He smiles the smile of confidence and sunshine. She speaks the muted dialect of reluctance. Together they are worlds and circles colliding. His campus activities take him from field to field while her high school days play out quietly. This classroom is probably the one thing that they share. But they share it beautifully.

They are not the only ones paired off in the odd orbiting of required confession. It’s the end of the year and row after row in room 427, earnest, sincere faces are turned and tuned to a classmate. Some of them have been friends since elementary school but most of them have been forced to bond with a less-than-friend for the semester, and so the disparate partners pepper the classroom. There is the socially awkward genius with the well-liked artisan; the driven athlete with the distracted fashionista; the ROTC disciple with the Nuevo-goth; the Darwinian atheist with the Evangelical optimist; the ambitious first-generation American with the conservative Republican. On the surface and judging books by covers or appearances, it seems as though a hyper-evolved space monkey grabbed a specimen from every corner of the high school campus, threw them all into a giant Yahtzee cup, and shook them until everyone was confused and dizzy.

I know better.

These students are not brought together by space monkeys (even though that would be awesome). They are not the cast of a “diversity *uber alles*” after school special from the 80’s or the scrappy survivors in a sci-fi apocalypse movie. What brings them together today is the same thing that has brought them together every day for the past eight months: language.

They have spent months measuring themselves against linguist giants so that somewhere between Ellison’s densely packed, but simple, “invisible man” sentence and Reverend King’s sweeping and profound periodic sentence from Birmingham Jail, they realized the transformative power of words well chosen. In the time that they wrestled the central argument from Thoreau and challenged the logic of their own assumptions, they alternated between terror and triumph.

And after all those months of diction and devices, they find themselves at the end of the year struggling to find their own words. As they spill out their personal statement stories, they form words of sorrow, regret, confusion, frustration. The words don’t form as easily as the feelings. So they must take care of each other. And they do. These strange, unlikely pairings hear each other with furrowed brows and tender encouragement. They respect each other’s stories. Sometimes they cry together.

These sweet students have shared something more than just stories today. They made room 427 a place of learning and honor, a place of respect and integrity, a place of laughter and epiphany.

I know because I am their teacher. And when I am asked why I love teaching, I now have fifty-three more reasons to put on the list.