When I first noticed the small lump of chain maile in Josh’s hand and gathering throng of admirers, I knew it could be a potential distraction in class, and perhaps a power struggle in the making. The second bell hadn’t rung yet, so I casually sauntered over to where he was sitting and asked if he made it – he did – and if I could have it for the hour. He looked a little relieved, as if now he wouldn’t have to decide who got to hold it, or who he would have to negotiate its safe return from, in this group of rather sophomoric sophomores. Josh was a pretty quiet kid; it was only a few days into the new semester and I was slowly getting to know him by his small, ill formed letters in pencil on in-class writing assignments I frequently collected. As I reached out for the little ball of metal, images of teachers bravely holding a hand out for contraband chewing gum to be deposited therein flashed through my mind. To my surprise, I discovered that chain maile lumps are tremendously tactile and not unlike the various stress relieving items from Greek worry beads to Play-Doh that have developed over the years.

Little did I know that Josh’s interest in wire craft would be the reason we connected over writing. A bright student that didn’t appear to be highly motivated when it came to English classes, Josh usually appeared bored in class and was very good at doing the minimum amount of work necessary to pass with a D. After that first day when I held onto his little project for the duration of the hour, it became a regular thing with us, he would automatically bring me the little lump of metal rings, which grew from a small golf ball sized piece to something as big as a handkerchief. He was talented in wirework and was enjoying the art class that allowed him access to copper sheeting and wire. I told him one day that I dabbled in jewelry too – I had made some things with wire but nothing like what he was doing. This opened the floodgates. He began to bring me other projects to admire – a ring, a bracelet of braided wire. I would find them on my podium at the beginning of class and he would dawdle on his way out of the room after class so I could return the item and ask about how he created it.

My interest in his interest slowly led to a different student in my classroom. It wasn’t an overnight turnaround, and Josh didn’t go from a D student to an A student, but he began to put more effort into his writing and began to ask more questions. Later in the semester, as the class took part in a writer’s workshop for a short story analysis paper, Josh would bring me questions about his essay draft together with an intricately braided cuff bracelet he was also working on. I found the wirework to be a helpful metaphor in talking about his writing. He had good ideas, but the organization of his writing was always less than coherent and he hated to revise his writing. I asked him one day what happened if he began a bracelet like the one he was working on with a plan in mind, but that he got a better idea as he was working on it. “That happens all the time,” Josh replied knowingly. “I just remove the parts I already put in and rework them so they look better than what I first had in mind.” I told him writing is kind of like that. Especially revising. Sometimes what you write feels right when you first put it on paper, but when you look at it again later, you see there are spots that aren’t quite right, or could be tightened up. The semester continued that way, I would make references to his hobby as they became relevant to what we were doing in the classroom.
When the semester ended, I asked Josh what happened to the chain maille he was working on at the beginning of the year. “Did you ever finish it?” I asked him.

“Well, Mrs. Floading, it’s really never finished. Every time I take it out I work on it a little bit more, but I always see something I could fix and I never really get any further. I’m okay with that.”

I couldn’t resist.

“Josh, you know you’ve just made the most apt comparison to writing I’ve ever heard.”

Josh just smiled.

Sometimes as a teacher you don’t know which interactions with students will result in something special.