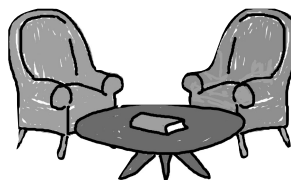


CONVERSATION ONE

Mission and Vision



Make your life a mission—not an intermission.

—Arnold Glasgow

Tonya hit the door to the stairwell with her right shoulder and began taking the stairs two or three at a time. She was late for her appointment with Dr. Michaels, full professor in the education department. She had never been in one of his classes, although many preservice students who had couldn't stop talking about his ideas, his stories, and his broad-based knowledge. This man had been making an impact on new teachers for years, probably decades, and she didn't intend to miss the opportunity to learn from him. As she crashed, again shoulder first, through the stairwell door to the third floor, she caught up to herself in a moment of hesitation. Her friend who had known him as his high school civics teacher extolled his involvement and caring and his enthusiasm for his subject matter. Some of his recent students, however, complained that he seemed distant. A guy named Steve in his current class described him as brutally direct and irritable.

The professor's door was open a few inches, but she knocked anyway, reluctant yet determined. "I'm sorry I'm late. I'm Tonya Simmons, and I have an appointment with you—with Dr. Michaels."

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“I’ve been waiting for twenty minutes, Ms. Simmons.” Dr. Michaels paused and looked straight at her, then turned and sat in the chair behind his desk. He gestured for her to take a chair across from him. Over a spread of manila files, sets of papers, and assorted books feathered with slips of paper, he concentrated his gaze. “Do you keep your students waiting,” he asked, “or do you get to class on time?”

“I apologize, Dr. Michaels.” Tonya acted appropriately contrite but didn’t budge from her purpose. “I’m student teaching at Peterson, and my master teacher wanted to talk to me about our next unit before we introduce it on Monday. I got here as soon as I could.”

The professor kept her standing and let her stew. “Consider all the possibilities before you make commitments, Ms. Simmons. I might think you don’t respect my time.”

“Originally we had planned to meet at lunch,” she went on, resolutely defending herself, although she wished she had gotten off to a better start. “I waited in the teacher’s lounge until almost the end of the period. Just as I was about to leave for class, she called from the administrative building and asked if we could get together right when school ended. I never got lunch!”

“You have missed lunch before and you will miss lunch again,” he commented without sympathy. “So, now that you’re here, why don’t you tell me why you are here?”

Very little intimidated Tonya Simmons. All through her school career, she had been considered bright, assertive, and up to a challenge. She was tight with details of her personal life, but friendly and a good listener. In high school, she had been one of three African American girls on the school’s winning basketball team, and she valued winning. Her parents were divorced; during high school she lived with her mother, a surgical nurse, and her younger brother. Her father, an engineer with an international rubber company, lived in the same city with his new wife and their three children. Tonya had managed college mostly on her own with scholarships, grants, loans, and various on-campus jobs. After graduating, she taught English in Japan for a year before returning to school for her teaching degree. Each new experience added to her confidence, although she was never as sure of herself as others took her to be. Approaching Dr. Michaels for input on being a teacher had taken both nerve and humility, but once Tonya made a decision, she stuck with it. So here she was—and she was going to make the best of it, regardless of the unfortunate start.

"I finish my student teaching in June," Tonya responded to the professor, "and I am fortunate to have a job at Sequoia High School next fall." Tonya scanned the office for a chair but remained standing. "I will be certified, but I don't really feel as ready as I would like to be. I've never been able to take one of your classes, and everyone says what a wonderful professor you were and how well you helped them prepare to teach." Tonya looked up at Dr. Michaels and stated simply and directly, "I want to be an excellent teacher, and I hope you can help me."

"They remember the teacher I was," Dr. Michaels responded with a determined smile, forming a steeple with his index fingers. "An interesting way you put things, Ms. Simmons. Curious that you would seek out an old 'has-been' as your teaching guide."

His goad annoyed Tonya, but she had been prepared for Michaels' irascibility. She began to protest that she hadn't meant anything negative, but the professor interrupted before she could explain herself. "Whether you meant it or not," he continued in a comfortable baritone, "there may be some truth to it. I've been in this game for a long time. Teaching is what I do. 'Has-been' or not, I still have responsibilities here. I can't be giving one-on-one seminars for everyone who comes through the door."

"Oh, I understand." In a softer and less defensive tone, Tonya restated her petition. "I thought maybe you could just give me some suggestions from your experience, maybe some books or articles to read, some teachers to observe."

