When Gifts Come Dressed as Trouble:

Using core gifts as a tool for understanding
and reducing undesirable student behavior

by Bruce Anderson

This article is excerpted from the forthcoming book, A Light In The Distance: Using your core gift as a guide for authentic teaching. *The premise of the book is that there are six distinct benefits to integrating the idea of core gifts into a teacher's kit bag of strategies. In the book, each benefit is accompanied by five teachers discussing it's usefulness.*

What is the basis you use for welcoming students into the life of your classroom? What would they say you regard and reward them for? Being on time? Not being trouble? Getting good grades or successfully carrying out the requests you have of them? These questions raise fear in me that, for myself, students' answers may not be what I hope. My actions and how I have designed the learning environment send very specific messages about the basis for welcoming, and those messages may serve to promote my own success rather than create a meaningful foundation for welcoming students. Rather than relying on my hopes and resulting assumptions about the truth, it may be interesting for me to ask students: "How do you know you are welcome in this learning situation?"

Several years ago, there was heightened concern for school safety in my hometown after the Columbine high school shooting incident in the mid-western United States. Recognizing that students who kill other students are most often framed as "loners" and also as young people who feel misunderstood and mistreated, we (a small group of students, a school administrator, and I) decided to ask students a few simple questions in order to get a reading on how students saw themselves and how safe they felt within the school environment. We came up with a short list of questions, and positioned volunteer students at the doorway to each school to gather data from students in the sixth to twelfth grades. I vividly remember the results. One of the questions asked the student if he or she knew their gifts. About three-quarters of the students said they could identify their gifts. Another question asked the student if he or she had been identified and acknowledged for those gifts. Only about one-quarter of the students felt they had been seen and acknowledged for their gifts.

What information does this give us, as adults involved in the lives of young people? What is the likely behavior of a young person who does not feel seen and valued for the essence of who they are? It may be possible for a suspicious adult to attribute these students' responses to the angst of youth—just another example of the unrelenting complaints from young people about how hard life is and how misunderstood they are. My guess is that this desire in some adults serves to further their real desire—to blame young people for their condition. "If they would just try a little harder, like I had to do, things would be better for them."

At what point did young people begin to bear the burden of discovering and being seen for who they are without the arduous support of adults? I know the answer to that question for myself. It was seeded at the points during my youth when I realized I was not going to get meaningful help in figuring out who I was or what I should be doing. By meaningful help, I am speaking of something beyond the encouragement to be successful in the outside world by going

to college, getting a good job, and avoiding trouble. Help with unraveling and understanding the world inside myself was noticeably absent during my youth, as I suspect it also was for my peers. Who am I? This question helps determine your gift, your talents, and how you want to be welcomed in the world. If the older people in a community do not take the primary responsibility for this task, what does that say about how we value our own gifts? We are living, in our families, schools, and communities, with the devastating results of what happens when adults do not take a commanding and unrelenting role in helping young people feel seen and valued for who they really are.

In contrast, last year I attended the classroom party celebrating my daughter's final day in fourth grade. In preparation for the party, the students had taken classroom time to carefully identify the primary contribution that each fellow student brought to the classroom. Out of all the ways you could describe this person, what is their strongest attribute? As the teacher read the essence statement created by the students for each other, you could see the pride in the student (and the tears in parents' eyes as their child's statement was read). This is the idea of the gift in its most simple and elegant form. Nine-year-old children seeing the essence in each other and being able to declare, in simple but powerful words, that gift. What do you suppose each student will carry in his or her psyche out of that last day in school? It will likely be the memory of being seen clearly and feeling welcome amongst their peers.

