

THE CHEMISTRY LAB

Sheila Monnahan

[Assignment: Write a narrative essay about a time when someone's careless or hostile words caused you long-time pain or unhappiness. Note: The topic for this unit was the messages we send other people by words, actions, appearance, etc.]

(1) "This still isn't right. I want you to redo it and hand it in tomorrow."

(2) I walked slowly back to my desk. I would have to repeat this experiment one more time. The assignment in question was a chemistry lab. No matter how many times I did the experiment, I always got the wrong results. Since this experiment contained basic data that we would build upon, I had to repeat it until I got reasonable results.

(3) Due to this experiment, I was beginning to fall behind. I spent every day for almost two weeks trying to figure out what was wrong. What made the whole matter worse was that the quarter was going to end in a couple of weeks. All experiments in Chapter Two were to be completed by that time. At the rate I was going it would be Easter before I was finished. My teacher, although sympathetic to my cause, was a slave driver in disguise, constantly sending me back to my lab table. Each time I would curse him more than the time before. Eventually I came to hate this man. I swear I had nightmares about him and his chemicals.

(4) My class was fairly large and we worked at our own pace. I suppose I got lost in the shuffle because Mr. Wiser, my teacher, didn't seem to notice I was two weeks behind the rest of the class. He never came to my table to offer assistance or moral support. As an insecure eighth grader, I had too much pride to ask for help.

(5) Two days and a million unsuccessful attempts later, Mr. Wiser called me to his desk.

"It's obvious to me you are having a hard time comprehending the nature of this experiment."

I thought to myself, no, I just like repeating this lab for my health. Of course I didn't understand it! So after a long pause I stated, "I guess you could say that."

"Why don't you stay after school? I can watch you do it and figure out what the problem is. You can then proceed in Chapter Two. Have you realized how far behind you are?"

I nodded yes and wanted to tell him it was all his fault for not having helped me overcome this hurdle, but I just said "thank you" and slipped out of the door.

(6) The rest of the day, I sat in my classes and dreading the so-called "after school lab." Somehow, in the back of my mind, I felt that being told what I was doing wrong was worse than just being told I was wrong. This would mean there were no other factors to blame but myself. In eighth grade, this isn't a nice thought; in essence, it means you're a failure.

(7) After school I bravely walked into the classroom. Mr. Wiser was waiting for me as he had said he would. I started to get the materials together. I had done this so many times I could find the chemicals in my sleep. I then proceeded to carry out the experiment under the scrutinizing eye of Mr. Wiser.

(8) The experiment went smoothly and Mr. Wiser didn't correct me once. I took that as a good sign. All that was left to do was to light a match and see if I had collected hydrogen or carbon dioxide. I lit the match and stuck it into the container. I watched that match go out for the one million and first time. Mr. Wiser went into a state of shock. I don't think he thought I could mess up in front of his very eyes. He quickly repeated the experiment himself. Much to his dismay, he got the same result I did. I began to thank God for little miracles. At least I couldn't be blamed; I could now claim victory; I wasn't a failure.

(9) He began to take a closer look at the set-up, and within minutes he discovered the problem. He raced to his office and reappeared with a rubber hose.

"Your hose had a leak in it so none of the hydrogen made it into the container," he stated. "Try the experiment again."

I rolled my eyes to show my displeasure. I know he saw this but he made no acknowledgment. Again I repeated the experiment which I could now do blindfolded and with my hands tied behind my back. I lit and match and gently stuck it into the container.

"Pop!"

"Well, Miss Monnahan, I think you've created hydrogen. Record the times and temperatures. Tomorrow you can continue in the unit."

(10) I just stared at the man. That's it? He wasn't going to offer any congratulations or apologies?

"Is there a problem?" he questioned. I stared at the floor and mumbled a couple of um's. Where were my guts when I needed them the most?

"Ah, Mr. Wiser, there is no way I can make up those experiments before the end of the quarter," I quickly blurted out.

"I know."

"That means I will barely pass the quarter."

Again I received a blank stare and he responded, "I know."

"But I performed the experiment correctly; it wasn't my fault it didn't work."

"I know," he stated again.

(11) Why didn't he explain himself? Didn't he know how important grades were to me? We just sat there staring at each other; he never said a word. I kept waiting for a solution to my problem.

(12) Finally, I remarked, "I don't think it's fair that I am almost going to flunk because of a rubber hose. I did the experiment right; I followed the instructions to a 't.' I can honestly say I did the best I could."

(13) I think Mr. Wiser was taken aback that I would be so outspoken but his reply was simply, "Sometimes your best isn't good enough. That's a

fact of life you are going to have to learn." Having said that he left the room.

(14) I'm not sure whether he meant that as advice or criticism. Whatever the case, it deeply affected me for the rest of my education. I've always striven for perfection. Naturally, I've never reached the pinnacle of perfection or even come close. But I will never agree that your best is not good enough. If it wasn't good enough, it simply wasn't your best.