"Think of it this way, Ms. Simmons. Here you are, in my office at—let me see; now it's 4:15 on a Friday afternoon. You want something from me?" Dr. Michaels leaned back in his chair and pulled open a file drawer. He took out a box of bread sticks, shook a few forward, and offered them to Tonya. She watched, but remained motionless and quiet.

"You told me you missed lunch. You must be hungry. Take one, Ms. Simmons. Or take two or three. I'm offering them because they are what I have to give. They will stave off your hunger for a while. What do you think? Will the bread sticks do the trick?"

Tonya wasn't sure if Michaels was being sarcastic or if this were some sort of a test. She decided to go along with the game. "They would help me stop being hungry," she responded, "but I don't get what you're after."

"Well, think of it this way." The professor knew he had hooked her attention and leaned back in his chair, tapping the wooden arm

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with his index finger. "If every time you come to my office and sit down at my table, I offer you bread sticks, would you be satisfied?" He waited for her to take up the challenge.

"I guess I would get pretty sick of them. I'd want something more," she paused, as if grappling with her options. "Maybe I'd want water or fruit or cheese or something."

"Absolutely." Dr. Michaels sat up straight then leaned forward on his elbows, looking right at Tonya. "Then it becomes your responsibility to bring something to the table also." He seemed pleased with himself and went on. "The more we bring to the table, the better the meal we will have. Think of that with your students, too. You, the teacher, will begin with the bread sticks—basic but incomplete without other contributions. Your students will be required to bring stuff as well. You provide the syllabus, the textbook; they come in with enthusiasm, with questions, with new ideas. You add to the banquet with your caring about them, your experiences, and your sense of humor. Everyone ends up with a full plate!"

"So you are saying that if I want to learn something from you, to get a full plate, I have to contribute something too, right?" Tonya had caught the metaphor and was interested to see where the professor was going.

"Right," Michaels repeated, pleased to have a volley partner. "So, what will it be? I've got the breadsticks, what will you bring?"

Tonya was ready for this one. "I really want to be a good teacher, so I'll bring my desire to learn." She lowered her eyebrows and frowned in thoughtfulness. "I will bring my questions and ideas to put on the table. And I will bring what I have thought about and prepared."

"Then we agree." Michaels pronounced. He had dropped what had apparently been his idea of an introductory interview and made clear his decision to accept Tonya as his independent student. "Meeting together will be a commitment we both make," he said. "It will be the same with your students. You provide the bread, the syllabus, and the textbook. They won't starve, but they'll get pretty bored. Then you will invite them to contribute. A diet of you all the time could get pretty stale, don't you think?"

Tonya loved conversational exchanges and leapt at any invitation to offer her experiences and ideas. "I've known teachers like that—one-man shows—and it got old real fast. It can be so tiring taking it in all the time without a chance to interact." She had picked up on Michaels' assumption of ongoing meetings, but she didn't want to interrupt the flow of his thinking to acknowledge his offer.

“A good teacher, Ms. Simmons, wants the interaction—and the students want it too.” The chair had become too confining and Michaels began pacing behind his desk. “They want a full banquet,” he went on, “not just the bread. Of course the teacher also gets tired of just bread and wants to add his or her contributions—enthusiasm, caring, challenges!” Michaels was gaining energy every minute. “A good teacher encourages interaction. Everyone gets involved. Everybody brings something to the table, and everyone goes away satisfied.”

As if to punctuate his point, Dr. Michaels tapped a breadstick on the desk. “So you get what I’m saying? One-on-one or with a class of 40, learning comes from interaction. It is not one sided.”

Tonya had been eying the breadsticks and couldn’t restrain herself another minute. “Could I please, would you mind if I had one of those breadsticks? Talking about bread and banquets has made me really hungry.”

“Be my guest, Ms. Simmons. A prop can always help you remember a point.”

A self-conscious silence settled on the office–classroom as Tonya broke off pieces of the breadstick and tried to chew as quietly as possible. Dr. Michaels took the opportunity to lengthen his paces, coming to rest in front of the whiteboard that covered the west wall of his office. After what he felt was an ample amount of time for Tonya to have finished the breadstick, he launched into a new topic.

“Have you thought about the impact you will make as a teacher, Ms. Simmons? Have you considered the effect you will have on your students—and the impression they will take away with them when they leave your classroom?”

Tonya brushed crumbs from her lap and reached in her backpack for her water bottle, then put it back. She didn’t want to be rude, and she wasn’t sure what rules went with drinking from water bottles in a professor’s office while he was talking. The sudden shift took her by surprise, but she had no problem with a response. “I think about it all the time,” she answered. “I want them to think I am a good teacher. I want to make a positive impact on their lives.”

“Try some math, Ms. Simmons.” Michaels picked up a marker and twirled it between his fingers. “That okay with you?”