As teachers, we have to make a strong and open statement, backed by our actions and the design of our activities within the learning environment, that we are welcoming students because *we need the essence of who they are as an essential part of the glue that holds the classroom together*. A student should be clear how the classroom is not complete when he or she is not present. Other students need to be clear what capacity and strength is not as available when another student is not present. Students and teachers must know each other's gifts in order for this understanding to occur. When the essence of each student is known, learners are able to understand and witness what "whole community" means, and carry the desire for wholeness forward as a distinct and available memory. Students deserve this opportunity as a foundational part of their education. If we, as adults, had known better when we were younger, perhaps we would have expected the same for ourselves. Or perhaps we did expect it, and did not receive what we knew in our bones was an essential ingredient for our growth. We, and the students in front of us, are part of a multi-generational pattern of disregarding the essential gifts of young people.

Remembering gifts strengthens and renews your commitment to the idea that teachers and students are worthy of each other's regard and attention.

One of the foundations for respecting another person is the belief that he or she has an important contribution to make to the world. One root of *respect*, "to look at again," reminds us that the first time we look we see the surface of who the person is—our judgments about their actions, their appearance, and our fear of the difficulties this stranger may bring into our life. Then, if we choose to respect the person, we look again. This time, we calm our inner voice of judgment and fear and make a genuine effort to see who the person really is. Where has this person been, why are they on my doorstep in this moment, and where are they going? Whatever the current condition of the person, they have essential capacities that are worth nurturing and bringing more fully into the world. This is also supported by the popular reclamation of the Latin root of "education," *educare*, which translates to "bring out what is within."

Breaking down the limiting notion that education is all about stuffing facts inside a person and filling them up, both educare and core gifts are defined by the idea that there are essential seeds of wisdom in each of us that are worthy of bringing out and building upon. This is especially important to remember when a student acts in a way that brings difficulty into the classroom, because it is a reminder that the student is larger than their current behavior, even though this behavior may be consuming the learning environment.

Core gifts are also important to remember on days when you are not giving teaching your full attention. Whether it originates from being tired, not having the desire to carefully listen, just interested in getting to the moment when the day is over, being frustrated with the latest unhelpful policy or rule mandated from above, or wanting the students to do (for once) what you ask them to do—a lack of authentic, centered, and focused attention will surely lead towards trouble in the classroom. When teachers and students are aware of each other's core gifts, they are reminded that the person in front of them is on a worthy path and is deserving of attention. Students are asked what they can contribute; core gifts thus provide a specific way for both students and teachers to welcome each other into the learning environment. Giving your core gift is a powerful way to feel "at home" and welcome within yourself, and be welcomed by others, in any situation. When teachers and students begin to see each other's gifts as essential attributes of each other's unique style, regard and appreciation develop that can sustain connection through moments when a student or teacher acts in ways that push others away.

Often, what is broken inside a young person is the same thing that is broken in the community—the belief that all of us are worthy of love and all of us have a contribution to make. When a young person is in trouble, he or she needs a bridge to find their way back into community. Giving their gift can be that bridge. When a young person believes they have something valuable to contribute, and the community provides opportunity for that contribution to be made, hope is restored, desire comes to life, and both students and communities become whole again.

Gift-aware teachers see trouble in a student as the giftedness of the person trying to come out.

What is the root of an undesirable behavior, either in a learning situation or in other parts of the person's life? In fact, this undesirable behavior may be the frustrated core gift of the person, unseen for too long and trying desperately to be noticed by the only means left—by drawing attention to itself in a dramatic way.

I met a young person a while back who said to me, "I know what my gift is. It's the power of persuasion and motivation. I just have the power to make people believe that they can do something. I've done some bad things with that gift, let me tell you. But I want to do good. You know what I want? I want people to really ask me how I'm doing…not to wonder what I'm up to and trying to get away with. That's what I need. Everybody thinks I'm trying to con them. I don't want to be a deer in the headlights anymore."

We are faced with students throughout the course of our professional life who have a strong sense of identity, and yet create trouble within the environment we have set up for learning. If you have been teaching for a few years, it is likely you have encountered every one of these students:

A student with a core gift for finding the truth who challenges every statement the teacher makes.

