

The Morning Pearl

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Everyone who has taken a Principal's Training Center Course knows about the "Morning Pearl". For those who are not familiar with the course, the Morning Pearl is a ritual of the PTC, where one participant stands up at the morning briefing to give a short "pearl of wisdom"; usually a piece of advice for the group about something that has helped the speaker as a leader or in his or her work. Offering a Pearl is an expectation for PTC participants and I had been regarding it as a chore which would require personal courage but which was also a hurdle I had to overcome in order to receive my PTC certificate. With the idea of facing my fears as soon as possible, I signed up to give my Pearl with the same spirit with which one makes a dental appointment. However, a few key ideas connected which changed my view and led to me sharing a Pearl on giving a Pearl.

The first key idea came from Bambi Betts. During our course, Bambi talked about the importance of rituals in defining our school culture or community. As a result, I reflected on some of the rituals of the PTC and the role of those rituals in developing a sense of camaraderie among participants who usually do not know each other before the course. I started to see the place of the Pearl within those rituals and this helped to shift my thinking about the value of the Pearl and the significance of offering to give one.

The second idea was sparked by John Mikton, who talked about the importance of posting as well as reading when participating in online communities like Twitter. I had not previously seen Twitter as a community so the idea that participation came with the responsibility to not only read, but also share ideas through posting was new to me. The idea that Twitter was such a community was novel, but I could quickly see the application of this idea to the PTC community. Since I had learned from the Pearls I had heard, it was only right that I try to offer something back to the community in return.

This thinking process led to me to reflect on what I had learned from the Pearls I had heard and why some of the Pearls stand out so clearly in my memory. I realised that I remembered almost all the Pearls I had heard, even those from a year before. Not only that, I could remember where the speaker was standing and his or her expression while speaking. In many ways, the small lessons I had learned from the Pearls were more vivid than what I had learned from my coursework. Since a key skill for teachers and leaders is effective communication, it seems that the Pearl has a lot to teach us. As I thought more about this idea, I tried to deconstruct the elements which made these short speeches so memorable.

I feel that the ingredients which make the Pearl effective as a form of communication are that it is brief, thoughtful and sincere. Brevity is almost always a hallmark of a great speech. Since the speaker is only permitted a few minutes to share a Pearl, the story they offer is usually something about which the speaker feels passionately. As an audience, we feel sympathy for a nervous peer, and this, along with the passion of the speaker, makes the Pearl emotionally engaging to the audience. An audience who is emotionally engaged is attentive to the message. In addition, the fear of peer judgement and the desire to create clear communication, means that the speaker puts careful thought into the the choice of words.

The more I reflected on the value of the Pearl, the more I came to see that it could be a model for my future communication. If I have something to say to a group of people, I hope that what I choose to say is something that I feel is important and that I express my ideas concisely and with sincerity. Furthermore, I came to value even more highly the contributions of those who had offered the Pearls I remembered. It seems to me that giving a Pearl is not only an act of courage, but also an act of community. Speakers overcome their fear of public speaking in order to share an idea that they feel may benefit others. This idea was enormously helpful to me, both in making me grateful for the ideas that others had shared through their Pearls and in helping me re-frame my attitude to giving a Pearl. I shifted from a focus on my fear to a focus on contributing to the PTC community. My "Pearl about giving a Pearl" was based on the idea that the Pearl can teach us a lot about effective communication but it can teach us even more about the importance of participating in a community.