



1-1-2019

Better and Worse

Hollie J. Wise

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

 Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wise, Hollie J. (2019) "Better and Worse," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 58 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol58/iss1/7>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Better and Worse

Hollie J. Wise

Is it just me, Miss Wise, or are your eyes getting really big?” Walker says as he looks all the way up at me.

It’s mid-September of my second year of teaching, and all around us the other kindergartners buzz about the room. Nice Miss Wise is trying to contain Crazy Miss Wise as I reprimand Walker for the umpteenth time. Apparently, my eyes give me away.

I lean down, closing the height gap between Walker and me, and try to finish the lecture so that we can both move on. “Walker, listen to what I’m saying! The pencil cannot be used that way!”

He’s still staring at my eyes, probably thinking about what it would look like if they exploded.

When Walker stepped off the bus the first day of school, the tag pinned to his polo shirt bore my name in crisp, black, permanent marker. His brave walk reminded me that someone who loved him put him on the bus that morning and sent him to me. In that moment, he became mine.

Now, imagining myself as the looming, bug-eyed giant that he must see, in this moment, I understand that I am his too.

I give up. “You can go back to centers. Leave the pencil,” I call after him.

It was Shannon, one of my sweet angels my first year (the year before Walker), who had said I’m the “perfect tall” for a kindergarten teacher. At almost six feet, I’m easy to spot on the playground, but I sense more than height in Shannon’s estimation. I recognize that I am theirs, and they are mine. For better and for worse.



“You smell good, Miss Wise,” says Michael, a boy who likes the way trash smells and who aspires to be a garbage man. Sometimes when he’s sitting on the rug, he reaches out and tenderly touches my ankle to feel the texture of my sock. The next day he’s so mad he wants to blow up the school, he says. Another day, he just hits his head against the table. Everything Michael does cries out to me, so I cry out too—to the guidance counselor, the behavior specialist, and the school psychologist. But still I feel like his mother and I are his only advocates in the whole world—and we don’t know what to do.

Sometimes, after a day with Michael, all I want is to go home and shower, to turn my face into the hot water and let it wash over me. But after, when I am lying in the dark, I meet that weight again, for it comes from a responsibility too heavy to have been washed away. It’s during this long year with Michael that my stomach begins to hurt.



The yellowish light of the teachers’ bathroom isn’t ever very flattering, but today I look especially worried and sick. Oatmeal with radioactive tracer was my breakfast, followed by a two-hour scan. Doctor 2, the specialist, has already ruled out celiac, Crohn’s, and inflammatory bowel disease, and he’s sent me for more tests.

Back at my school to teach the second half of the day, I’m stalling in the bathroom. I’m still shaking off the unpleasant feeling of the cold, nuclear medicine wing where I spent the morning, trying to forget the ickiness of being handed breakfast by a stranger wearing exam gloves. In a few minutes, I’ll have to muster bright classroom energy, but for now I pause, trapped in the dark spiral of unknowns. All of the tests and appointments should be leading to something—a resolution or at least a name for what I am experiencing. But despite what I want, this is only a beginning.



After a few years of teaching, I have learned the importance of beginnings. Powerful forces, for better or for worse, are set in motion at the start of something. In the first week of school, I teach many lessons that are critical to our year-long success, including “Paper Towels Belong in the Trash, Not in the Toilet” and “A Fire Drill Is Just Practice.” My

favorite first-week lesson is “How to Ask a Friend to Be Your Partner” because it fills me with joy that a world exists where success is just this clear-cut and simple. Here’s how the lesson unfolds:

“Boys and girls,” I say in a voice that suggests this is something very important and special, “today you are going to learn how to ask someone to be your partner.”

I select Jayden as my helper. As he makes his way to the front, nineteen little pairs of eyes watch him.

“This is how you ask someone to be your partner,” I say. “First I turn to Jayden, and I look at him.” With cartoonish exaggeration I act this out; my audience is captivated. “Jayden, will you be my partner?” I slowly ask. Before Jayden can speak, I whisper to him his line.

He says very seriously, “Yes.”

“Okay,” I smile and gesture that this mission is accomplished. “We will sit down on the floor facing each other. Now, who would like to give it a try?”

One by one I let each student choose a partner. Even the last to go, who has watched the scenario unfold at least ten times, needs my personal coaching. It’s painfully slow, yet for the first time all day, everyone is riveted. It’s reality TV for five-year-olds.

This kind of constant directing can lead to a bit of a god complex, because in the universe of my classroom I am the highest power. Here, knowing the end of the school year from the beginning, I create and accomplish my work. Daily, I judge right from wrong and administer both justice (time-outs) and mercy (warnings).

