

Sometimes one of the hardest things can be to see things from another perspective, and realize that while we have a lot of gifts and talents, so too, do other people. But when we are able to get past ego, and see the bigger picture, in the end great things can happen by remembering the greater mission.

A number of years ago there was a teacher by the name of Jo Russell, who was also the proud mom of a 13 year old boy named Rick.

She showed up to the parent-teacher conference to meet with Miss Johnson, his teacher. And things got off to a bad start. Miss Johnson didn't even pay much attention to Jo. Instead, she locked her gaze on her junior high son's eyes.

Jo had worked with Rick on his latest paper, and she felt she had a glimpse of a rare gem in her own son, as he had a gift as a writer.

But, not according to Miss Johnson. She was saying, "You know, Rick, you just didn't develop your story well enough and you forgot a period here. That's why you got a D on the paper. That brings your overall grade down to a C in English this semester."

Just a few days earlier, when she reviewed the very same paper, she had told him, "Wow, Rick, you have real talent." As a published author and writing coach for decades, Jo had seen a lot of good and bad writing. Her son's skill sparkled. As his character grieved over the loss of his best friend, he pledged to make the dangerous climb to a mountain summit in honor of his buddy. The emotions, scenes and dialogue were outstanding. As a reading and writing teacher of a hundred students a year just a few younger than her son, she knew an "A" when she saw it. Rick deserved an A.

But Miss Johnson didn't think so, and her ignoring Jo and talking more to her so just made her more angry.

Jo saw Miss Johnson enough as teachers at different schools in the same district. But they also served as members of the same committee, which met once a month.

How Jo hated Miss Johnson, she thought to herself. She felt her decision to call Rick's work below average - a D - was unfair. So was his final grade of a C. She had worked with both of her sons on their final papers. Rick's brother in another class had turned in a paper that had been below average in punctuation and editing, but he refused to work on it any further. He got an A.

But Rick's C, Jo thought, would follow him throughout high school and beyond.

Miss Johnson was unfair, ugly and unprofessional. Jo felt a hard lump in her throat and anger boiling. At least she only had to see her once a month. She stormed out of the conference steaming over the injustice of it all.

Jo half-hoped she would be run over by the school bus - or drown in the community pool. But she taught swimming in the summer so drowning was unlikely.

When summer came, she thought she would have a vacation from Miss Johnson, but when she showed up for the first session of a six-week summer writing class for teachers, she was there too.

Well, it was a pretty big group Jo thought, so at least she could stay on the other side of the room. But then the leaders broke up the large group into smaller groups, and guess who was on Jo's team?

How unfair. Three years she wanted to attend the class, and now she was in the class too. What a long summer it was going to be.

In the small groups, the first job was to write and share personal experience stories. Miss Johnson wrote about family traditions that had brought her, her siblings and extended family close with much fun and laughter. Christmas with everyone making popcorn sculptures. Skits and plays with improvised costumes. Crazy contests. Games. Lots of creativity.

As the group laughed, Jo felt her hatred melt, just a little. After all, she did those things with her family for the same reason that Jo took her sons camping, hiking and skiing in the mountains on weekends and vacations. Family was important to both of them.

Her angry feelings were changing. Over the long days of class together, she realized her respect for her was eroding her hatred.

By the time the school year began again, they had learned to work together. Handling responsibilities on the same committee was much simpler without harboring hate. A Young Author's Day came together with a professional author guest. It took all of their teamwork. As they had hoped, the event left the student excited. Working together, teachers learned how to bring writing exercises into every subject.

The committee high-fived each other to celebrate the success of the event. Following that was a very exciting five-school writing contest that included Miss Johnson and her students' writing.

Close to spring break the following school year, during a long committee meeting after school, Jo could only hope the chairman would realize it was time to adjourn.

Miss Johnson cleared her throat. "Yes, I just found out this week that I have the big C." She paused a moment to compose herself. "I have to have surgery right away and I will be gone for quite a while. I really hope to see you all in the fall." Uncertainty hung in the air.

The teacher who never missed school, was always on time, and had always been healthy - all of a sudden wasn't. Miss Johnson was in for the fight of her life with her unyielding adversary - very serious cancer.

It would be a tough, discouraging and long road to recovery, if she made it. And she was single, alone much of the time.

As a solo mom with two sons, Jo knew what that was like.

Something she had been doing for years was encouraging others going through challenges, illness, loss or victories. Mostly she worked within her church and community. She used her writing skills and blank notes, cards and small gift baskets to urge the recipient to persist through the tough roads and trust God. And so God prodded Jo: do this for Miss Johnson, she needs it.

He laid the thoughts on her day after day and Jo finally caved in and called the district office for her home address.

Right away, she began sending her cards encouraging her to fight and win. Each week as she urged her on in writing, she realized she was fighting for her to beat cancer too. No longer did she hate her. She had forgiven her. Hatred changed to respect. Respect change to like. Like changed to caring. Now she really cared if she would make it.

Jo wrote from the heart and meant it when she penned the words of encouragement.

She wasn't sure what happened to her for quite a while; the next year Jo was hired to work in a different school and district.

But then a former colleague told her. "Did you know Miss Johnson is back teaching again? She's doing better all the time."

Jo was happy. And she bumped into Miss Johnson at the community pool. As they enjoyed the warm water in the hot tub, she cried gleefully. "I'm cancer-free now! And I'm getting married! I get to retire this year! God is so good!" She glowed with a smile and then added, you just don't know how much those notes you sent meant to me. It was a very hard fight for a long time and your words kept me going month after month. Thank you so much!"

