

1 Roadside Weeds



What is a weed?

A plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered....

—Ralph Waldo Emerson¹

“What shall I do? I don’t wanna quit my dreams, you know? If I quit this, nothing would be left. I would just have to find some job. I don’t wanna do that.” At the time he sent this email message to Miguel, Hiroshi was a young man of eighteen, living in the midst of a crisis: Like most people his age, he was uncertain about the future. Throughout his life, he had been good at sports, played music, and knew how to fix a car. At school, Hiroshi was popular, but not for the reasons most parents would welcome. In fact, Hiroshi was expelled from every school he had attended for the past six years. His mother went to countless meetings with principals and teachers, trying her

best to convince them of her son's genuine interest in getting through his school years. In each school, Hiroshi had developed a reputation as an impossible student, a troublemaker, and the scars on his left arm, the product of many fights, could easily convince anyone who met him for the first time that he was indeed someone destined to end up in a great deal of trouble someday.

Miguel met Hiroshi in 2002 while he was teaching an EFL writing class at a local high school in Yokohama. He recounts:

The first time we met, the class was already halfway through the spring semester. I remember seeing his tall, athletic body hunkered behind a computer desk that seemed designed for toddlers. Behind his desk, wearing dark glasses that prevented others from seeing what or who he was looking at, Hiroshi seemed to be saying, "Don't mess with me." While I gave instructions to the class about the assignment they were about to start, I noticed that he was looking outside as if something more interesting were taking place in the next building. My natural reaction would have been to say, "Hey, young man, the class is over here." I wanted to say something to him, but I didn't. A couple of days before, I had been "warned" by a senior teacher about a "new, problem student," someone who had the reputation for getting into trouble everywhere. Forewarned, I thought, This is Japan; how bad can this kid be?

Later, my suspicions proved right. Hiroshi was not a bad student at all. True, he did not like school, and when asked about it his answer was honest: "School is boring. Teachers are boring, therefore, I am bored." At the time, I thought, This is not the kind of person I would like to sit next to during a meditation session. However, in the months that followed, Hiroshi was to remind me of

a lesson that I had learned in my own youth: that the worst thing society, parents, and schools do to young people is to instill fear in their minds, coupled with a sense that they have failed to meet the expectations of those around them, that their opinions and experiences are not regarded as important. Such young people come to believe that they are weeds who don't belong in any garden.



Weeds are generally maligned as interlopers. We spend great effort, or money, to rid gardens of them. We incur unseemly blisters on hands and fingers if we trowel them out ourselves. (In this high-tech era, would these be called digital blisters?) From the perspective of a landscaped yard in England or a tailored Japanese garden, weeds don't belong. Chris writes:

After the winter rains in California, the roadside along Iris Canyon in Monterey suddenly bursts into life with light-infused stained-glass greens. Over some weeks shoots develop into stately creatures adorned with pinks purples whites yellows and reds. Thistles, wild radish and mustard, hemlock topped with new lace, poison oak, pea-family vines, *tampopo* (a Japanese word that I find more musically appealing than dandelion), delicate grasses, and other weeds whose names I do not know. Rains stop altogether in April, and in mid-May the weeds begin to shift colors. The grasses and their delicate seed pods, now three feet tall, turn golden; some of the poison oak begins to take on the deep red that will characterize it in the fall; the radish and mustard flowers linger and stand out against the

dried grasses; and the hemlock now as high as a tall person delights the eye with its profusion of lace flowers and delicate carrot-top-like greenery. The weeds have arranged themselves in intricate combinations of colors and textures. I stop and admire them. Weeds don't look like this in my yard.

Along the roadside, weeds not only belong where they are; they flourish without needing anyone to take care of them, to fuss over them. They combine and cluster in ways that look landscaped in their balance and integrity. They change over time but they never disappear. They are hearty. They have guts and tenacity. The ungainliest of them blossom in their own elements, and when mowed down in early summer, wait patiently for a few weeks before coming back with a vengeance. They persist. Along the roadside, weeds suffer no discrimination from elitist and manicured garden species. They develop fully into whatever their essence dictates.



