Beautiful and full stop

By | Nov 29, 2013

Mrs. Anne Fernandes taught us English at school. And she taught much else. While our skills in English certainly improved, we were learning about many other things from the values she espoused in her interactions with us – kindness, humility and integrity. In addition to the lessons that she taught with great interest, she read out to us from newspaper articles and generously recounted incidents from her personal life. She saw her role as encouraging and inspiring us, helping us become better human beings. In short, we were in good hands.

It feels nice to meet Miss Anne, and get her to share some glimpses of her ‘teaching journey’. She is as welcoming as ever. “The maternal instinct in me was very strong. I knew that I’d be a successful teacher. I could love any child. With my love for reading, I was confident that I would be able to make lessons interesting, understand the children and move with the times,” she says. She retired from St. Anne’s High School (Malad, Mumbai) two years ago, but there continues to be a regular stream of ex-students who drop by to see her and ask for her advice.

Teaching is something she had wanted to do even as a child. And having grown up, her decision to become a teacher was quite happily accepted by the family. Though she wanted to teach younger kids, Montessori training was expensive. So she enrolled for a B.Ed. at Tilak College of Education in Pune in 1970. “The Government used to give us a stipend of Rs. 75 per month. In those days, that was a lot of money. I was able to help with the household expenses. Everyone was happy at home. Teaching was considered to be a noble profession. The society literally venerated teachers. All ‘good’ girls from ‘good’ families became teachers.”

She feels that the B.Ed. training helped her immensely. Most of her lecturers were hardworking and dedicated. It is from them that Miss Anne drew her models of ‘good teaching’. Whatever the training did not prepare her for, she learnt on the job. The first school she taught at was St. Vincent’s in Pune. Many of the students came from elite backgrounds, and she had some difficult times. “I remember one boy had a very bad handwriting. His mother asked me – as a teacher, can’t you improve his handwriting? I told her – you have one son, I have sixty. Perhaps you could help him improve his handwriting at home. It didn’t go down well with her,” she says.

After getting married, Miss Anne shifted to Mumbai. Adjusting to a newer, noisier city came as a big challenge. But her colleagues at St. Stanislaus School in Bandra, Mumbai helped her settle down. “Some of my happiest years were spent in that school. Those teachers took me under their wings and made the transition pleasant.” However, as far as her students are concerned, she feels that teaching at St. Anne’s High School was the best. “For those 21 years, the rapport between me and my students was like mother and son. At the other two schools, the teacher-student relationship was not so friendly. At times, it got quite impersonal.”

It has been a total of 36 years of teaching. I am curious to know how she looks back at the experience and about the lessons she has learnt. She says, “It has made me a better human being. It has made me more compassionate and loving. I look back with pride when I think of students like you. There are so many students who come and visit. I feel a sense of fulfillment, of having done my job well.”

She wanted to give herself a treat for this, and has just come back from a wonderful trip to London, Rome, Florence and Lisbon. Though she doesn’t teach English any longer, she teaches at Sunday school, and has decided to get involved with community work.

There is something about people who leave gracefully when it’s time to move on. You feel it in the air when you listen to them. You see it in their eyes. You hear it in their voice. They seem to know what Rajiv (a teacher of mine who prefers to be addressed by first name) calls “beautiful and fullstop”. Miss Anne surely knows.

This profile, by Chintan Girish Modi, first appeared in Teacher Plus, September 2008 and is a part of the “In Conversation” series. The author is a freelance researcher, writer, educator and traveller.
*thumbnail image - school memories album - from teachersparadise.com

Tags: journey, teaching, experience, grace, memories, conversation

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