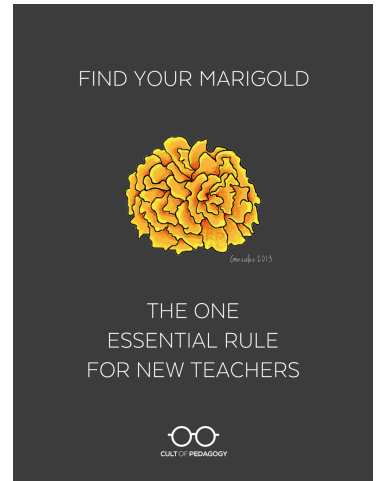


Find Your Marigold: The One Essential Rule for New Teachers

Adapted from *The Cult of Pedagogy* by Jennifer Gonzalez.

Welcome to your first year of teaching. This year will test you more intensely than just about anything you've done up to now. It will deplete all your energy, bring you to tears, and make you question every talent or skill you thought you had. But all these tests, if you approach them the right way, will leave you better and stronger than you are today.



Advice is available everywhere you look, and some of it is very good. Still, with everything you have to do right now, it's easy to get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of it all. And the fact is, a lot of those tips won't work very well if you fail to follow this one essential rule:

Surround yourself with good people.

By finding the positive, supportive, energetic teachers in your school and sticking close to them, you can improve your job satisfaction more than with any other strategy. And your chances of excelling in this field will skyrocket. Just like a young seedling growing in a garden, thriving in your first year depends largely on who you plant yourself next to.

THE MARIGOLD EFFECT

Many experienced gardeners follow a concept called *companion planting*: placing certain vegetables and plants near each other to improve growth for one or both plants. For example, rose growers plant garlic near their roses because it repels bugs and prevents fungal diseases. Among companion plants, the marigold is one of the best: It protects a wide variety of plants from pests and harmful weeds. If you plant a marigold beside most any garden vegetable, that vegetable will grow big and strong and healthy, protected and encouraged by its marigold.

Marigolds exist in our schools as well – encouraging, supporting and nurturing growing teachers on their way to maturity. If you can find at least one marigold in your school and stay close to them, you will grow. Find more than one and you will positively thrive.

Few teachers will be lucky enough to be planted close to a marigold – being assigned to one as a mentor, co-teacher, or team leader will be rare. You will have to seek them out. You can identify them by the way they congratulate you on arrival, rather than asking why anyone would want this godforsaken job. Or by the way their offers to help sound sincere. Or just by how you feel when you're with them: Are you calmer, more hopeful? Excited to get started on a teaching task? Comfortable asking questions, even the stupid ones? If you feel good around this person, chances are they have some marigold qualities.

Once you've identified your marigolds, make an effort to spend time with them. Having a hard day? Go to your marigolds. Not understanding how to operate the grade reporting system? Go to your marigolds. Confused by something the principal said at the faculty meeting? Marigolds. They may be on the other side of the building, out of your grade or subject area, or otherwise less convenient to reach than others. If your school is especially toxic, you might have to find your marigolds in another school, or even online. Make the effort. It's worth the trouble.

BEWARE THE WALNUT TREES

While seeking out your marigolds, you'll need to take note of the walnut trees. Successful gardeners avoid planting vegetables anywhere near walnut trees, which give off a toxic substance that can inhibit growth, wilt, and ultimately kill nearby vegetable plants. And sadly, if your school is like most, walnut trees will be abundant. They may not seem dangerous at first. In fact, some may appear to be good teachers – happy, social, well-organized. But here are some signs that you should keep your distance: Their take on the kids is negative. Their take on the administration is negative. Being around them makes you feel insecure, discouraged, overwhelmed, or embarrassed.

WALNUT TREES ARE POISON. Avoid them whenever you can. If you don't, they will start to infect you, and soon you'll hate teaching as much as they do.