All of us have had, at one time or another, students who remind us of weeds. They just don't seem to belong where they are. Like Hiroshi, they stand out as clumsy, ungainly, tough, or intractable. Or they hide their buds and blossoms; their finery is invisible next to the cultivated varieties. In a large class, it is especially difficult to see them, let alone imagine them alongside a road in happy conjunction with their diverse companions. The more pristine plants get the attention. The weeds get ignored.

Classrooms are gardens, of course, not roadsides. We work to keep them clean and tidy, to arrange chairs tables and desks in a

certain symmetry, to fit everything in, living and inanimate, within clearly defined boundaries, and to water the plants, our students, with our knowledge and wisdom at least once a week. We hope that by the end of a term we will see signs of growth. We measure growth regularly, and do our best to make sure that each plant moves ahead with all the others. But there are occasional weeds that make teachers who crave a sense of order get out the trowel or the mower. They shoot up and out and sideways, threatening to take over the garden. One solution is to trample them underfoot, flatten them, extract them, or at the very least cut them back so as to maintain symmetry and order. Another is to ignore them. A third is to take a deep breath and watch them grow.



Unless mowed down or plowed under, roadside weeds change all the time, quite on their own, with only essential nourishment from seasonal rains. Change happens over time with living things, of course, and sometimes the changes are visible and other times undetectable. If I walk up Iris Canyon every day, I hardly notice changes in the roadside weeds. But if I miss a week or two, or some months, everything looks different. Where did these lovely new blossoms come from? How did the stubby thistle suddenly become so tall and gangly, and how did I miss the emergence of its purple pin cushion? When did the grasses turn golden and empty their seed pods? How could I have missed all these miracles?

We see students once or twice a week and do not notice changes in them. Then, some of them come back the following year

to take another class, or just to say hello after graduating, or to get advice about the next stage of their lives. Often, we look at them and ask, “Who are these new people?” They must have been changing every day before my eyes. I must have been part of the changes, but I missed it.



Miguel: I was often labeled a “weed” for a variety of reasons, the most noticeable being my apparent absentmindedness, described by several of my teachers as “unwillingness to learn.” Outside school, my childhood was divided between visits to doctors and piano lessons. A pensive boy with a fragile constitution, I never seemed able to develop friendships with other children my age. What my teachers failed to notice was that from an early age, I had become an avid reader, and that one of my daily routines was to go back home and “check” in the encyclopedia to see if what the teachers had said in class was true. Quite often, I found that things were not as I had been told.

Growing up in a home environment that stressed education over everything else, including sports and friendships with the neighbors, I found refuge in music and books. I spent countless hours playing the piano, learning the basic repertoire, and reading history and geography. At school, I spent much of my time drawing, occasionally taking notes, notes that were never to be looked at again. Today, we call these students aural-learners, but back in those days, they were simply referred to as problem children. Throughout my schooling my teachers missed seeing “the other side,” the curiosity that served as the basis for my education, mostly because they were more concerned with providing pupils with the information

they needed to pass tests. Naturally, it was easier to label seemingly distracted students as unfit children, problem students, “weeds.”

Chris: I was another sort of weed. Active, outdoorsy, and tom-boyish out of school, I spent much indoor time drawing. At school, however, I was undernourished and wall-flowerish, confident only in the company of one or two other like-minded weeds. I behaved. I did my homework. I conjugated verbs in Spanish, took dictations in French, wrote book reports, none of which I can remember. I tried algebra, and didn’t protest when I didn’t understand. When things went wrong, when something didn’t sink in, it was clearly my fault. Just not smart enough. Just not brave enough to speak out. Teachers did not talk with me about interest and its connection to motivation and learning, or about school subjects and ways to connect them to my own life, or about the normal ups and downs on the path to becoming an educated person. Teachers did not talk with me about education. I looked with both awe and dismissive cynicism upon the popular kids: the cheerleaders and jocks, all the nice-looking kids with clear skin and lots of friends, the garden variety plants. Everything they did seemed boring. Why would anyone want to wear a little short skirt and jump up and down waving pom-poms? Why did everyone get so excited over American football? What was the big deal with proms? Singing in the high school choir kept me going, a choir populated by an odd assortment of other weeds who, like me, did not understand the lure of cheerleading, proms, and football games. I finished high school with a lot of As and a few Bs and a C in algebra, feeling as though I had learned nothing at all. I found no adult role models or mentors at school—where teachers were probably relieved to have a complacent student who got good grades—or at home, where my parents themselves lacked the courage I craved. The appearance of order was what counted.



