



7th/8th Grade English

April 18, 2008

The artist is nothing without the gift, but the gift is nothing without work.

– Emile Zola

Dear 7th and 8th grade parents,

It's getting on towards the end of the year for our seventh and eighth grade class, and for our eighth graders, the culmination of their time at Ring Mountain. Read one way, the quote above could be an admonition to our graduating class as they go off to high school: It takes hard work to realize your talents! That's a worthy and true message, one our student's have heard often. But Zola's wisdom could be used to look outward as well as in. Also implicit in that statement, where you see the expression of some else's giftedness, you are seeing the fruits of hard work.

I remember during my own high school days that it was almost de rigueur to behave as though one's success was achieved with minimal exertion. Speaking to my father at UHS and to a few colleagues teaching high school, that trend is just as prevalent in schools today. The same attitude is customary on TV and in popular fiction, where the "truly" brilliant seem to come by their accomplishments without cost. In the midst of that culture, it's easy for students to convince themselves that if genius and eloquence don't issue forth effortlessly every time you open your mouth or pick up a pen, your talents must be modest at best. In fact, the most common anxiety students bring up during writer's workshop is that their writing compares poorly to the excellence of their peers.

It's hard not to buy into the message, high schools, and even middle school now, are competitive worlds. To be so gifted that you needn't work for your success would be impressive indeed. There is admirable humility in acknowledging the diligence lying behind one's success, yet there is also pride: you take credit not only for your talents, but for the hard work put into developing them. There is a generosity of spirit in that attitude that is so much a part of what we try to instill in the culture at Ring Mountain; it's a signature I hope our students will take

with them to share with their new peers in high school. Meanwhile as our seventh graders become eighth graders, it becomes their responsibility to model that generosity to their newly arriving peers.

For their last major novel of the year, the seventh and eighth grade are reading *Romeo and Juliet* this past week. Shakespeare is typically greeted with trepidation or even dread by students. Yet, while the language is challenging, the themes are timeless, accessible and relevant to our middle school students today. After all, they are now the same age as our protagonists!

For the class's first academic exposure to Shakespeare, we are using the Folger version of the text. I wanted to use an edition that has minimal editorial comment on the play, leaving the class to form their own opinions. At the same time, I am mindful that they will need help with Shakespeare's language, which can seem quite foreign to a modern English reader. The Folger edition presents the play in its original form with translations of words that are no longer in modern usage on the facing pages for easy access. We also have several copies of a "side-by-side" translated version of the play available during discussions in case the class ever gets really stuck. While this "minimalist" approach may prove more difficult for students, I feared that simply providing the translated version would make it too tempting for them to give up trying to understand the original; the beauty and genius of the language makes the struggle worthwhile. We will also screen a few versions of Shakespeare's play in class (along, time permitting, with a version of *West Side Story*), which should help provide context to make the reading more accessible.

The reading assignments will be relatively short in pages, but I expect each assignment should still occupy from 45 minutes to an hour's time for a diligent student. At the same time, I'm encouraging the class to not get so bogged down on individual words that they lose the thread of the story as a whole.

With patience...attend,

What here (during homework) shall miss, our toil (in class discussion) shall strive to mend!!

I recommend that they read each assignment through once without stopping just to follow the story, and then to go back to decipher individual passages.

And so!

"In fair Verona, where we lay our scene..."