind them. They’ll never get anywhere in life if their prime motivation is so misguided. And I certainly won’t make the mistake of fueling Level I thinking ever again.
Level II. I Want a Reward

Eventually children begin to make decisions for reasons other than avoiding trouble. But teachers are especially guilty of enforcing what in our class is identified as Level II thinking. I guess too many of us read B. F. Skinner in college. We learned that if children are rewarded for good behavior, they are more likely to repeat behavior we deem acceptable. There is, of course, truth in this. Whether the reward is candy, toys, or more time for sports, a dangling carrot can be a powerful inducement for good behavior.

I have visited middle school classrooms in which teachers use Level II thinking to encourage their students to finish homework. One history teacher I met pits his classes against each other in a competition to see which of them can complete the most homework. The winning class gets a prize at the end of the year. Apparently this teacher has forgotten that a knowledge of history is supposed to be the prize. When I spoke to the class that did the most homework, I learned that they were terrific at completing assignments and turning them in, but their understanding of history was shockingly limited.

In my early years of teaching I foolishly bought into the reward syndrome because it “works.” If I needed to miss class and was terrified that my kids would give the substitute a bad time, I knew how to handle the situation: I’d tell the children, “If I get a good report from your teacher, we’ll have a pizza party on Friday.” The next day I would return to find a nice note from the sub. This allowed me to trick myself into believing I had done a good job with my students. After all, it was certainly better than scaring them, and the kids “liked me” more. Okay, go easy on me. I was young and inexperienced.

Parents also need to be wary of encouraging Level II thinking. It’s great to give a child allowance money for doing chores. That’s how
our capitalist system works—you are paid for doing your job. The
danger, however, is giving children gifts or money for behaving the
right way. We need to show our children that proper behavior is ex­
pected, not rewarded.

These payoffs are common in classrooms across the country. As
someone who is on the front lines every day, I am well aware that
getting kids to behave is one of the toughest jobs in the world. We’re
all working way too many hours, and if a homework chart with gold
stars gets kids to do their work, that’s good enough for many. But it
is no longer good enough for me.

I think we can all do better.

Level III. I Want to Please Somebody

As they grow up, kids also learn to do things to please people: “Look,
Mommy, is this good?” They do the same things with teachers,
chiefly with the charismatic or popular ones. They sit up straight and
behave the way we hope they’ll behave. But they do it for all the
wrong reasons.

Young teachers are especially susceptible to this phenomenon
(and I speak from personal experience here). When kids want to please
you, it gives your ego a jolt. It’s nice to have students show you what
you think of as respect, to have them jump when you say jump.

In one instance, when a teacher returned from a day of absence,
something also sadly funny happened. The substitute left a note and
the teacher was thrilled to learn that the class had been fine, but one
student in particular, Robert, was fantastic. He helped run the class.
He showed the substitute where everything was kept. He was an as­
sistant teacher. But here comes the ironic part. The teacher was so
proud of Robert that he offered his prize student a reward—perhaps
it was extra points for a test or a piece of candy. Robert refused it. He
didn’t do it for a reward. He was thinking above this. He did it for the teacher. He was proud of himself. And the teacher was proud of himself, too, because he had a little guy worshipping him. They were both proud of themselves and felt good.

Of course it’s nice that Robert did a good job, and it’s sweet that he did it to please his teacher. This is far better than the situation in most classrooms. We can cue the music and maybe Lulu can sing “To Sir with Love.” But we can still do better. This is a point on which I simultaneously tease and challenge my own students. Do you brush your teeth for me? Do you tie your shoes for me? Do you see how silly that sounds? And yet many children still spend their days trying to please their teachers.

The desire to come through for parents is an even greater pressure. Many children are so desperate to please their parents they will even pick their colleges and majors to keep their folks happy. These same kids grow into frustrated adults who hate their jobs and can’t understand why they are so displeased with their lives.

Well, at least they were trying to please someone. But I think we can do even better.

