

Sample Letter About Literature

Dear Rita Pierson,

I've watched your TED Talk at least a dozen times, and in the seven minutes and forty five seconds you spoke, your words changed me.

I have always been curious as to why because you didn't say anything about teaching and learning that I didn't already know. You said, "It's about the connection. It's about the relationship." Of course it is.

I've been teaching for twenty years. I know that. You remind us that, "no significant learning can occur without a significant relationship." I know that too. So I've long wondered what it is about your talk that has resonated with me . . . and nudged me to watch it, again and again.

Maybe it's because we have some things in common. Your parents were educators. So were mine. My dad taught 6th grade and my mom taught high school. I'm also not good at math. (I confess this fact to my students often.) When you reminisce about your students, the glimmer in your eyes reveals how much you loved being a teacher. So do I. Like you said, "Teaching and learning should bring joy." But, it's more than that.

When people say, "Have you ever seen Rita Pierson's TE Talk?" my eyes brighten, and I excitedly say yes . . . as if I know you. As if I have a story to tell about you. Which I don't. But I guess, in a way, I do.

The most memorable moments in my classroom have emerged because of this connection you speak of. Because of the relationships. Because many of my students feel safe enough to take risks..to allow themselves to be vulnerable. I have so many stories, but I'll tell you just a few.

During our story slam, one student began, "You might think you know what it feels like to be Muslim, but you don't. Being Muslim is when your mother goes to the supermarket wearing her hijab, and comes home crying because someone told her to go back where she came from." Another student told us, "You wouldn't know it, but when I was younger, I was really fat. It's not easy growing up when you're fat." And another girl, who I will never forget, looked at us and said, "Yes, I'm black." Then, she pulled on her hair and said, "And, yes, my hair is very different from yours. And no, you can't touch it."

These are just a few stories from my classroom, and they are still unfolding.

The first time I watched your talk, I immediately wanted to know more about you . . . and maybe where I could find you. A very quick Google search informed me that that you died one month after your talk. This news startled me, and it scared me a little too. It meant there was a chance that I might never have heard your words, and also that the vibrancy and inspiration that was you is no longer here. It never ceases to amaze me when someone who is so full of life is suddenly gone. I still can't make any sense of it.

I still watch your talk . . . when I'm feeling dejected and need a little inspiration . . . I like to hear your words: "Is this job tough? You betcha. Oh God, you betcha." I've watched it so many times that I can conjure up your voice in my mind. I can repeat the words with the same rhythm and intonation: "But it is not impossible. We can do this."

The words don't sound as convincing from my mouth. . . in my voice. So I listen to your voice, I embody your presence. I see your fire red blazer and the way you strut across the TED stage: "I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful, and I am strong." And it lifts me up, and I know you're pointing at me when you say, "We're educators. We're born to make a difference." I think teachers need champions in the same way kids do.

Thank you for being my champion.

Beth Pandolpho