Classrooms, as gardens, are admired for their order and “beauty,” not for the weeds that may spoil the view. Aren’t we constantly trying to connect with those students who are the cream of the crop, the ones who make teaching rewarding because they appear to provide us with evidence that our lessons have succeeded? Sometimes we are just so grateful to see that someone cares about the subject we are teaching that we neglect the students who show little interest or those who seem to have left the classroom even before they have arrived. They lack all outward signs of motivation, they pay little attention to our lessons, they slouch and doodle, they gaze out windows, they disrupt and resist in counter-productive efforts to establish a sense of power, to take charge of their stories. Our natural reaction is to not pay attention to them. Our expectations are low, and the weeds fulfill our expectations.

This was the case with Hiroshi. Miguel says:

My colleagues had given up on him. Also, having been influenced by many teachers, many students saw Hiroshi as a problem because his presence disturbed the apparently “perfect” environment of the classroom. He was understandably powerless in that environment. What my colleagues and many students were not seeing is that Hiroshi was a creative individual who enjoyed finding not only solutions to problems, but the causes of the problems in the first place. In doing so, he did not accept blindly the one solution given by the teacher as the correct answer. I uncovered this when, after a few weeks of teaching the basics of paragraph construction, I asked students to practice writing by responding to questions such as, “What

is the most difficult decision in your life (so far), and how did you go about making that decision?” and “Who or what influenced your decision?” While other students searched for the “perfect” answer, the answer that would make the teacher happy, Hiroshi used the opportunity to write a quasi-paragraph in which he expressed his disappointment at a school system that had obviously failed him.

At first, his writing seemed to drift away from the original question, and I wondered if he was trying to test me. However, I made a point not to reject what he had written. There was something in his writing, a kind of passion and intensity that had a much more powerful effect than the perfectly crafted pieces by other students. I read his reactions and decided that the best way to understand him was to engage him in conversations that would guide both of us to a common ground to work from. From that time on, many of the discussions we had centered on his learning to express ideas in ways that would not offend others. At the same time, we worked on finding ways in which Hiroshi could convey his messages so that other people would take notice of the kind of student he represented. He once told me, “Man, there are other people like me, you know. And the sad thing is, no one listens to us because we are not what they want us to be.”

When we drafted this essay, Hiroshi and I had not met for more than a year, and to this day, meeting regularly does not seem necessary. He does not need my constant attention. Occasionally, I receive an update on his progress. I can see his life unfolding. In a recent email, he described with tremendous excitement the experience of applying to a school in New York. He tells me that he is gradually finding his way and this means he is now certain that he “has to” become a sound engineer “or something.” In that, he is showing a commitment to growth, the kind of tenacity that I rarely see in more “normal” students.

For now, Hiroshi tells me that he understands he will remain a weed in the minds of many people for a long time, but one who might one day serve as a role model for others. He has already set an example for one of his teachers, a fellow weed, who continues growing in his own right.



Some of our students, like Hiroshi, might not be the kind of people we would like to take to the opera. But try this for an attitude revision: What if we conceptualize these weeds in our classrooms as doers, not followers? They reach out and up, sink roots, and grow new sprouts if mowed down. They resist being pruned, clipped, grafted, or otherwise tinkered with by others. They outgrow their pots. They send runners secretly in all directions, out of sight of the gardener's shears, and pop up later in unexpected places. Such weeds can be seen as having a sense of purpose, at the very least of doing rather than being done to. And their success is not to be found in their beauty (a fragile, transient quality after all), but in their tenacity. We can communicate the importance of this weed-like tenacity to our students.

We teach who we are. If we are or have been weeds ourselves, we will engage in our work with a spirit of purpose, a conviction that change and growth are possible even for those weeds who have repeatedly been mowed down. Teachers cannot magically transform a student's life. But can't we show them that they, too, can be weeds who survive and flourish?

Notes

1. Emerson, R. W. (1904). *The complete works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Volume XI: Miscellanies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, p. 152.