I am theirs and they are mine in this universe I have made. Yet I feel *I* am the one being created here. The power of the way the children see me, the dynamic of this stewardship, forms me out of the basic elements of myself.



“Okay, Miss Wise,” Viviana acquiesces. She has a distinctive way of saying my name that conveys both annoyance and fondness. Her tone simultaneously recognizes that I am the higher power of this universe and rebels against that knowledge. Today her classmates have tattled on her. I’ve just seen the evidence, two squished monarch caterpillars in her hand, and I’ve banished her to time-out. I had been very clear with all of the children before recess when I said, “You may visit the butterfly garden, but look with your eyes only.”

Ten minutes later the caterpillars are dead.

After watching this scene repeat for the next three days, I realize that no consequence will be strong enough to overcome Viviana's compulsion. So my special education colleague writes a story for her. Every day before recess, inevitably after a few rounds of resistance, Viviana reads this custom story before going out to play: "I swing on the swings at recess. I go down the slide at recess. I DO NOT GO IN THE BUTTERFLY GARDEN. I slide down the fire pole. I have fun with my friends. I DO NOT GO IN THE BUTTERFLY GARDEN."

Surprisingly the story works, although by this time our caterpillar population is irreparably diminished.

The butterfly garden browns and dies as the year goes on, and Viviana's story is forgotten. My medical story, meanwhile, advances to Doctor 4, but by June this doctor's treatments are making me worse. I'm running on fumes to the summer break ahead when Viviana's story resurfaces in my end-of-the-year file sorting. I'm alone in the room, so for kicks I read it aloud.

Although Viviana always read the story in monotone, I read it now the way I imagine her brain must have translated its message. With an exaggerated ponies-and-rainbows sweetness in my voice, I read until I get to the page with the big red X and bold print. Here I switch to my best impending-doom voice and read, "I DO NOT GO IN THE BUTTERFLY GARDEN."

I smile and put the story in my "save" pile.

By the middle of summer, I wish I had a story like Viviana's for my health. My body is failing me, and I am failing my body. The distress signals it sends are a code I can't break. Doctor 4 runs out of ideas, and I'm on my own again. I could use a guide with clear-cut dos and don'ts.

I look for guidance from the higher power in my life: God. And though I feel assurance that I'm on the right path, the way ahead isn't as clearly spelled out as Viviana's story. There is no big red X or impending-doom warning, so I just keep going forward.



Thin acupuncture needles, carefully placed on my legs and feet, reach up like antennae into the expectant air of this new place. With each doctor or practitioner I visit, I yearn anew to be free from my symptoms, and though I have been failed repeatedly, hope comes automatically. As I lie quietly in the dim natural light, I imagine myself as seen from above—a body in repose, still except for the movement of breath. The scene is

peaceful and neutral. Then, all at once, a great love for my body flows over me. I am filled by this kindness coming from me, but directed to me. I don't feel failure or frustration—just tender concern and love for the physical part of my being. This momentary clarity is enough, for now.



It's August again. Despite all of the tests and treatments, I'm getting sicker. But because I don't know what else to do, I start another school year.

A few weeks later I go to see Doctor 6, and by February the scopes and pill cams have gone where no one has gone before. This doctor seems to know things that no one has known before, and I'm finally gaining weight again.

Because I'm out for so many appointments and tests, my class this year quickly becomes used to substitutes. I quickly become accustomed to having a break from these students, who are as far from an angel class as a group can get. This is the year, in fact, that I coin a name for what lies on the dark side of the kindergarten spectrum: Gingerbread Head Biters.

The name emerges during our study of the classic tale "The Gingerbread Man." To make a picture graph in math, the children rip a paper gingerbread man to show where they took the first bite of their own real cookie—from the arm, leg, body, or head. Then they tape their paper cookies in the appropriate columns on a class poster.

Usually, most of the cookies end up in the arm or leg column, but this year, as the graph comes together, I see unprecedented results: the head-biter column is off the chart.

I don't know exactly what these results say about them, but I'm not surprised. Behavior charts and intervention plans are taped all over my desk this year. I like each one of the students individually, but as a group their combined needs and strong personalities are overwhelming.

All the Gingerbread Head Biters have excellent immune systems; hence, they are never absent. James, who bounds in each day with volatile emotions, has the best immune system of all and is only absent one day the whole year—the day he is adopted by his foster family.

It's not their fault, but because I'm struggling to survive, I resent that my Gingerbread Head Biters need every ounce of energy I have. And then Regina arrives.