“Sure. I’m a math teacher—and Spanish.”

“How many students do you, or will you, have in your classes every day?”

“Probably 120–125. I’ll have five classes.”

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“And each of those students will decide if you are a good teacher or if you ‘suck’, to use the current vernacular. And they will tell their friends. If each student tells three friends that you are a good teacher, how many people will you have impressed?”

“Could be up to 375.” Tonya was quick, but it wasn’t the first time she had done this exercise. The facts always impressed, if not intimidated, her.

“And then add their parents and siblings and soccer coaches and church leaders and. . .” Dr. Michaels encouraged Tonya to interrupt with a “you go ahead” gesture.

“Lots of people would hear if I was a good teacher or if I sucked.” Tonya took a breath before challenging the professor. “But so what? I want to impact them with the excitement of algebra or the value of knowing how to talk to someone who speaks another language. I don’t want to be popular just because I’m nice or funny or something. I want to be a teacher who makes a difference, who changes someone’s life!” For a moment she seemed surprised that she had been so confrontational, but she recovered. “I would prefer to imagine my students telling all those people about what they had learned or an idea they had discovered. Just saying I was a good teacher doesn’t really mean much, don’t you think?” Tonya rested her case.

“I like your emphasis,” the professor conceded. “The math works the same way. You have an impact on 25 students in your Spanish class and make them love discovering how to communicate in another language. They tell three friends, and you’ve had an impact on 75 people with the fun and value of learning Spanish. Being thought of as ‘good’ and making a positive impact are pretty much the same thing. The students go home and tell parents, siblings, coaches, and you have brought a positive message to hundreds of people! That’s the impact you have as a teacher. Hundreds of people. When you get a student excited about learning, hundreds of people get a positive message about teachers—and what they teach. Other students get the message and want to sign up for your classes. When you’re bad—well, you know what happens then. Students avoid a bad teacher’s classes, maybe even what the bad teacher teaches!”

“A bad psychology teacher means empty classes.” Tonya thought about extending her example but didn’t. Instead she put her backpack aside and stood in front of her chair. “I can still remember the good teachers who had a impact on me, and it’s been years since, say, ninth-grade science. I must have told 50 people over the years

about the day Mrs. Tice brought the poor dead skunk she had found at the side of the road into our first-period biology class. She made her (she had been pregnant) our impromptu lesson in anatomy, and we watched so intently none of us left when the bell rang." She was excited remembering, and her voice carried the energy. "Then there was Mr. Scott who read aloud the biography of Malcolm X. He read it with a passion I had never seen anyone have for history—he impressed me. I said something about him in my pre-algebra class just today! About the way he paced and gestured and held us totally captive."

Dr. Michaels stood still, twisting the pen in his hand, giving Tonya time to absorb the lesson they had worked out together. "So you understand," he said, breaking the silence, "the impact you will have—now and in the future—when you are a good teacher."

The professor shook back the sleeve of his brown sport jacket and checked his watch for the time. "We've talked about the mutual responsibility of the teacher and the students to bring something to the table. And we have seen the impact a good teacher can have on her students. Now, Ms. Simmons, the big question. Why do you want to be a teacher?"

"I have thought about that, of course. They ask you in all the interviews." Tonya bent over to grab her backpack and began to unzip the front pocket. "Actually, I have my essay response to an application question right here."

Dr. Michaels took the folded sheet and scanned the essay. "You say you want to make a difference in student's lives. You talk about being a camp counselor and how you saw the difference a good counselor made in the girl's experience at camp. You don't say so directly, but I would guess you want to save the world."

Tonya frowned and straightened her shoulders. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing is wrong with saving the world if you know all the problems and have all the answers, but we are talking about what you will do as a teacher. You want to make a difference in students' lives. For the better, I assume."

"Of course. I want them to care about their world so they can do something about it. To make changes they have to know more about it and how the world works. I want them to care about themselves and know that they can make a difference—that they can contribute to the life around them and make it better." Tonya felt herself bristling but made a great effort to control her tone.

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“Ah! Ms. Simmons,” Dr. Michaels met her defensiveness with a positive interpretation of her intentions. “You are beginning to focus in on your motive, your true motivation for becoming a teacher—a good teacher.” He paused to consider his next comment. “You may not sound very original to me or to yourself. What matters is how seriously you take your mission, how you relate what you do every day to your vision.”

Tonya left her chair and stood at the corner of Dr. Michaels’ desk. Her voice was tight, and she made an effort to maintain her cool. “I may not be original, but I am sincere.”

