



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

## The Power of Stories

Maria Hayward © 15 March 2026

*A brief caveat: these stories include mention of suicide and incest.*

I want to share some stories today – stories that derive from my early teaching experiences. Stories that shaped me into a different type of teacher than the nuns and others who taught **me**.

I learnt something even from just remembering the stories I'm going to share with you today. These are stories about how I, as a teacher, most poignantly and most intensely was able to develop and strengthen my pedagogy; and this learning derived in significant part, from the students themselves. I could tell so many refugee stories, but the following are from my secondary school teaching experience, and one is from my adult teaching role.

When I was a teacher at what was a progressive secondary school in West Auckland, the principal told us first year teachers (there were 5 of us, I think), and he told us: “*you are teachers of Maths, German, English and so on, but what you really teach is **kids** - ‘rangatahi’*”. He asked that we keep in mind that the students who sat in front of us had lives outside school and **anything** might be going on for them during those out-of-school hours. He said that if there were big things happening in children's lives, this would impact their learning, and we needed to be aware that this could indeed be occurring for some of our students.

I recall he cited possible situations that included: domestic violence, poverty and he also mentioned that a young person might be struggling with their sexuality – they might be gay. I considered my classes – mine were across all the levels – that is, from year 9-13. I thought, oh these things are unlikely amongst any of my classes. All my students seemed perfectly normal, happy etc. I was sure none of them would have terrible things going on in their homes – and I certainly couldn't see any gay kids in my cohorts (I imagined all the stereotypes of course – and didn't see this). So, I forgot about the advice – although I did quite like the aphorism: **we teach kids, not just school subjects**.

But looking back, I'm so glad he gave us that little talk – it wasn't something you learned at Secondary Teachers' College. The focus there was solely on how to teach your subjects. We also didn't learn anything about the learning process, about variations in learning styles, or about cultural differences. And no one ever mentioned anything about the lives or the **humanity** of our students.

One day a student at our school committed suicide. This shocked and traumatised me hugely – he seemed the perfect kid – I couldn't understand it. I think we all struggled with the trauma – the loss was terrible, and the reason was unfathomable to us. Later people talked about **depression**. I wish I'd known about mental health issues at the

time. I wished that any one of us teachers, had perhaps mentioned depression in our teaching, so that all the students might have known it was ok to raise this topic, and to seek help. I later wondered if maybe the boy was gay or perhaps even trans – and couldn't express this or talk about it, or possibly even name it. There was certainly **something** really big going on and no-one knew what it was. Was something causing depression or extreme anxiety?

I became aware that it didn't matter how good you were at teaching your subject, your **personal relationship** with the students really mattered – would they talk to you or not – or to anyone in the school – would they reach out? Would it have been **more** important for **me** to have been this kid's **excellent Maths and German teacher** or to have somehow contributed to something that might have **saved his life**. For me it **had to be** the latter. I remembered what Des Mann (the school principal) had said and I determined to change my teaching approach. I determined to become more observant of my students, more aware, more alert to signals, to have more of a relationship with all of them – a professional one, but one where they saw me as **human** (and humane), and where I also saw them as **human**.

Another time, I recall two of my students chatting intently in the hallway outside my classroom. I went to see why they weren't coming into class. I remembered what Des had said. The girls told me that one of them was too 'sad' to come in. I told them to wait there while I quickly set work for the rest of the class. Then I ran up to the admin area to talk to the school counsellor and to ask what I should do. (By the way, ours was one of the very few schools in the country that had a Guidance Counsellor instead of a Disciplinary (or 'caning') Dean in the school. She told me to send the girl to her straight away. Luckily, the student did go. At the end of the school day, the school counsellor called me into her office. She told me the girl revealed that incest was occurring in her family. The school had phoned the police, and the girl would not be returned home till the perpetrator had been removed. This was a very middle-class family, by the way. Another shock for me.

