

# Strengthening Your Professional Commitment

by Candace Jaruszewicz

I can only speak about commitment from one perspective, which is my own. I say this because I believe very strongly that commitment is a very personal agreement — and means only what you have determined it means for you, and you alone. I can't make a commitment for anyone but myself. Presuming to speak for anyone but myself would be an act, I believe, of extreme disrespect to all of you. So, I can only share with you my view of what commitment is, or should be, in terms of what we, collectively, have chosen to do as professionals, which is work with, and for, children.

I received what I considered to be a very strange note at the beginning of this school year. The background of the story goes like this: One of the administrators at my university is a man with whom I do battle on a regular basis — and this will sound familiar to you, I'm sure. I insist we are working ourselves to death for the school, our students, and the community. He says we don't do enough. I complain we are undervalued and poorly compensated considering the importance of the

work we do to prepare the next generation of teachers, compared to, for example, engineers. I argue that building bridges or locomotives is not more important than building human beings. He says we have a choice — stay or go somewhere else for more money. I remind him on a regular basis, usually after he has made what I consider to be a particularly insensitive comment, how support and encouragement are more effective than constant criticism, but he continues to find

something to complain about each time I see him.

I came to school this year with the battle lines already drawn, the DMZ identified. I was ready to continue the fight, to continue to stand up for the rights of teachers to be recognized, appreciated, and valued for the important work we do. Then he presented me with a gift: this book, *A Brave and Startling Truth*, which is a poem by Maya Angelou, and a note which said, "Candy, thank you so much for your commitment to our students and to the university. Congratulations on passing your comps." (I'm presently nearing the end of my doctoral program.)

I was totally confused by what I could only describe as a totally out of character "random act of kindness." Why would Attila the Hun



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make a gift to me of a poem about a vision for world peace and justice when it seemed to me that he thought early childhood education was of no value? Why would he commend me on my commitment to the university when we obviously agree on nothing?

I have struggled all year with trying to make sense out of it because nothing else has changed — we continue to argue, debate, and fight about “quality, compensation, and affordability.” If those words sound familiar, they are meant to! I come from a background which includes teaching and administration of early childhood programs, and I can tell you definitely that child care and teacher education at the university level are grappling with the same issues. When I explained this to him, using the analogy of the university as a child care program, I thought he would fall out of his chair, but it was a point that he grudgingly had no choice but to give me. It was one argument I actually won (or at least he let me think I did).

Anyway, I have worked very hard this year at trying to think about commitment while in the throes of feeling at times frustrated, demoralized, undervalued, and so on. I will share this list of questions with you, because these are the things I do talk about with my students, who will some day be your colleagues. They are questions that I have had to answer myself, over and over again. Tonight, I would challenge you to ask them of yourselves.

- **Are you naive about what to expect?** We go into this profession with our eyes open in terms of responsibilities and compensation. It does not mean we give up the fight for equitable compensation, but we recognize that it is our choice to be in the ring. No one is making us do

this. If you can't fight this fight from a position of *inner strength*, rather than *external weakness*, I suggest you *get . . . another . . . job*.

- **Do you absolutely know clearly what your personal beliefs are and how they affect and guide your professional practice?** You will not be good at what you do if you do not *know why* and cannot *explain why* you are doing it. It is as simple as that. If you are not willing to think seriously about what it is you believe in terms of what children are like, how they learn, and what your role is in that process, I suggest you *get . . . another . . . job*.

- **Do you act consciously out of that belief system every day?** — in other words, *practice what you preach*? You will be frustrated and confused all the time if your actions and behavior contradict what is in your heart. If you say children say and do the darndest things, and then can't stand it when they do, *get . . . another . . . job*. We simply do not need people in this profession who are not kind, caring, and patient.

- **Do you have a plan to provide for continued growth as a learner throughout your professional life?** *Not doing this*, I think, demonstrates an extreme lack of respect for yourself and the children you care for. It does not have to be formal education; not all of us necessarily need or want this. But it does mean that you read everything you can get your hands on. It means that you think, you reflect, you discuss your work with others. It means, especially, that you take advantage of every professional development opportunity which presents itself.

You may punch a time clock or have specified hours to which you are assigned work, but your responsibility as a teacher or caregiver

absolutely demands that the commitment to learning goes on beyond those hours. Your children deserve that. Fortunately, learning has its own intrinsic rewards, which actually have the power to get you through a tough day or period of time. If those kind of rewards are not important to you, I suggest you *get . . . another . . . job*.

- **Lastly, do you absolutely take time to joyfully celebrate who you are and what you have chosen to do, because you know why you have made that decision, and can be happy with it?** If you cannot wake up in the morning and be happy about where and how you will be spending your time today, please, please, please *get . . . another . . . job*.

I am not trying to shoo all of you out of the room and into a job at the mall. I believe that each of us has made the kind of commitment I just described. I have struggled and lain awake many nights wondering at times what in the world I was thinking when I decided to enter this profession. I will be the first to admit that facing these questions can be, and is at times, a painful experience. The administrator at my university is really just challenging me to answer these same questions. As much as I hate to admit it, I have to thank him for that. If we are not challenged to think about these issues, maybe we wouldn't.

My answer to these questions is that I do not want another job. Recognizing that from a carefully considered position is a wonderfully liberating experience. It enables me to go about my work joyfully. It makes it possible for my students to say to me on course evaluations that they like knowing their professor lives what she does, not because I have told them that, but because they have sensed it. It gives me the

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strength to continue the fight for respect and equitable compensation for the early childhood profession because I am able to do it from a perspective of personal freedom, rather than out of anger or bitterness.

We, the caregivers, teachers, and future teachers who work with the smallest of human beings, are the people who, in large measure, have the privilege of making Maya Angelou's vision come true. As she says, "We are the possible, we are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world."

I have been able to achieve some measure of peace in my life because I have come to the conscious realization that this is what I really think I mean by professional commitment. I hope you can, too.

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