“The most important first step in becoming a good teacher, Ms. Simmons, is to know what you want to accomplish by being a teacher. You have made a good start, albeit rather grandiose and idealistic. Now you must examine your motives, thoughtfully. You must know what sort of a difference you want to make—and how you plan to accomplish your intention. You cannot go into the classroom on the wings of passion and good intentions but without a focus.”

“How much more do I need to know beyond that I want to make a difference and be a good teacher?” Tonya was calmer, her question less a challenge than a sincere inquiry.

Noting that Tonya has dropped her guard and become more receptive, Dr. Michaels tuned it down a notch himself and spoke in a controlled, professorial voice. “You need a clear vision—a picture of what you want to give your students. Your vision is of the ideal. It is an image of what you want to accomplish as a teacher. Your mission is to bring about the vision. And as with every mission, getting to your vision takes work and time.” He leaned against the whiteboard and waited a few seconds for his message to sink in. “Having the vision gives you the focus. It informs everything you do. Fulfilling the mission is your process, the process of becoming a good teacher.” He paused again. “And the process never ends because part of the vision is that learning and growth never end.” Michaels fanned his fingers and brought his hands to his desk with a muffled slap. His face had become pink, and his eyes gleamed.

The passion in Dr. Michaels’ voice caused Tonya to turn toward him. He seemed aware that he was getting excited and paused to collect himself before going on. “First you need a vision. Then you need a mission statement that you can write down and return to frequently to test whether what you are doing is consistent with what you intend to accomplish. You need a personal mission statement that is specific enough for you to use as a touchstone, a reality check.”

He folded his arms, then raised his right hand as if to write in the air. "For example," he took a step back from the desk, "a history teacher might have as part of his mission to increase his students' world awareness. How would he know if he's accomplishing this?"

Tonya, always the alert student, began to answer, and then realized the question was a rhetorical device and waited for him to go on. "Maybe he sees his students reading a newspaper. Perhaps they want to talk about a world event they saw covered on television. Could be they suggest having a current events session once a week. They're bringing questions and ideas to the table and at the same time giving evidence that the teacher is accomplishing his mission." The professor shrugged before finishing his speech. "But you won't always know how close you are to accomplishing your vision or completing your mission. Sometimes you will never know. Other times you may have to wait 10 or more years to hear from a former student that indeed your teaching did make the difference. You just have to keep your vision in sight and keep up with the process."

Dr. Michaels moved over to the bookcase and leaned back on his left shoulder. "I suggest you keep a copy of your mission statement with you, in your daybook or your wallet, as a reality check—and refer to it often. It will help you get a grip on those days when you wonder, why am I doing this? It will direct you when you aren't sure where you're going."

"I have thought about my motives and my mission. Every preparing teacher does." Standing had become awkward, and Tonya sat down again. "But I can think some more." She studied the back of her hand while gathering thoughts for her response. She began to speak, slowly and purposefully, as if discovering her ideas as she heard herself think. "Already I'm realizing," she said, "that I need to think more about how my mission will affect how I approach teaching. I need to understand how I will know whether I am accomplishing my mission. I guess my mission will be like my goals. My objectives will be what I do as a teacher to achieve those goals."

"Yes, Ms. Simmons." Dr. Michaels again looked at his watch and ran his hand through what was once mildly curly brown hair but was now somewhat flat and streaked with gray. He continued, "This is serious business, and I am serious about teaching. And so, I gather, are you." He moved toward the desk, discovered he had a pen in his hand, and returned it to the whiteboard. Back at the desk, he snapped his briefcase closed and moved toward the door. Tonya stood and

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swung her backpack over her left shoulder. She shuffled her feet but didn't move toward the door.

"Thank you, Dr. Michaels. You have really got me thinking. The interesting thing is, I am thinking, but what I really want to do is to get back to the classroom and teach—to do what I am thinking about."

"You strike me as sincere and willing to explore. There's a lot more to this game than having a mission." The sunlight outside the office window was fading, and the professor switched on the light. "I am willing to continue our conversation if you are willing to be prepared. And for next week, that means a vision and a mission statement—your mission statement."

"Wonderful. Thank you." Tonya sounded relieved. "I really appreciate this. And I will have the statement. Is the same time okay with you?"

Dr. Michaels collected the left over breadsticks and put them back in the drawer. "This works for me. A good start to the weekend. See you next Friday. And you will be on time."

Tonya nodded her head, still embarrassed about being late. "Yes, and I will be here on time," she said, hoping she projected both respect and gratitude.

Conversation Points

1. What is the importance of a mission statement?
2. Identify your mission and vision statement for teaching.
3. What will you do as a beginning teacher to encourage your students to "bring something to the table"?