

A letter to my Teacher

Saving One life, One World

Adnan Khalil

I wasn't the best of students. Never had I been one, nor did I harbour any ambitions of becoming one. Somehow, I had managed to scrape through life at school at the Government High School No. 2, Bank Road Mardan. It had all worked out fine until I reached tenth grade. School work got tougher. I found it harder and harder to cope with it. Before I knew it, it was time for me to take my mock exams for Matriculation.

It was the science subjects. That's where the problem lay. Specially biology. I was so bad at the subject that I had begun to question my academic ability as a whole. Our biology teacher was a middle aged man named Zafar Iqbal. He also happened to be our class teacher. Even though he inquired from me time and again about my poor performance, I always managed to dodge the question. The fact that Sir. Zafar had to cope with around fifty other students helped me conveniently elude his attention.

My mock exams were just around the corner. I had a decision to make, I could either continue with my studies, or I could just quit. Being a young man with an impulsive temperament, I made the wrong choice; I decided there was no use studying further.

I could have run away from my home, but I needed time to make a plan. In the meanwhile, my exams had started. I left all my exam papers blank. I didn't know what else to do. Nobody seemed to care. Some of my friends mocked me, but I could live with that.

When the result came home, my father's temper hit the roof. He locked my wailing mother in a room and tied me with a rope to a pillar. He beat me for a little while and then left me there to ponder over what I had done.

I hated my class teacher more than ever now. Why did he have to send the result home? Didn't he know it would land me in trouble?

The next day, I didn't go to school at all. I went to a nearby bazaar and got to see so many jobs that didn't involve books or reading. I went to a mechanic's shop and asked him to hire me. I still remember how he offered me the job for fifteen rupees a day. But there was something that was not right. I saw the other apprentices at the workshop, their clothes in tatters and their faces soiled. Could I adopt this life? The harsh reality of life began to unfold in front of me; my school was a safe haven that I could turn to. But it offered no hope. The workshop was a wretched place to be at, but at least it would pay me.

Not knowing what to do, out of habit I returned to my school to spend another pointless day there, not knowing this day would change my life. I hadn't expected anyone to note my absence, as many children bunked classes. I was surprised then, when at break time, I was summoned to the staff room. My teacher Zafar Iqbal was waiting there for me. He asked me kindly where I had been yesterday, why I hadn't come to school, and why I had left all my papers blank. Unable to control myself, I burst out at the man responsible for my misery and told him the entire story. He listened quietly to my tirade. After I had finished, he opened up our biology book and asked me which topic I had the most difficulty in understanding. I pointed it out to him.

“This?” he laughed jovially. “All you had to do in this was understand the given diagram.”

Totally confused by his attitude, I asked him to explain it to me and so he did, being true to his word, using only the diagram. Being done with this topic, I pointed another one to him, and he handled it the same way. His method made sense. Innovatively refreshing, I found that I could digest something as boring and as difficult to understand as biology, by merely learning it through a different method, using diagrams.

From that time onwards, it was hard to get away from Sir Zafar. He would call me during break time, during my free periods, sometimes even during the games periods. I used his method of teaching in other subjects as well, especially in the science subjects, and it worked. That period of three months was miraculous, as I grew in knowledge and understanding exponentially.

Before I knew it, I was one of the better students in my class. Sir Zafar had managed to put light to my long extinguished flare for education. I passed my Matriculation exam in First Division and topped the Mardan district in all three science subjects! Since then, it has been an upwards journey. I found that using outside-the-box thinking like Sir Zafar’s, I could understand things more quickly and more effectively.

I completed my F. Sc and then did my Bachelors in medicine. I went on to do research at the Pakistan Atomic Energy Commission in molecular biology. But my passion lay elsewhere.

I returned to my hometown and began to teach science at the school level. After some time, I was offered a job at a renowned school in Lahore so I moved to Lahore. In the meanwhile, I began to train as a teacher trainer. My methods were deemed outside-the-box and so they were. But they were also very effective and why shouldn’t they be; I had an excellent example in front of me in the shape of Sir Zafar; I had myself experienced the efficacy of his methods.

Today, I am a certified teacher trainer for the Punjab Education Foundation. I have held many workshops in the Punjab province and beyond, and have helped hundreds of teachers with their teaching styles and methodology.

If it wasn’t for my teacher, I don’t know where I would have ended up. Sir Zafar, thank you for making me who I am. I only have one regret: I wish I had thanked you earlier.

The author is a trainer of teachers, for Pakistan Education Foundation and Idara Taleem o Aagahi.