

Professional insight

Dealing with those everyday issues

By Doug McCarthy

THE POWER OF WORDS

Meeting former students who are now adults is usually a delight. But recently, I had a chance meeting with a former student and I worried that our conversation would be awkward because of an incident that happened years before.

Brian was in my Grade 8 class my first year of teaching. He had just turned 15. He didn't like school, but he did have a wonderful gift for repairing car engines. Despite his youth, many people in town brought their cars and trucks to him for service. Unfortunately, his passion for cars led to his arrest for auto theft, and before the end of the school year Brian was sent to a youth correctional facility.

Thankfully, he was able to turn his life around. Brian told me that he has a successful business and two children in university. He has been recognized as a community leader and is an active member of his church. Then he told me that while in detention something I had once said inspired him to reform his life. I was puzzled. What words of wisdom could I, as a new teacher in my early 20s, have shared back then that were powerful enough to change the course of this young man's life?

I probably said what many teachers might have said in the same situation: "You can get past this and make changes for the better" or "This one incident does not define who you are as a person." I may have been one of the few people who said something encouraging to Brian. Many others, including his family, were very upset with him.

As I thought more about our conversation and the powerful effect that our words can have on others, the image of a honeybee and its imperative to collect nectar and pollen came to mind. The bee doesn't realize that, as a consequence, it is also pollinating flowers and plants that we need to survive. Similarly, we may not be aware of the positive effect our words can have on others. Sadly, I also know that at times my words are as harmful as a mosquito bite. The mosquito's imperative is to collect mammal blood, but unintentionally it also spreads disease such as West Nile virus and malaria. Careless words can also cause hurt and grief, even if that wasn't the intention.

This quote from Buddha sums it up well: "Whatever words we utter should be chosen with care for people will hear them and be influenced by them for good or ill."

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