A further situation I recall where I was surprised to hear the back story of a student was when, one evening, I got a phone call from a parent saying that his son had come home after school that day with an earring in one ear. They'd had a huge argument and he'd run out of the house. On the way out, he apparently, and weirdly, told his father to phone **me**. I didn't know why he did this – but on reflection it may have been because I had taught this young person the same subject over 4 consecutive years and during this time – I had got to know the class quite well. But I didn't know why this situation had occurred. Problems like this didn't happen in nice middle-class families, I thought; and back then, boys didn't get their ears pierced – that was **really rebellious**. I recall his father saying to me, "How can he be a lawyer with a pierced ear?" I don't know how I thought of this, but I did manage to say something that I'd remembered from my Youthline training. I said to his father, "Maybe he's done the piercing because he's trying to tell you something or he wants to talk to you. Maybe he wants some sort of conversation". I imagined the young lad might have wanted to say: "I don't want to be a lawyer, I want to be an artist". I didn't say this, but I did ask the father if he could let me know when his son came home, as I was now rather concerned. Quite late that evening the father did phone me. His son had come home, he said, and they had had a very good talk together - all was fine. I'm sure you're all guessing or very likely, knowing what the problem actually was, but I was young-ish, naïve, and not very aware of diversity. I didn't think 'normal' people were gay back

then. The next day, his lovely friends told me this was the case (they were mostly girls and had known that their friend was gay for a while, I'd say). They said that his parents had accepted that he didn't want to be a lawyer, and they also accepted that their son was gay. Many years later I met said young man in the city with his gorgeous partner. He told me he had just completed a degree in something like marketing and design. These stories all made me grow up, mature, as a teacher. I learnt not to stereotype and that students might be depressed or confused or hurt or gay or anything. My role was to teach them and to care for them as well.

Oh, by the way, not all of my teaching was like these stories – most was just hard slog. But I have to admit, I always really loved working with secondary-aged kids. Why am relating these stories to you? Well, it's because stories evoke feelings and we don't tend to forget the feelings that we experience during a talk, whether these be: sadness, shock, fascination, pain, anger ... Feelings are important. And when we feel things deeply, we are changed, we are transformed.

So, it was very good advice that I received from an amazing mentor in my old school principal. I learnt to always be open to what might be going on not only with students, but with others too. When I became a teacher of adult learners, I often found myself listening to aspects of students' life stories – and sometimes reading about them in their assignments. So much goes on in the homes and hearts of people who are poor, people who come from different cultures, or different language backgrounds or countries, people who are neuro-divergent, or perhaps are former refugees or queer. And the stories gave me a deeper insight into the lives and internal goings-on of my learners. I could relate so many stories from my pedagogic career but, I just have one more for today:

I recall a Pasifika student (at tertiary level) telling me that when she got home – after taking a train and **then** a bus to South Auckland, she would have to finish getting dinner ready for her younger siblings and help them with their homework. Her mother would be leaving for her second or third cleaning job of the day and I think she said that her father might still be asleep after a night shift. I knew that this student also worked at KFC on the weekends to pay for her bus fares and other Uni costs. She mentioned, another time, that she had to do her assignments at Uni where there were computers and wifi (which she didn't have at home).

This young woman also shared with me that coming to university was like being in a **different country** for her, even though she was born in New Zealand – it was the 'palagi' world – she had to navigate this culture (as well as her own). Her whole life prior to this, she told me – was a **brown world** – not a single pakeha in her school, in her suburb, or in her church – and now she was in, what felt like, a foreign country. She had entered university, by the way, on an 'equity' stream. She was in the bottom 10% of the grades in her first year. In her last year, she was in the top 10% (I understand this is quite a common story with equity students). And imagine, the depth of understanding as well as empathy and compassion she finished her training with, compared to the regular, middle-class students (maybe our kids) with a very straightforward life and all the provisions for academic study supplied to them.

Our UU principles and values guide us towards justice, equity, compassion and, if we're lucky, we become transformed. I really like being transformed – I see it as being improved, becoming a better human being.

We learn from stories. We learn from listening to others, from hearing their stories. In a few weeks' time, we will also be listening to and sharing stories for our second Table Talk service – the topic will be **health and care**. I think that process will be transformative too.

**Meditation / Discussion Questions:-**

- What did today's talk make you think about?
- Is there a story you'd like to share?