A student with a core gift for leadership who gathers students in groups to tease or physically bully other students.
A student with a core gift for logic and order who challenges each rule in the family, classroom, and the larger community.
A student with a core gift for compassion and feeling who is overly dramatic and draws attention to him or herself by yelling and carrying on in the hallways.

When a student acts out, finding a way for them to give their core gift in a healthy, contributing way is one of the most powerful tools a teacher can use to draw the student back into the learning environment. The usual approach to reducing behavior[1], which is to get the student to do less of the offending action, is exactly the wrong strategy to use in a situation where the gift of the person is coming out in unhealthy ways. The gift-aware teacher strives to intensify and help the person go into their gift further as the method to bring the person back to using their gift in a healthy way.

Gifts acknowledge what is not going to go away.

The gift is not going to go away. You can't eliminate the person's desire to give their gift. It's like the bubble under the carpet— pushing it down in one spot will cause it to rise up in another. In the above situations, what could you do to provide a healthy and contributing way for each student to reengage in the environment? For instance, with the truth-finding student, you could:

Ask the student to list all the alternative views of truth related to an idea being presented, with both positive and negative attributes of each.
Ask the student to defend a position that he/she does not believe in.
Ask the student to define the difference between "the truth" and what is true for him or her.
Tell the student a story about a time when you knew the truth needed to be told and you didn't have the courage to tell it.
Ask the student to tell a story about a time when they thought something was true but found out later it wasn't.
Assign the student to investigate the root words related to *truth*, and how different cultures interpret truth.
Have a sidebar discussion with the student and acknowledge their passion for the truth and why truth is so important in a learning environment.
Gather this student and others who have a similar gift for truth finding to talk about how their gift has helped them.
Ask this same group of students to tell stories to each other about how their gift has gotten them in trouble.
Ask this same group of students what they are most afraid of related to their gift.
Ask the student to tell a story about a time when they told the truth and it was helpful in a situation.

[1] Gift identification and giving fit nicely within the framework of the current "positive behavioral support" (PBS) movement. PBS asks the teacher to name what the student is trying to get from the behavior, and then find a way for them to get that same thing in a positive way. When a teacher recognizes a student's gift, and then offers alternative ways for him or her to give it, the desired outcome of positive behavioral support is achieved.

Ask the student to describe why secrets are bad.
Ask the student to describe a situation where keeping a secret could be a good thing.

Gift-giving balances a person's behavior.

Gifts have a self-leveling quality to them. When they are acknowledged, they will adjust themselves to be seen and used with acceptable levels of both intensity and frequency. The task of the teacher is to find ways for the person's gift to be contributed in a healthy way. Rather than trying to reduce the giving of the gift, the teacher finds ways to reorient this powerful capacity in the person. Punishment, in cases where the gift is being given in ways that are not helpful, sends the message to the person's psyche that the most valuable part of who they are is not worthy of others' attention and gratitude. The likely result of this awareness is a building resentment, a purposeful lack of appreciation of others' gifts, and a continuing escalation of disrupting behavior.

Gifts highlight and help accurately define four kinds of disruptive behavior.

Teachers who orient themselves to using gift identification and giving strategies in a learning environment are on the lookout for four different sources of trouble that can stem from gifts:

1) *Not giving gift.* A student who forgets to, or chooses not to, give their gift will often be unmotivated to participate in learning environments. This is primarily due to the student not making a connection between the learning topic and the direction of their life. When a student begins to give their gift, the connection is remembered and the student becomes engaged and alive with the possibility that their engagement will serve their future.
2) *Somebody else restricting or not letting you give your gift.* A student who is restricted in giving their gift is likely to escalate their behavior in order to draw attention to the fact that their gift is not being received. Gifts want to be seen, and will resort to most any mechanism to be recognized within a group.
3) *Giving your gift in a way that drives others away.* Oftentimes the person will give their gift in a way that is "too much" for the rest of the group. Being insistent on giving their gift when it's not the contribution that's really needed at that time, giving their gift at the expense of others making their contribution, giving their gift in such a forceful way that it becomes seen as an angry, aggressive, or hurtful gesture—all are forms of gift-giving trouble.
4) *Staying in the opposite, the wound.* At times, a person will retreat into their suffering rather than give their gift. This usually occurs at times when courage is required for gift giving, and the person gets thrown back into the feelings that accompanied the original suffering (the opposite of their gift). The effect of this is usually a behavior that is incongruent with the situation. For example, consider a person who has a gift for welcoming others, and who was severely not welcomed in their own life. When there is a new person in a group who needs welcoming, but who is seen as marginally acceptable to group members, the person with a gift for welcoming may suddenly become quiet or even contribute reasons why the new person should not be welcomed. The situation has triggered them to retreat into their old wounds and act out the conditions under which they did not feel welcome. In this moment, they are intent on not letting the newcomer receive the welcoming that they did not get.