Level IV. I Follow the Rules

Level IV thinking is very popular these days. With so many young people behaving badly, most teachers are trained to lay down the law on the first day of class. After all, it is essential that kids know the rules. The better teachers take the time to explain the “why” of certain rules, and many creative teachers get their students involved in the creation of class standards. The theory is that kids who are involved in generating classroom rules will be more invested in following them. There is truth in this.

I’ve seen many classrooms where such rules are posted on the
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wall. There are charts hastily scribbled by a teacher with too much work to do and other charts that would impress the board of a Fortune 500 company. I’ve seen rules that make sense (no fighting) and rules that make no sense at all (no laughing). Well, to each his own. The fact that different classes have different standards can actually be good—it teaches students to adjust to new situations in new environments.

I have no problem with rules. Obviously, children need to learn about boundaries and behavioral expectations. I am certainly not an anarchist. And when I come back from my day at the staff development meeting, am I glad that Robert behaved himself with the substitute? I am thrilled. This already puts Robert on the right path to success and far in front of his more mediocre peers. It tells me that Robert knows the rules (not all children do), accepts them (even fewer do), and is willing to carry them out. If Robert and his class are Level IV thinkers, they’re doing much better than most. One could argue that these good ends justify the means. But if we want our children to receive a meaningful education, do we really want Robert to do things because Rule 27 says he should?

I met a teacher who had an interesting way of teaching his kids to say “Thank you.” One of his rules was that if the teacher gave you something—a calculator or a baseball or a candy bar—you had three seconds to acknowledge his kindness by saying “Thank you.” If you didn’t do this, the gift was immediately taken back.

And it worked. The kids said it constantly. The only problem was that they had no real appreciation for the gifts they received. They were merely following a rule. Also, the “lesson” did not carry over into other areas of the kids’ lives. One night I took these same children to see a play, and they were no more or less gracious than other children in the theater. They did not thank the ushers who handed them programs or helped them find their seats, and they did not thank the people who served them drinks at intermission. Their
class rule was just that—a way of behaving in one class with one teacher.

It’s also worth considering how many outstanding people would need to be erased from the history books if they had never looked beyond Level IV thinking. I teach my students that while rules are necessary, many of our greatest heroes became heroes by not following the rules. We have a national holiday for Martin Luther King Jr., and this heroic American would have accomplished nothing had he been only a Level IV thinker. Gandhi didn’t follow the rules, and neither did Rosa Parks. Courageous labor leaders broke rules to help their workers. Thank goodness that people like Thoreau, Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez had the temerity to think beyond Level IV. Extraordinary people throughout history have done this, and if we want our children to reach such heights, they need to know the rules but see past a chart on the wall. There will be times when the chart is not there. More important, there will be times when the chart is wrong.

Level IV is a good place to be, but we must try to do even better.

Level V. I Am Considerate of Other People

Level V is rarefied air for both children and adults. If we can help kids achieve a state of empathy for the people around them, we’ve accomplished a lot.

Just imagine a world of Level V thinkers. We’d never again have to listen to the idiot on the bus barking into his cell phone. No one would cut us off when we’re driving or in line for a movie. Noisy neighbors would never disturb our sleep in a hotel at 2:00 a.m. What a wonderful world it would be, indeed.

After many years of trying to get this idea across to my students, I finally found success by introducing them to Atticus Finch and To
**Kill a Mockingbird.** At one point in the novel, Atticus gives his daughter, Scout, a piece of advice that perfectly illustrates Level V thinking: "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view . . . until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it." Many of my students took this advice to heart and before long the idea began to snowball. Soon almost all of my kids were becoming extremely considerate of others. With Atticus Finch leading the way, I learned that the old cliché is true. Kindness really is contagious.

During these years, I received extraordinary thank-you notes from my substitute teachers. They were amazed that my students were able to modulate their voices throughout the day. When one sub asked the class why they spoke in whispers, the kids told him they did not want to disturb the students in the next room. When the teacher remarked that he was hot, several youngsters offered him cold bottled water they knew was stored in our small refrigerator.