Doing this may be a challenge: Your supervisor might be a walnut tree. You may be co-teaching with one. You might work on a whole team of walnut trees, spending hours with them every week. Touching base with your marigolds will help flush out the toxins that build up from contact with the walnut trees. On top of that, simply identifying certain coworkers as walnut trees can help dilute their power over you. If I'd had a label I could mentally place on certain people in the schools where I worked, they would have had far less of an impact on me.

So in the spirit of identification, here are some common walnut tree varieties to look out for:

Kid-Hatin' Kate, who will snort every time you share a positive anecdote about your students. Spend enough time with her and you'll believe every single one of them is a lying, cheating little sneak and you're a fool if you think otherwise.

Retirement Dan, who regularly reports on how many years he has left before he's "outta here." He then adds with a chuckle that you have about thirty, right? Dan will find your enthusiasm about school "cute," but will then tell you to "just wait...it'll wear off."

Twenty-Page Tina, who sets impossibly high standards for her students and brags when kids fail. You had your kids write a five-page paper? Tina assigned twenty. Your mid-term had fifty questions? Tina's had a hundred and fifty, and only a dozen kids passed it. The students say her exams are the only ones they ever have to study for. After talking to Tina, you'll feel the urge to triple your kids' workload and add at least ten trick questions to your assessments, just to get your average down.

Tough Guy Tom, who overhears you talking about your students acting up in class and says, “They would never try that crap in *my* room.” Whenever you leave a conversation with him, you go and scream at your kids.

Hattie-Who-Hates-the-Principal. Self-explanatory.

Lawsuit Steve, who sees you touch a student’s forearm and says you better watch out. He “had to give up hugs years ago” and is always reminding you to “be careful.”

My-Time Margaret, who counts the number of minutes she got for lunch, complains about serving one more day of car-rider duty than anyone else, and knows precisely what time she’s legally required to be in the building each day (not a minute earlier).

And **Good-Old-Days Judy**, who hates anything new and never fails to mention how much better things used to be.

Be especially vigilant during PDs, when you’ll find yourself in a veritable forest of walnut trees. It will be the worst when the presenter asks you to perform some task – read student work, for example – in groups. The trees will slowly turn toward the center, leaves rustling, snarky comments dropping off their branches like walnuts whacking the table. It won’t matter how potentially interesting the activity might be, as soon as they huddle up it will be snark, snark, ugly, ugly, hate, hate. When this happens, recognize that you are surrounded, hold tight to your roots, and remember your marigolds.

GET WHAT YOU CAN, WHERE YOU CAN

Your search for marigolds will yield imperfect results: Not everyone is all-marigold or all-walnut tree. There will be some in the building who just make you happy – go to them for a mood boost. Some who aren’t terribly good at the teaching part, but love the kids to death – seek them out when you need to be reminded of how much you love them, too. Others will take care of you – encourage you to rest, slack off a little, not beat yourself up. And some who are intensely into the craft, who always have a great strategy on hand and keep up on current research – they can really help you stretch your abilities. Learn who has what marigold qualities and get what you can from each of them.

Finally, try to find some compassion for the walnut trees. Their toxicity comes from a place of real pain, and they themselves probably fell under the influence of the walnut trees who came before them. Plus, it’s not like their complaints have no basis in reality. Teaching *is* a ridiculously hard job, some say almost impossible – like climbing Mount Everest (if you’ll allow for one last metaphor). Still, you’re aware of the difficulty, and though many before you have failed, you have accepted the challenge.

Before you climb that peak, you’ll need to choose a sherpa to escort you through the trek. The first option is Walter Nutt, who starts by asking why in the world you’d want to do something like this. He describes the many others who have died trying to do this climb, how sick you’ll get, how people have polluted the trail, all but destroying what was once a pristine and beautiful mountain. The second

option, Mary Gold, congratulates you on your courage, sits down with you to map out some important strategies, and finishes off by saying *It's a crazy-hard, mammoth task, but you know what? We're going to make it happen.*

Who do you want leading you up that peak?

Find your marigolds and stick close to them. Grow big and strong.