Giving your gift in inappropriate ways and not giving your gift at all are both forms of hiding.

Both have the result of not being seen for who you really are. A student who acts in ways that drive the teacher and other students away receives a response of negative attention. The negative attention can come about in many forms; each type is attention received for the not-loving, not-caring, and not-compassionate part of the student. In the same way, the student who is silent and not giving their gift receives no attention for the loving and caring parts of who he or she is. Neither student gets acknowledgment or receives attention for the gift that greatly defines their character and their calling.

Over time, both of these students will begin to frame who they are in terms of their disrupting or hiding behavior, and begin to assume it as the fundamental descriptor of who they are. As the person begins to define him- or herself, more and more, as trouble, they will have an increasing desire to defend that part of themselves. As hope for being seen in other ways gradually dissipates, the person retreats into silence or escalates the disruptive behavior as a way to receive what is now seen as the only way they can get love and attention. Teachers who use gift identification and giving strategies provide students with a powerful and healing alternative—to be seen for who they really are.

The student's core gift can be the ticket into relationships.

For students who have life stories of feeling unwelcome, identifying and using their gift can provide specific strategies for increasing opportunities for being seen and valued. This can have the effect of reducing other kinds of behavior for which they receive attention. Our psyches want to be acknowledged. We will get that acknowledgement any way we can and, as our options diminish, our behavior becomes more and more outlandish until we finally are literally screaming for attention. Or, as noted previously, the screaming can take the form of silence and retreat. Both behaviors are efforts to be seen.

When a student is given the opportunity to give their gift, and is witnessed for it, there is an immediate response of feeling welcome. The more the student is acknowledged for giving his or her gift, the more welcome they feel. Students who are oriented towards feeling not welcome will respond to gift-giving opportunities when they are taught about their gift and provided the opening for giving it. This can become a natural way for a student to look for attention, and at the same time increase his or her skill in giving their gift.

The students receiving this person's gift also begin to frame the student as gift-giving rather than either disruptive or too quiet. The giving of the gift is the mechanism that causes the person and the group to accurately perceive each other. The person sees the group as not out to get him or her, but rather as a group who values the person. The group sees the person as someone with a contribution to make. On both sides, there is an increased understanding of the worthiness of the other.

Questions for teachers:

1. How do you welcome students? What do you think students would say is not welcoming about your behavior? Is this connected to your gift in any way?
2. Describe a student who is disruptive to the learning environment. Given this behavior, can you guess what the person's gift might be?

3. How do you use your gift to protect yourself? How is your gift a defensive posture towards the world?
4. Which one of the strategies listed for engaging a truth-gifted student intrigues you? Why?
5. Out of the list of four kinds of trouble you can get into with your gift, which one is most common with you? Which one causes the largest emotional response in you?
6. Who helped you determine the purpose of your life? What did they do to help?

Part Two:

In Our Daily Life:

Teacher's dialogue about core gifts and student classroom behavior

Moderated by Bruce Anderson

Editors Note: Five respected and innovative teachers from different kinds of educational environments in the United States were gathered to dialogue about the idea of gifts, behavior, and teaching strategies. Chris Heimrl, special education behavioral specialist; Renae Taylor, elementary teacher; Catherine Johnson, college professor; Brian Anderson, high school English teacher; and Roger Taylor, corporate trainer. Their conversation has been edited and included here to show the variety of vantage points that the idea of gifts offers to teachers.