Hotel employees also remarked that my students were the kindest and best behaved they had ever seen. Announcements were made by grateful pilots on airplanes that the Hobart Shakespeareans were on board, and planeloads of people applauded their quiet demeanor and extraordinary manners. I was very happy and proud to be their teacher.

But . . . you guessed it: I still think we can do better. While few things make me happier than encountering a young person who has reached Level V, I want my students to reach even higher. For a teacher, there is no more difficult assignment. But the fact that it is difficult does not mean we should not try. It can happen, and when it does, the gratification I feel makes up for every heartache, headache, and small paycheck I have ever received because of the crazy world of education.

I know we can do better because I've seen it happen.
Level VI. I Have a Personal Code of Behavior and I Follow It (the Atticus Finch Level)

Level VI behavior is the most difficult to attain and just as difficult to teach. This is because a personal code of behavior resides within the soul of an individual. It also includes a healthy dose of humility. This combination makes it almost impossible to model; by definition, Level VI behavior cannot be taught by saying, "Look at what I'm doing. This is how you should behave." In a way, it is like a catch-22.

I teach my students about Level VI in several ways. Since I cannot discuss my own personal codes, I try to help the kids identify them in others. There are any number of outstanding books and films in which the Level VI individual exists. It's fun for parents and teachers to find this type of thinker—they're all over the place once you begin looking. Let me tell you about a few of my favorites.

Each year my fifth-graders read the outstanding novel *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles. The book's hero, Phineas, is an extraordinary athlete and a Level VI thinker. One day he's at the swimming pool and notices that the school record for a swimming event is not held by a member of his class. Although he has never trained as a swimmer, he tells his friend Gene that he thinks he can break the record. He limbers up briefly, mounts the starting block, and asks his friend to time him with a stopwatch. A minute later, Gene is shocked to see that Phineas has broken the record. But Gene is disappointed because no one else saw it to make the record "official." He plans to call the local paper and have Phineas redo his feat the following day in the presence of an official timekeeper and reporters. Phineas declines, and he also instructs Gene not to tell anyone about his ac-
complishment. He wanted to break the record and did. Gene is
dumbfounded, but my students are not. They have a language to de-
scribe and understand Phineas's character.

Or take the case of Bernard, the boy who lives next to Willy Lo-
man and his family in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Bernard
is constantly pestering Willy's children about school and studying
and is seen as a nerd. Later in the play, as Willy desperately tries to
understand his failures and those of his own children, Bernard shows
up but is in a hurry. He is a lawyer and has a case. As he rushes off,
Bernard's father mentions that the case will be tried in front of the
United States Supreme Court. When Willy marvels that Bernard
didn't mention this astonishing fact, Bernard's father tells Willy,
"He doesn't have to. He's doing it."

Through these examples I try my best to battle ESPN and MTV,
where posturing, trash talk, and "I'm king of the world" is the norm.
I try to quietly show children a different way.

I also use films that feature Level VI thinkers. One such character
is Will Kane, the sheriff in *High Noon*, played brilliantly by Gary
Cooper. Gunmen come to kill him, and everyone in town wants
Kane to flee, for different reasons. Some want the gunmen to control
the town so business will be better. The deputy wants Kane to leave
because he wants his job. Kane's wife, a Quaker, wants him to run
from the fight for religious reasons. But Kane has to stay. It's who he
is. And even when he's been deserted by all, when his life is on the
line, he remains true to his code. That's a tall order to ask of our
children, but I ask it of them anyway.

For my money, the best example of a Level VI thinker on film is
Morgan Freeman's character of Red in *The Shawshank Redemption.*
I am well aware that most elementary-school children are not ready
to watch this mature film, but Room 56 is a special place and we
watch it after school each year. Red is in prison, serving a life sen-
tence for murder. Every ten years or so he comes up for parole. He
faces the parole board a number of times during the film, and each time he tells the board he is a changed man. His appeal is always rejected. But in one glorious scene, after spending most of his life in prison, Red finds his voice. He tells the parole board he doesn’t even know what rehabilitated means, at least in their terms. When he is asked if he feels regret for what he has done, he says he does. But he says this not because it’s what they want to hear or because he is in prison, but because he sincerely feels regret. He has grown into a man who knows himself and has reached Level VI. He does not base his actions on fear, or a desire to please someone, or even on rules. He has his own rules. And he is released from prison.

