

IDEAS

# Grieving a school year unlike any other

I always dread the end-of-year goodbyes, but in the wake of remote learning, it feels like we've barely said hello.

By **Eric Fishman** Updated June 12, 2021, 3:00 a.m.



Two of the author's students learn the waltz in class, before the pandemic. ERIC FISHMAN

Lately, I've found myself looking at photos from previous years in the classroom. There is one in particular I keep returning to. A pair of third-grade boys dance together, hands on each other's shoulders. They are learning the waltz. In the minutes before this photo was taken, they had run to the classroom next door to hide — embarrassed by this silly dance the teachers were asking them to try. But at the end of the period, I turned around and found them in the corner, stumbling over missteps, counting out loud in time.

In previous years, the emotion that pulled me to this photo would have been something like nostalgia. Nostalgia for these two students. For vanished moments in the classroom. As I look at the photo now, the emotion is closer to grief. But what exactly am I grieving?

Before this past March, I had seen my students only once in person this school year, on an unseasonably warm September day. I stood outside the playground as they came by with family members, one at a time, to pick up paper bags of supplies. We awkwardly waved across a safe distance as the day cooled into evening and the sky's blue deepened. Then they walked away, or got into cars or on bikes, and were gone. And for months we saw each other only through screens.

I imagine that each teacher keeps a photo album in the back of their mind of students they grieve. Mine includes Caleb, with his fierce love for the baby turtle we found upside down in the parking lot. Caleb, who when frustrated would curl up into a tight ball in the corner and refuse to move. When we brought in a marine biologist to visit our new turtle, she told us that the white snot we had found on its shell was not a sign of disease but the remnants of its egg. That the turtle was on its way to a river, and we needed to let it go. (I've changed my students' names here to protect their privacy.)

Teaching is full of loss. We spend six to seven hours a day together, learning the contours of each other's humanity — how we argue, sing, hold a pencil. Our classroom family. The weft and weave of failures, fears, small victories, and the moments when something in the room shifts and everything magically aligns.

Then they leave. And they write, or they visit, or they don't.

In his essay “How I Survived My First Year,” former high school teacher Bill Bigelow recalls the words of one of his mentors: “Tom McKenna . . . had said that at the end of the year he always felt like a jilted lover. *Wait, there was more I wanted to say to you*, he would think as the students filed out for the last time. And: *I always cared more about this than you did.*”

But how do you grieve something that never happened? A community that never fully formed?

Over the past year, the figurative distance we traverse as teachers became literal. Online, in the place of the usual classroom commotion was an absence that one fellow teacher [described](#) as “dystopically silent.” One of my students mourned this loss of connection in a [reflection assignment](#): “It’s super hard to make friends now. For example, during lunch when the class ends you can’t talk to people. And sometimes when I am angry I need a friend to talk to.”

Even as many of my students have returned to in-person learning, there are still some online whose faces I rarely see, whose voices I rarely hear.

Despite the burdens of this year, there was joy. The mustache-and-eyebrows Zoom filter Anthony used to make himself look older. The time Sona came back from lunch with her hair dyed green. When Terrance taught everyone how to fry an egg. Our afternoon dance-offs. When two new students met each other in person for the first time in April. And wonderfully strange moments that might have otherwise slipped by unrecorded are now preserved in the Zoom chat — such as this update from Ivey during break on a Tuesday in November:

11:51:01 GUYS I JUST PUT COTTON CANDY IN MILK IT TASTES LIKE CLOUDS

Another photo draws my attention: a snapshot we took of our virtual classroom last fall. We are playing an online version of hide-and-seek. The student who is “it” hides somewhere at the periphery of their camera’s frame. The other children close their eyes, tuck their heads beneath their computers, let their hair fall in front of their faces, or press their hands over their eyes. Years from now, I suspect this image will be what comes to mind when I think of these kids: half hidden, beyond my understanding — like all my former students.

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