Chris: Most of the work I do is around helping people who have what others call "undesirable behavior". But I'd like to preface that by saying it's not clear what undesirable behavior is in a classroom. For instance, as a teacher, I'm more worried about the kid who doesn't say anything than the kid who is in my face being disruptive. You can figure out a kid like that right away. They give themselves away. I'm more worried about the kid who hasn't given me anything—no clues to help me figure out where they are.

Renae: If I can help a parent to see the gift, or remind them of the gift, in their child, it can be very comforting to them. If a child is remarkable or unique—for whatever reason—sometimes that's worrisome to parents. It's my job as a teacher to tell the parents, "What's stirring in there is growth, and it's good."

Chris: You are able to help them see their child and tell them about the potential, rather than having them see what is going on as a problem. And your capacity to see that in a child is part of your gift?

Renae: Yes, that's true.

Chris: When a student is being resistant, or in some kind of trouble, aren't they really asking: "Why am I here? It's clear to me why you are all here, but what contribution am I bringing? That's not so clear to me." Resistance is often the wound side revealing itself. My interest is in learning how people can have a sense of belonging and figure out who loves them. That's what schools are about—they are places where relationships can begin and grow while people are learning. My particular interest is in the difficult behavior part that can erupt during that process.

Roger: A lot of the teaching and training work I do in businesses is around what is called "non-desirable" behavior. Whether you want to call it productivity or change or cohesion or effectiveness, at some level it involves dealing with resistance and resistant behavior, which many leaders immediately see as non-desirable. I have a frame for those situations, which is like this: If we knew enough about what the person who we see as "resistant" was experiencing internally, we would be brought to tears by the courage and effectiveness they are bringing to the show. But, if you look at it through the lense of your own world as a teacher or leader—by your own fears about what you are trying to pull off and are challenged by—you don't see or hear any of that. Everyone has a gift they are bringing towards the adaptive change, and resistance is really moving towards the change as opposed to moving away from it. Every resistant viewpoint is an expression of concern—it's all moving towards an attempt to adapt. The resistant contribution is a gift to the change process.

Chris: Are there any distinctions between adults and children? One of the distinctions I make for myself is that kids are, at the root, more dealing with a struggle around "I'm not enough" or "I don't belong". Adults are dealing more with the struggle of "I'm really on my own here—I have to figure this stuff out alone". Although these are related questions, adults have the added weight of realizing no one is going to bail them out. The positive side of this is that adults get to feel like they are in charge of it.

Brian: I feel like this is one of my weakest areas. I don't actually work with very many disruptive students. I don't think the techniques I use work very well with disruptive students.

Chris: The principles are the same, but the strategies are different. It's simple, but it's not easy. Interpreting it to a specific student is where it gets hard. For me, the beginning of that process is to just abide with the tension and emotion that goes along with the feeling that "Oh, things are not going well!" As a teacher there is a certain amount of wanting students to find their own path and grow, but at the same time wanting the boundaries to be secure. For me, I don't mind little disagreements or clarifications, but I really don't want someone to vehemently reject or challenge what I have said. Boom, that really gets me at an emotional level. I see it as a non-desirable behavior because I've got this certain lens that I don't want interrupted. What are some of the things you rely on that that help you enter difficulty you are having with the student?

Cath: Before I had this language of a core gift to lean into, I did have a sense that being home with myself is important. When I am challenged in the classroom I recognize that, when I feel at home with myself, the challenge from the student is oftentimes an opportunity for something really creative to happen. If I'm not feeling at home with myself—if I'm feeling insecure or not up to the task—then that challenge feels threatening to me and I want to manage, control, or push it down. Having language around the core gift now, it's fun for me to think about what "being

home with myself" means in relationship to my core gift. It's another way of staying grounded and centered in that moment when there is a disruption or something unplanned for is happening. I am certain that I have to be able to trust my own resources and the resources in the classroom as a whole to meet whatever is happening in some kind of creative way. When there is a challenge, it's usually an important voice coming through in that moment—people who often times don't get heard.