If you are skeptical about trying to get kids to this level of thinking, I don’t blame you. Any teacher who is sincere and ambitious about what he does opens himself up to colossal failures and heartbreaking disappointments. A while back, two former students returned to my school. Only a few years earlier, they had been smiling in my classroom. They had participated in extracurricular activities and performed Shakespeare. I took them on trips to Washington, D.C., Mount Rushmore, the Grand Tetons, and Yellowstone National Park; I have a photo album full of pictures of these boys smiling, laughing, and having a wonderful time. I still have the thank-you notes they wrote me when they graduated from the class. Both promised to continue to be nice and to work hard. Yet they came to our school one afternoon armed with smoke bombs. They ran through the halls and threw the smoke bombs into classrooms, destroying property. They also detonated them on teachers’ cars. Mine was the first one they chose. For weeks I didn’t sleep well, trying to understand how they had become so lost in such a short time.

But that’s what I do. It’s what all good teachers and parents do. We ask a lot of our kids and do the best we can. We need to raise the bar for children precisely because so many kids are behaving so badly. We cannot allow incorrigible behavior to make us lower our stan-
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I refuse to go back to telling a child to do something because I said so. I will not trick myself into believing that if a student looks up to me I've accomplished something. I can't do that.

A few years ago, I missed a day of school in order to speak to a group of teachers in another state. As is my custom, I told my class in advance and did not discuss consequences if they behaved poorly for the substitute. I did not promise any rewards if they behaved well. I told them I'd miss them and would see them the day after my talk.

When I returned, I found a note from the substitute to the effect that my students were wonderful. I gave it a quick glance and began setting up for our day. About an hour later, during math, the kids were working quietly on some word problems involving fractions. There was a knock at the door of my classroom, and a short woman came in, holding hands with her six-year-old son. She spoke Spanish and asked if she could talk to me. Something had happened to her little boy, a first-grader, the day before. Walking home from school, he had been beaten up and robbed of his backpack. While this was happening, other students, as is so often the case, only watched or continued on their way home. But a little girl who was walking by had picked him off the sidewalk, taken him to a fountain, cleaned him up, and walked him home to make sure he arrived safely. The boy's mother was going around that morning trying to find the girl who had helped him. She wanted to thank her.

I asked my class if anyone knew about this. Nobody knew anything. Having been absent the day before, I was clueless. I told the mom about some other classes to check and tried to comfort her little boy by telling him to remember that while there were mean kids in the world there was also a nice one who had helped him. They left and continued their search.

As I shut the door I noticed that most of the kids were talking to one another, speculating on which school bully had perpetrated the
crime—some bullies seemed more likely than others. Out of the thirty-two kids in my class, thirty-one were involved in the discussion. Brenda kept working on her math, head bent closely over her paper. I noticed this because Brenda hated math. (She was a marvelous reader, and she used to joke with me that try as I might, I would never convince her of the beauty of arithmetic.)

I stared at her as she hunched over her math problems in the back corner of the room. And for one oh-so-brief moment she looked up, unaware that I was watching her. She looked up because she had a secret and wanted to know if anyone knew it. I didn’t until our eyes met for a split second. Her eyes narrowed and she gave me a serious shake of her head that told me to mind my own business. “Don’t ask me anything and don’t give voice to your thoughts,” her face told me before she put her head down and went back to work.

It was Brenda. She had helped the little boy, but her plan for anonymity had been foiled by the mother and my brief glance. I asked the other kids to get back to work and resumed my business. The rest of the day was a blur. Brenda had reached Level VI and no one would ever know. She and I have remained very close over the years, but we have never discussed that day.

I don’t think we can do better than this.