



Learning Lifeline

A LETTER ABOUT LEARNING FROM ESTHER WILKISON

The day I made it rain inside a classroom was almost a disaster. I held a massive metal bowl of ice a few inches above a pan of boiling water. Steam condensed on the bottom of my “cloud” and drops slowly formed. The third-graders were deeply excited, but only the ones in front could see. Those in the back began either rain-dancing or pushing towards the front. The jostling mass bumped against the student desk holding the burner with boiling water. My hands were full with the ice bowl.

“FREEZE!” I yelled. The students froze. Then I said, “Back up. Front circle — crisscross applesauce, behind them — kneel, ones in back — stand.” The students did as directed. All survived, but the chaos and near danger made me feel like a failure. Yet—the failure was not me or my students. The activity simply revealed a *system failure*.

Our brains require systems because we don’t have enough energy to give intentional focus to everything we do. If we brush our teeth the same way over and over, we eventually do it on auto-pilot. We no longer need to think about brushing once it is a system. These behavior ruts allow us to function while our brain is busy with other things.

Systems are like train tracks. We, like trains, do not off-road well. The train tracks we need to run through our day are automatic habits. Once we have a habit-track, routine tasks will not take focused thought. Focused thoughts burn a lot of calories. If students use up their caloric energy to figure out how to do what could be a routine procedure, they will not have the energy to learn. Now, you might think that staying on a routine track sounds boring, but don’t be fooled. When our train is on track, we can party on the train.

The pandemic years disrupted our systems. Without our normal routines, we had to focus more, which left us mentally drained. Without the external events, we developed coping systems. We laid tracks, but our behavior ruts often led us to languish—not flourish. This brings us to our Second Strategy for Bridging Learning Gaps.

Develop Better Systems

I took the Pacific Surfliner Amtrak to San Diego once. What stunning ocean views! It was splendid! But do you know where the train took me? San Diego. Amazing, right? If I get on a train that is on a track to San Diego, I should not be at all surprised to end up there. And so it goes with the systems we use and the systems we teach to our kids.

If we are not moving on daily tracks that lead to lives of wisdom and God's purpose for us, we need to lay better tracks. Jesus stepped into a nation proud of their religious power system, yet blind to their own sin and to people in need. In came Jesus, from a nowhere town, with a group of students—most of whom would never make it in an honors class. His system? Touch the untouchables. Feed the hungry. Befriend the outcasts. Jesus also had a system of silence and solitude to hear from His Father. Thanks to all Jesus accomplished for us, we can leave our failed sin-management system to accept His complete Salvation, which includes practices that will re-pattern us to become a people who care about the same things He cared about.



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My third-grade science students had only been exposed to the ineffective system of sitting at desks and listening to the teacher. My live demonstration led to better attention, comprehension, and retention—but I needed to plan and practice in order to lay the tracks that would lead to consistent active learning. Don't skip the reality that laying the track will take planning, practice, adjusting, and more practice. When active-learning systems become routine, students have more brain bandwidth to soak in actual content.

Here's the good news: we are not stuck with the poor systems we developed in our past. God designed the brain to learn! God's Spirit can give us the power to change even the most entrenched habit ruts. What is one area of your life where you would see the greatest result if God helped you develop a better system? If those you influence saw you develop better systems, how would that impact them?