Chris: A man who has taught me a great deal says that "The individuals who act out the most are really not problems, they are revolutionaries. They are the ones who are standing up and shouting "This is not right and I won't stand for it anymore." If you can look at those students as the voice of change or reason, it creates opportunities.

Renae: To me, that is the point of the job of teaching. Right there. The student, by explaining to you how this environment doesn't work—or by withdrawing from the environment—is letting you know they are trying to learn. And my response is, "Let's get into it and figure it out." We have very structured homework we send home with children in the third grade. We do this so, when we are in class together, we can spend the time validating or invalidating the work that we do together. Most often, the issues that arise are personal. So I have to address them on a personal level. The children come in with wounds and baggage…

Chris: All of which comes right over to you…

Renae: Oh yes, in behaviors that come out right in your face. Many children have serious baggage that is really bringing them down and incapacitating them to learn and deal with the choices I am asking them to make in the classroom. Sometimes a child needs a break from their serious life and an opportunity to be a child for a few hours. In order to help this child release some of his or her struggles, I explain to them that the environment is a safe one. I tell them there is a classroom door, and there is a bag outside the door with their name on it. They can put all their troubles in the bag, and they can leave it outside the door. It's still outside, with their name on it, and they can haul it off because it is theirs to deal with. But while they are in my classroom today, they are children, and they can sit back with other children and breath and relax. Often, for children with extreme loads, this is very effective. It takes reminding them sometimes, but generally they get that idea and they can be in the class without feeling trapped by the big load they are carrying.

Chris: Does the environment you create also include the permission to bring your bag into the classroom and dump it out so they can deal with it?

Renae: Oh, absolutely. You can talk about it anytime you want. Generally, that kind of thing comes out in conflicts between children. I believe totally in the wisdom of children, and in giving them opportunities to share their lives with each other. It is amazing how, when it becomes clear from one child to another why they are crying, they can organize themselves to help each other. They really can work it out. There are a lot of children who have major wounds, and they sometimes need a little more one on one from me. But the majority of kids can work it out amongst themselves.

Chris: A lot of my work in schools is with kids who are about to be booted out of classrooms for assaulting teachers or other students. I ask them, "Why is this such an awful place?"

Renae: One reason it's awful is that the student doesn't feel like they have any choices.

Chris: What I'm hearing from you is that you try to find, for each kid, the tension and the balance between security and autonomy. "I'm responsible for the safety in this classroom, and I'll assure you that I will be there."

Renae: I will be there, being who I am. And it's possible for you to be who you are.

Chris: And you do that so they can explore the autonomy part of it? Those two things are incompatible in a lot of ways. If you are safe, sound, and secure, you are compromising or jeopardizing your independence, because there is dependence that goes with security. On the other hand, if you are just out there doing your autonomous, independent thing, you are compromising and jeopardizing a certain amount of security.

Renae: In that sense, I am managing that balance. Children understand that there are social norms and there is a social order. Truly, I don't know any child who does not think that's imminently fair. For instance, I had a student with autism. Other children totally understood this kid who needs to be under that table and has to have quiet around them. As a teacher, all I had to do was say to the other students, "This is something he needs." And the other students respond with a simple, "Oh, that's o.k." And then they are off and running again. For that age child, it's really different than it is with adults. Adults get freaked out, but the children are totally fine with it.

Roger: As opposed to a teacher saying, "That's none of your business", which is the other way you could respond to one child's curiosity about the needs of another child. But that dishonors the kid asking the question.

Renae: Yes, and that also dishonors the whole environment. Because you can't say that this part and this part and this part are free for you to understand, but this part is none of your business. That's ridiculous.