Jo had come a long way. God and Miss Johnson had healed her heart, moving her from hatred to forgiveness and healing.

Who would have guessed, she reflected, she would one day be her encourager?

And as for her son Rick, as a sophomore in high school, he beat out all the other grades in an award-winning first place story.

As it turned out, Jo reflects, both Rick and Miss Johnson were rare gems in God's sight, and hers.

Were I in Jo's position, I too would be upset with the teacher. I might have a hard time understanding how something that seemed clear to me, that my son was a great writer and did a fine job, could not be obvious to his teacher. And were on on the committee with her, this anger might have set in and prevented me from working well with her to help others. It could be easy to be consumed by resentment and revenge. But I'd hope like her, I'd learn to let it go, and see the bigger picture, which was that Miss Johnson did not hate Rick - she just wanted him to reach his potential. And working together, the mom Jo and the teacher Miss Johnson, not only made Rick better, but helped other kids as well when compassion replaced anger, and both used the gifts God had given them to help both one another and other students.

It can sometimes be very easy to be angry or jealous. We can think that our way is the highway, and no one should tell us how to do our job, how to raise our kids, or that our ideas have the most merit for how a home, church, school or society should be run. And the sad reality is that when we become entrenched in these views, when we refuse to change or be open to the gifts others have, no real growth takes place. So the question for us is can we do what we often tell our kids to do, namely to play nice with others, and realize that together we are called to build up the Church and the world? For that to happen, we have to remember the world does not revolve around us and that so many people have so many talents, and that when we each work together, so many amazing things can happen.

This week in our first reading, we meet Eldad and Medad. The context is that God, seeing Moses is working so hard, sends some of the spirit given to Moses and gives it to 70 others. The spirit was given to these others, but Eldad and Medad were not there when it happened, but apparently are given the spirit too and begin to prophesy. A young man is upset with this, and Moses, in his wisdom says why are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets, stressing that they are doing good work. And in the Gospel, John says essentially the same thing. "Teacher, we saw someone driving out demons in your name, and we tried to prevent him because he does not follow us." Jesus, just like Moses, says "do not prevent him...for whoever is not against us is for us."

How easy it can be to like John, or like Jo at the start of the story at times. Who does this person think they are, I know what's best. Who is this new person who's coming into my committee or parish? Or I'm the only one who can do the job. The truth is when we celebrate baptism and confirmation, we believe that we are priests, prophets and kings. When we mark Pentecost, we are also reminded that gifts are given to all; some we all possess, but others also have unique gifts as well. So how can we make sure we are open to the gifts of others, and avoid the pitfall of jealousy and entrenchment?

I think one important starting point it to remember the goal: salvation of souls is the mission of the Church. We want to become better people, and help others to become

better too. The goal in life is not recognition; as Saint John the Baptist says, He must increase, I must decrease. We should have that attitude of the humble servant, and it applies to other things too - wanting to work with a teacher to help our kids learn; working with our fellow parishioners for our parish and school; or working with others to better our place of work; or others in the family to make our family better. It's why mission statements can be helpful - it's important to think big.

Once we do that, we can do self-inventory along the way. On the one hand, we want to recognize our gifts and use them. But as we do this, we also want to be open to the gifts of others. Case in point, Jo and Miss Johnson. Both had gifts as a teacher. But maybe Jo the teacher had a hard time not being Jo the mom and seeing the veteran teacher wasn't trying to be mean, but to help her son to grow. Ego can sometimes make us think that can do things better than others. Or that we are the only one who can do the job. But Jesus picked disciples, Moses had many others assist him, and we need to do the same thing. From parenting where we get advice from our spouses or our own parents to working on the job or on various volunteer committees, whatever it might be, we need to recognize our interdependence for the greater good.

So, too, should we recognize when it might be time to step aside. I remember at another parish I was at, there was young women who had a Masters in Interior Design. She wanted to be on the environment committee; and the pastor remarked to me that frankly the decorating at the parish left a little to be desired. I agreed. But the problem was the same people were on the committee for so many years, when she joined no one cared what she had to say, so she left. Now were I pastor of the parish, I might blow up the committee, but that wasn't my call. But the point is that sometimes the time comes to step aside because God might be calling us to try something different, or to be more open to the gifts of others. It could also be maybe someone comes along who can do a better job at a task than we can. And if they can, what a great thing that is, because while it might not benefit our ego, it will benefit the greater good.

One final point is through it all, seeking counsel from God and others. At work, sometimes we get yearly evaluations on our performance. But do we do this in life? When we pray, rather than just saying "Our Father" or "Hail Mary," do we also talk to God and ask for the gift of wisdom so we can discern what our gifts are or what the gifts of others are? When we have an issue with a person, do we pray for that person too? Do we make time for silence so we can calm down from our emotions and see the big picture? Doing so can be so helpful for true spiritual growth, but also for the greater mission.

Most of us are not in a junior high English class. But all of us are here today because we want to grow closer to God and grow in virtue. In our world, there can sometimes be such division from politics to our workplaces and schools, and sadly even in our Church. Division though is a poison that destroys; love is what heals and strengthens. We are now about to receive the Body and Blood of our Lord, given to us all for we are all equally loved by our God. As we do so, may we remember that this love is given to all without exception, and may our eyes and ears, souls and hearts be opened to using the

strength that God gives us through this sacrament to truly build one another up, never forgetting the mission isn't getting noticed or getting power, but rather about helping one another find the Kingdom of Heaven - something we can truly do when we build each other up and work together, each using our gifts for the glory of God.