

Tom Payeur, 2019 Vermont Teacher of the Year

Speech given on December 5, 2019

Good afternoon. Congratulations to Bibba and everyone being honored here today. Being recognized as one of your district's outstanding teachers of the year is a very big deal. You should feel proud of this accomplishment, honored to be a part of this cohort, energized by the expertise surrounding you. I'm serious, you cannot be congratulated enough right now. Let's spark this fire one more time - I want you to reach out to an outstanding teacher next to you and give them a smile, handshake, clap on the back, hug, whatever you gotta do, but take thirty seconds to congratulate that person right now. Go for it.

Thank you for doing that. And thank you to all of my humble types out there for accepting the praise. You know who you are, the ones who might be sitting here right now thinking it's a bit uncomfortable to have the spotlight on you. Or maybe you're relishing in the praise today, but you've got this expectation that this is just a moment in time, and tomorrow you'll be back in the classroom and that title of "outstanding teacher" will be put back in the filing cabinet. I'm here to tell you - don't do that. Well wait, yes, do go back to your classroom tomorrow, but don't you dare let go of being known as outstanding. Your students deserve a teacher who recognizes their own outstanding practice, a teacher who actively tries to share that shining beacon of outstanding with everyone they meet.

About 3 months after being named the 2019 Vermont Teacher of the Year, I was asked the question I had been sickly anticipating from the moment I submitted my application. A student of mine was having a particularly tough day, and in flash of frustration said, "Why are you even the teacher of the year? You work at Winooski." HHHMMMMM. If you've had that trauma training you what I mean when I say my reptilian brain perked up and said in my mind, "Excuse me? You do *not* get to talk about yourself, your community, or me in that way!" HM. Deep breath. Exhale. And I replied, "That's exactly why I'm the teacher of the year."

You see, education, our glorious bedrock of democracy, has not been immune to the axioms of free market economics, where competition is said to bring about the most desirable results, where people behave in rational ways to maximize utility in all of their transactions, where our implicit bias has us view awards and recognitions as acknowledgement of first place, better than, best at. Of course, none of this is unquestionably true. I don't need to tell you, spend twenty minutes in a crowded cafeteria during lunch time and then let's talk about rational decision making.

This student of mine was buying into the narrative of best and worst as a default in a difficult time. I don't fault them. This fetish of status has metastasized over generations, fueled by technology growth, big data, and uncertainty about the future. No matter how harmful, it is still comforting to take refuge in our perceptions of order and patterns.

As a side note, let me tell you how much fun it is to be a math teacher who just loves to disrupt order, patterns, and step-by-step procedures. I'm serious, if any of you think that the literal order of operations, you know, PEMDAS, is the only, let alone most efficient way to simplify an expression, meet me afterwards. We've got some talking to do.

So, let me share with you, in an unabridged way, what my student and I talked about that day. First, I am partial to Winooski. We should all be unashamed to say that we take immense pride in the communities we live and work in. To me, Winooski is a truly quantum experience. Just bear with me here. Quantum mechanics, in my layman's understanding of the science, tells us that the universe is a mess of probabilities until we momentarily observe it - in which case we lock in our perception of what we think is true and real. A lot of people momentarily observe Winooski and say, "diversity". But the truth of the place is the immense probability and potential that happens before and after that observation. It is a futile effort to lock in a perception of Winooski. Like any good society, Winooski School District is a miasma of contradictions that fuels a burning desire for anybody who steps through those doors to simply live in it, to feel what it's like to serve in a place where the only constant is, was, and hopefully always will be, change.

So right off the bat, I refuse to take to heart any ranking metric of our school. I acknowledge that data points serve a purpose, but that purpose is not to depress a community. I know the unbridled, explosive truth of this city.

Furthermore, the relationships I have built are, and the work that I have done is outstanding. I literally am a person who stands out from the normal status quo. I don't do this on my own. I am not a hermit or exile. I do this because those around me have faith in my abilities, support my decisions with their actions, and agree with my yearning to just always do better for our students. I pay back the faith and investment by supporting others to stand out, by routinely reflecting on my moral compass, and by being genuinely curious about how others view the world.

I am not the best. I am just someone people trust, because I trust them.

And that, that is who each and every one of you are. If I took anything away from the final season of Game of Thrones, it's that the best leader is definitely not the one who strives for the role, nor is it even the one who has leadership thrust upon them to their reluctance. The best leader is the one who is ambivalent about the title, who continues to stand out and stay true to a higher calling through the exciting and frustrating times alike.

You have all been gathered here to formally acknowledge your leadership role in your own unique schools, but I have to insist that this day be more than that for you. This should be a day that inspires you to stand out even further, to begin to take actions that you and others can be proud of. You are now a model of righteousness, a beacon of what is possible. Believe in this, and it shall be so.

We are entering into a phase of the Anthropocene, this era dominated by human development, in which our actions have and will create an irreversible escalation of environmental and social discord and upheaval. Our future generations will create new technologies and jobs, but more importantly, they will be grappling with issues such as rising sea levels, increased desertification, and mass migrations on scales never experienced in all of human history. The time is now, and only now, to prepare our students for this very real future. The only way to get there is to be intentional about standing out. We must be conscious of our efforts to erect this image of an outstanding individual so that our students, colleagues, and fellow citizens can look upon us and say “That’s what success looks like.”

Small steps will inspire larger ones in turn. Write your thoughts out and seek to publish them - as a social media post, as an op-ed in your local newspaper, as a feature in one of the many education outlets you know about. Attend a meeting. Join a committee. Reach out to your local legislator to talk about what it means to be in education today. Maybe even run for office yourself. See yourself as an educational expert, of which you are. And do this, take these steps, with the ultimate goal of disrupting a system that allowed, encouraged, told my student to think that anyone coming from Winooski could never be outstanding. Resist this inequitable, rigged construct of competition and help bring into focus that which was meant for us all along - a democracy of collaboration, where each and every citizen holds and is held up by one another. That is who you are, that is what today means, that is what you must continue to do.

Thank You