Roger: That's what jacks up all the problems and makes it not work in the classroom—is to try and protect a child in that way by withholding information.

Renae: That doesn't work because you've now just made that kid so different that they will have a hard time being accepted.

Chris: Most adults went to school when there was even a worse response than "It's none of your business that the kid is under the table." For us, as students, it was none of our business why those kids were not even in our class—they were over there in that special classroom all alone by themselves.

Renae: My prime directive with students is to tell them the truth and be real with them to the extent that's reasonable to their development.

Cath: The cultivating of wisdom is knowing something has happened and then being able to ask questions that validate your knowingness. That entire wisdom process gets truncated by "you're not allowed to know".

Roger: When the truth is not told, the basic underlying message the student receives is "You can't handle it." So it not only truncates the learning process, it truncates resilience. Renae, I'm hearing in what you are saying a very clear desire to build resilience whenever possible, and you assume students can handle it and will let you know if they can't.

Renae: Yes. We have a child in our class who has a lot of behavior and learning development issues. He was in our face, driving us all crazy, and everyone was complaining about him. He was out of school one day, and I got the other students in a circle and said, "O.K. today we're going to talk about this child. I'm hearing a lot of complaints, and anything you say will be fine, there will be no judgment." The children went around the circle speaking, saying "he does this" and "he does that". I just kept affirming them by saying, "You are absolutely right, he does". And then, about the third time around the circle, a youngster stopped me and said, "Now, wait a minute. Remember when I was in first grade, how I behaved like that? And I'm a lot better now." And all the other students went, "Yea, we remember that and you are a lot better now." And then they started to develop strategies for how they could support this student. Those kinds of experiences, time and time again, have taught me that you can really trust children.

Chris: That's been my experience, too. Whenever I am in a classroom working with a behavior issue in a student, after listening to the kids I would just say, "Now, what are you all going to do about it?" And their first response is, "What do you mean? You are an adult, that's your job." But, as adults, that's a mistake I think we've been making for a long time…that we always know what a kid needs and what will work, and that it's our job. I think we are too far away from being kids ourselves to always know what will be helpful. You have to trust the brilliance of children. You have to let them know that they do have the answers, and you supply the permission and let them know that you are behind them and will help guide them through it. Because, no matter who decides what to do, in the end it's going to be about what the kids do with other kids.

Roger: A lot of these dynamics are not that different when we are talking about adults. There may be more of a mask that has been developed, so there is more to work through. For the leader, it's the same as for the teacher—the basic strategy is to get real. We're going to be really clear about power, both what I am authorized to do and what you are authorized to do. I think that's one of the main tools for the leader, and it's often times very confused. So many leaders think they have to make everybody comfortable. That's the Achilles heel. But their primary job is to listen and acknowledge. There is also a part around setting some boundaries for people who go beyond the usual norms. That's the place where leaders have to be clear about their authority.

Cath: I think it's best if people have a chance to influence the boundaries for what is acceptable in the classroom.

Roger: Yes, but oftentimes the group doesn't want the work of taking accountability for their own stuff…to face the challenges around their own resilience. They'd just rather have somebody else deal with it. The leader is responsible for saying it's going to happen, and then asking "how" to the group. The troublemakers will respond by saying, "If I can't decide whether it's going to happen, then I'm not going to say how it should happen." As a leader, you've got to let that comment go right by and get involved with the people who are interested in contributing. The resistant people will come around to helping with the "how" if they are not excluded. There is a bus that is going, and they are deciding to be on it or not. Most will decide to get on the bus.

Chris; I liked what you said earlier—that resistance is not really pushing against, it's just a different way to move toward it and there is potentially something of value within their resistance. I think this has something to do with core gifts. It may be that the person is trying to give their gift, but others see it as a criticism or resistance. Worse yet, the giving of their gift may not be valued because they are so clumsy in giving it…it drives people away from them. The teacher may be critical or even punitive in response to the way the person is giving their gift. If it comes across as clumsy, or because the wound screams louder than the gift, we see a potential contribution as abrasive, offensive, and non-desirable. But what they are really trying to do is say, "I have something to contribute."