"Who is going to help us?" I plead with the principal and assistant principal as I sit in the office. This is too much. Regina has been plopped in my classroom with no support because she can't qualify yet

for special ed services. I'm told there is a process that must be followed, and it takes months.

Regina has no language. Kissing and roughly hugging her classmates are her only ways to tell them how much she likes them. She wails because she's mad or maybe because she's confused; I don't know the difference.

I am given crumbs when I ask for help. My assistant and I struggle to meet Regina's tremendous needs as well as the needs of the rest of our students. The hope that had been growing in my body and spirit (as a result of Doctor 6's treatments) starts to look like an illusion. As I begin to sink instead of swim, I see the thin line between air and water.

Finally, Regina qualifies for the special ed services she needs. But it's too late because I'm broken and defeated by the realization that I have been pushed to a limit I didn't know existed—to a place where I can't bring myself to claim Regina as my own.

The school year carries on, and after the last day, I pack up for the summer cleaning. My ritual as I leave the room in its worn but tidy state is to take a last look before I close the door. In that moment, I can release the stewardship of that year's class.

This June, I am particularly grateful that although the joy was missing, I completed my job. I made it through—not with the grace or goodness I would have liked—but to the children nothing was amiss: they were safe, they learned, and they belonged with me. But as I look at that room, letting go of this difficult year, I'm not sure I can come back.

As summer break begins, I'm back in Doctor 6's office. He's trying to appear empathetic as he tells me he has exhausted his options. After a year of his treatments, although I feel better than my worst, I've plateaued far below healthy. This is as good as it gets for you, he is telling me. He doesn't understand what it's like to teach *Gingerbread Head Biters*. Look how far you've come, he's explaining. But I remember what health felt like, and I desperately want it back.



I do come back to my classroom. There are joyful moments with my students, but I'm wary now. Unlike in my early years of teaching, when each challenge stretched but did not break me, now I clearly see my limit and that the fail-safes don't exist, and I am afraid.

Traumatized as a child by the ending to the original version of the movie *Pete's Dragon*—by the finality of the dragon's goodbye—at the close of each school year, I choose to leave our class ending unfinished. I ask my

soon-to-be first graders to visit and wave to me in the hall next year. I don't tell them that it won't be the same and that we won't belong to each other the way we do now. Instead, I leave open the possibility that if we need each other, we'll still be close by—the way *Pete's Dragon* should have ended.

I realize during the summer break that my health is declining again and that I need to take a leave of absence from teaching. I'll be back in a year or two, I tell myself, leaving open the possibility that I'll be Miss Wise again.

After clearing out the classroom for my replacement, I take one last look into the quiet, bare space that isn't mine anymore. Closing the outer metal door and instinctively listening for the sure click, a part of me, with both longing and gratitude, understands this is a final goodbye.



Years have passed, and I have not returned. The teacher stuff I carted home in boxes that last day has been sorted and pared down three times now, and still it takes up half a room. Occasionally, I take out my emotions too and try to sort and pare them down—try to understand what can stay and what can go. When I examine them one by one, I see the part each played in my decision to leave. Fear stole my confidence. Hope insisted that wellness was just ahead. But love was there too, underneath the others. Love for my own body, my oldest stewardship, suggested the choice to step away from the classroom.

I am still trying to break the code of my symptoms. I still dream of freedom from illness. Doctors have failed me, treatments have failed me, but I trust my body's constant loyalty to help fill the measure of my creation. Despite its imperfections, a body gives perfectly—breath after breath, beat after beat, cell by cell. I haven't discarded the final box of emotions yet, nor do I think I should. Even as I question whether I made the right choice, love focuses this truth in my view: I am mine—for better and worse. And love records that I was theirs, the children's, too.

It's Brian, who on his very last day of kindergarten summed it up best. His thank-you note read, "Miss Wise: Every school day, I had a good day. I will miss you tomorrow."

The gift of kindergarten is that tomorrow always begins anew. Even if you have to move your behavior clip to red because you flooded the bathroom, tomorrow your clip will be back on green. Even if your lunch bag leaks in your cubby or you don't get picked for Line Leader, tomorrow is a clean slate.

This is how I want to remember it: a new kindergarten day. The morning light comes in from the solarium. Their fresh, little faces look up at me from our blue rug. As I begin the morning, the familiarity of our routine affirms our belonging.

“Good morning, boys and girls.”

“Good morning, Miss Wise.”

This essay by Hollie J. Wise won third place in the 2018 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest sponsored by BYU Studies.