



That Four-Letter Word: Agapē

Sweaty hands. Cotton mouth. Mind racing. You are in an interview for the job you really want. The inevitable philosophy question comes at you; however, it is not open-ended. Instead, you are asked your philosophy via a prioritization mandate.

Rate these three elements in priority for your teaching philosophy:

Build music skills, Build student discipline, Build enrollment.

Why?

How would you answer that question?

Last spring as we interviewed three young teachers, we asked that question. The intrigue is that we received a different answer from each of the three candidates. One explained how establishing student self-discipline and classroom procedure was the foundation for all learning. Another candidate contended for the need to have and keep kids in the class before any discipline or music can be taught. The other candidate passionately validated that if music is being learned with excellence, then discipline and enrollment take care of themselves.

Music, discipline, enrollment. How would you rate them in order of importance? Think back to the best teachers you had in school. Which was most important to them? Depends on the subject. Maybe. Depends on the grade level. Probably. Depends on the teacher personality. Likely. Still, the reflection is worthwhile.

For this teacher, an epiphany occurred through a series of circumstances early in my career.

1. One of my high school ensembles dropped in enrollment by 50% over five years, despite receiving superior ratings and being selected to perform at state convention.

2. A nationally renowned journalist who had been held hostage in Lebanon was quoted, saying, “When you’ve been stripped of everything, you realize that awards and reputation and success don’t really matter. People are most important.” I still have that newspaper article.

Adapted personal motto: *People are more important...than performances, paperwork, and projects.*

3. After watching an impressive Bands of America performance by Marion Catholic High School, putting Bernstein’s *Candide* on the field, I read an article by their director, Mr. Greg Bimm. His top priority in his teaching: Love the kids.

Based on those circumstances and other observations, my answer to the introductory question:

1. Enrollment (people) 2. Discipline (motivation) 3. Music (skills)

Enrollment: People are most important. Love the kids. Every activity, every interaction, every rehearsal of every day must have the focus of showing the kids that each of them is important and each is capable of success. If you build a healthy, positive relationship with them, they will follow you to numbers two and three. Then, the stronger the bond and belief and expectation between teacher and student, the greater self-discipline and self-motivation you can instill. And then, the greater their motivation to follow your lead and instruction, the greater musical skills you can teach.

Seven years ago, our principal began the school year by asking each of the department chairs to write their version of “This I Believe”. Based on a book, *This I Believe*¹, the invitation is this: Write a few hundred words expressing the core principles that guide your life—your personal credo. As a reflection of the commentary above, the credo below is an abridged version of that assignment.

Agape

With some credit or apologies to Mac Davis, I believe in music...I believe in love.

As a new teacher, I had recently seen an incredible performance by the Marion Catholic H.S. Band from Chicago Heights, Illinois. Awe-inspiring for its excellence coupled with its enthusiasm, these kids had truly captured the pinnacle of musical achievement, not only in

awards, but more importantly, in the intangible, lifelong experience of teaming with peers on a journey of success. Then I read an article by Greg Bimm, director of the band. His first and highest recommendation for teaching and inspiring students was this: Love the kids.

With all the four-letter words you hear all the time, one four-letter word we need to hear more of...is love. Love is worth three words in Greek: phileo, eros, and agapē and the greatest of the three is agapē. This love is unconditional. No expectations, no conditions. Love without anything in return.

I believe in loving each student regardless of talent or intellect, regardless of how they help or hurt the class, regardless of how isolated or “loved” they are by their peers. I believe in the love that treats the night shift crotchety custodian with the same kindness and respect as the principal with evaluation in hand.

I am not speaking of the 60’s flower-child love of license, the 80’s love of self-esteem or the 21st century love of tolerance. Agapē love is when Joey is out of his seat again and I follow through with consequences again while forgiving his oops again. Love the kids. I believe in the love that expects and inspires and commands and persuades and leads and encourages and teaches each student towards their own astounding personal best—a best that often far exceeds their own expectations or comfort.

In all of its manifestations and in its true meaning from the God of the universe who created it, I believe in love.

All the best to you and your students this year. Discover or renew your priorities. Know what you believe. And don’t be afraid to use that four-letter word that needs more airplay – love. Because people are most important!

¹ Allison, Jay; Gediman, Dan *This I Believe*. New York: Henry Ho