Roger: In any working group, it's often the same people who challenge the change or challenge the leader. There is a way in which they repeatedly run for that office and get elected by the group to be in that role. Those people have a particular gift. Part of their gift is not to be railroaded by power. That may not be what's really going on, but somehow they take a stand in those situations. "We're not going to let you railroad this down our throats without talking about it." That's a very useful thing, although it's easy to perceive it as an attempt to stop all change. But, you know what, that's never been my experience. If their concerns get heard and acknowledged, those people often become the most committed when it comes time to change. But if they get blown off, it becomes about justice, and they never give up.

Renae: Do you think that, sometimes, there are major wounds in a person that overwhelm their ability to make a change?

Roger: When I find out that a person is known as being someone who always is resistant, it does help me to think, "Oh, this person may have wounds, but at the same time they are going to be a voice for justice." It really helps me to imagine that there is both a wound and a gift in what the person is bringing.

Cath: I thought you were going to go somewhere else with that. Let me see if I got what you just said—you are thinking that the resistance in a person may be part of their gift, and the situation brings out this gift.

Roger: Yes.

Cath: I was thinking that one way to use this core gift work would be that some of those resistant people could be unplugged from that role they usually play if we help them to be aware of their

gift. We could redirect them to give their gift rather than just being resistant. That's different from what you were saying.

Roger: That's possible too. What often happens is, when they are acknowledged and thanked for raising this resistance, all the distracting energy around doing it just falls away. They realize that the act is no longer a problem, but a service.

Brian: That's a different perspective. I think it would catch them off guard—to say to a person, "That's your gift and, no, we can't all do that. We're counting on you to bring up the resistance."

Chris: What is your experience when a person who is bringing undesirable behavior really feels acknowledged in some way for their contribution?

Renae: For the contribution to be seen and acknowledged by the teacher or the leader is one thing. But when peers acknowledge it, then a whole new dynamic opens up. That recognition really, for all of us, tends to open things up more.

Cath: To be acknowledged by who they see as their real community…

Renae: Related to wound versus gift, what I have noticed is that some people just keep revisiting their wound all the time. Their gift is less effective because they don't give it in a way that it can be seen and appreciated by others.

Chris: The closer a person is to their wound, the more likely they are to have their future be right behind them. They will continue to walk backwards right into their past, and the wound will be reopened, relived, and re-storied over and over again. There is no future in front of them.

Bruce: How do you help a student begin to look forwards instead of backwards—to become hopeful that there is something worth working towards?

Brian: How I talk about it with students is within the framework of "doing your life's work." That's about the future. I talk about the difference between work and your life's work. For many students, that is a shocking thing to consider. We read some of Annie Dillard's essays, and she talks about accomplishing your life's work before you die.

Chris: On the flip side, don't many kids respond, "Why does that matter? I'll never live to see twenty-five. Why are you having me talk about the future? None of my brothers or cousins have seen twenty-one. They're dead."

Brian: Yes. It can get that serious, and then their writing becomes meaningful for them. No one can really get around the concept of a meaningful life. It's a serious thing to consider what you need to do so that, when you die, you will feel like you've lived a full and meaningful life and are prepared to die. This is not just school stuff. Let's pretend we're not in school. This is real stuff that you need to figure out, or your life is not going to be very meaningful."

Chris: It sounds like your life's work as a teacher is to help students understand they've got a life's work. For all of us, I think the greatest gift we can have is that our work life is our life's work.

Brian: When I first read about the core gift idea I thought, "You probably need to get to whatever your gift is because that's your 'go to' place. That's part of feeling like you have done what you needed to do in your life." That's how I see meaning in the concept.

This article is excerpted from the forthcoming book: *A Light In The Distance: Using your core gift as a guide for authentic teaching*. By Bruce Anderson.