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Let's Keep the
"L" Word



It's dismissal time. Marilyn Cohen, a little more dressed up than usual in preparation for an early evening school program, holds hands with her friendship circle of kindergartners as they sing their good-bye song. When the last child leaves, waving a fistful of artwork, Marilyn hurries to check the incubator, which is on a table in the center of the room. It has been the center of attention for the last month. She tidies up the poems, projects, pamphlets, and posters (the four Ps!) that are scattered around the incubator. She places two of the children's most beloved books back on the shelf: Mildred Selsam's *Egg to Chick* and Ruth Heller's *Chickens Aren't the Only Ones*.

She checks the eggs again, then glances at the children's chick-hatching calendar, though she

knows full well what it says. It says “Day 21,” but not one of the eggs shows any sign of a chick.

Staring at the apparently lifeless eggs, Marilyn thinks of the weeks of effort put into this activity: observing, comparing, discussing, researching, anticipating. And all the fun: the stories, songs, games, and poems the children enjoyed as they waited for the chicks to magically start hatching—one, then another, and another. Child after child has asked, “They *will* hatch, won’t they, Mrs. Cohen?” How could she face her students and tell them that their fears have been confirmed, that their loving care and dedication have yielded nothing, nada, zero, zilch!?

Disappointment often drives teachers to leave the profession. But Marilyn doesn’t give in to disappointment. She rushes to the office telephone and dials the number of Dr. Richard Langenbach. Years ago, the embryologist/farmer visited her class and conducted an in-service presentation on chick hatching. Marilyn was among those enchanted by his wisdom and enthusiasm. Since then, Dr. Langenbach has supplied eggs to Marilyn and her kindergartners for their springtime chick-hatching celebration, and their success rate has been outstanding—until now. Dr. Langenbach answers the phone, and Marilyn is relieved to hear his voice.

“Do you have any chicks up your sleeve?” she jokes, then explains her predicament. “I’m not going

to lie to the children," she assures him. "Tomorrow, we'll talk about nature and how sometimes things don't work out the way we plan, the way we hope. Sometimes, it's not in our hands. We do our best, but then nature has its own plan. It's hard to understand, but we have to accept that. However, I do want the children to have chicks tomorrow to see what their chicks would have looked like if they had hatched the way we hoped they would."

She arranges to borrow about half a dozen live chicks, cancels her immediate plans, and drives fifteen miles to Dr. Langenbach's farm out in the country. But he isn't there.

"He must have forgotten," says Mrs. Langenbach, explaining that her husband just left a few minutes ago. Marilyn, determined not to leave empty handed, asks if Mrs. Langenbach would round up some chicks for her.

"Oh, my! I'm allergic to all those chickens," Mrs. Langenbach says apologetically. "I never go back there! But you're welcome to if you'd like."

So Marilyn digs her high heels into the muddy earth and heads for the chicken coops. "I didn't see this in my job description," she muses. She is greeted by a cacophony from hundreds of clucking, flapping, squawking, agitated chickens.

Where are the chicks? As she searches, she recalls how Dr. Langenbach talked about the

developmentally appropriate practice of integrating chicks into the adult population. She peeks into the coops, and the birds peck her and scratch her. She finds herself in a flurry of chicken coop dust, feathers, and empty seed husks.

Amid the cackling chaos, Marilyn manages to capture six chicks. She puts the frightened little creatures into a cardboard

box she brought, then gladly accepts Mrs.

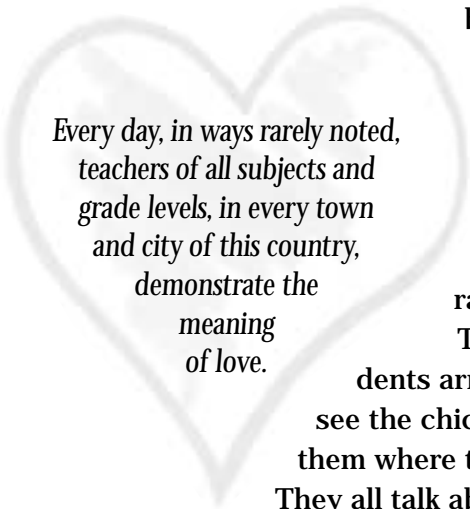
Langenbach's offer of a washing facility. She drives back to her classroom and gets the chicks settled into their temporary homes.

The next day, as her students arrive, they are thrilled to see the chicks. Marilyn explains to them where the chicks came from.

They all talk about life's disappointments and joys—of eggs that don't hatch and those that *do*.

All the students get to be photographed holding a chick. Their photos will always be reminders of this special time.

Some would call Marilyn's experience an example of professionalism. Others would say she was nuts. I



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offer it as an example of what the poet Theodore Roethke meant when he wrote, "Teaching is one of the few professions that permits love."

Every day, in ways rarely noted, teachers of all subjects and grade levels, in every town and city of this country, demonstrate the meaning of love. Marilyn Cohen is just one example. Here are some more:

- Rosie postpones the surgery she needs until the summer because she doesn't want to leave her third graders in the middle of the school year.
- Marcella rises at five A.M. on trash collection days and drives around the neighborhood to find discarded but perfectly good items she can use in instructional activities with her students.
- John turns down an invitation for a special breakfast program. The tall Texan explains that he just can't miss his Head Start class, where he greets every child at the door with his ritual of "Howdy, pardner! I'm mighty glad to see you!"
- Maddy holds an umbrella over her toddler construction workers for more than an hour to

shade them from the hot sun while they dig tunnels and roadways in the sand to create a storybook world.

- Rashid waits in line at the mall for two hours to get an autograph from a visiting sports celebrity for one of his eighth graders, who is a big fan.
- Maxine calls every one of her fifth graders' families to make sure they attend a poetry and art celebration at the local museum. She refuses to let any child miss out and spends the evening carpooling for those who have no rides.
- A newspaper headline reads "Teachers Buy Extras, Survey Says: More Than \$400 Spent on Supplies." The article begins, "Whether for stickers, markers, a meal on a field trip, books, or even shoes, teachers say they regularly dip into their own pockets to help their students." Jeff knows all about that. He spends more than \$1,000 a year for his fifth graders. He knows which ones can't afford lunch during field trips or bus fare for special outings, so he pays for them rather than see them excluded.

In our high-tech, ever more impersonal society, where we are often known more by our numbers

than our names, it's reassuring to know that those special people teaching our children demonstrate the meaning of that trite, devalued "L" word—*love*.

There, I said it!