

# BLACK BETTY

REFLECTIONS *of a*  
BABY BOOMER

*A Collection of Stories  
About Life in the Classroom*

IAN MALCOMSON

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by IAN MALCOMSON

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*Education, I have contended, is the transaction between the generations in which newcomers to the scene are initiated into the world, which they are to inhabit. This is a world of understandings, imaginings, meanings, moral and religious beliefs, relationships, practices—states of mind in which the human condition is to be discerned as recognitions of and responses to the ordeal of consciousness. These states of mind can be entered into only by being themselves understood, and they can be understood only by learning to do so.*

—Michael Oakeshott, *Education: The Engagement and the Frustration*

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The names of the people, with the exception of the author's immediate family, in these stories have been changed to respect their privacy. This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not by way of trade, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise disposed of without the publisher's consent, in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published.

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## Introduction

*We are acquisitive to the point of being greedy. Pieties are fleeting,  
loyalties evanescent and the pace of change warns against deep attachments.*

*We are willing to try anything once regardless of the consequences.*

*The eye is ever on the new model.*

- Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*

*It is so difficult to find the beginning.*

*Or better yet, it is difficult to begin at the beginning.*

*And not to try to go further back.*

- Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

All the stories that appear in this collection I have taken from my personal experiences in the classroom as either a student or a teacher. Many of them served originally as anecdotes for my children over the years. While these tales encapsulate the ordinariness of public school, they also seek to explore the life-long learning available to everyone who goes through the system.

After having compiled these accounts of my life, I ask myself why anyone would want to read them, especially if they had an overall bad experience in school. Am I telling my readers something they do not know already: lots of seat learning, questionable teaching methods, interesting and droll characters, and awkward moments? I hope not! Was my reason for writing to point out the inherent weaknesses in public education and ways in which to correct them before it is too late? No, that would be a waste of time. I would be just another one of many self-declared experts spouting off on why educational standards are supposedly slipping. Anyway, people more eloquently versed on the subject have already said what is worth saying, and still no one listens.

Rather, this collection is about a middle-aged man trying to make sense of his life in the context of his formal education. The many lessons I have learned in the past, I continue to relearn in some modified form. I am extremely grateful to the public school system for allowing me the chance to be involved in life-long learning. Mine is a learning curve that defies any pre-conceived notions of order and stability. To help my reader unlock the key lessons in each story, I have placed

short relevant quotations both at the beginning and at the end. A big ‘thank you’ goes to my son, Eliot, who has provided pictorial metaphors to help capture the main ideas and to my wife for her tireless and brilliant editing of various drafts.

## From the Beginning

*The unexamined life is not worth living, as Socrates concluded,  
but the examined existence becomes real only when shared with others,  
in my case through the highly subjective art of writing.*

- Peter C. Newman, *Here Be Dragons*

From where I sit at my desk, I reach over to pull back the drapes and look outside. In a dimly lit room, I see the rain droplets lashing against and running down the outside of the study window. Along with this cascading effect is an unmistakable howl of wind through the trees on this side of the house. It is a typically stormy autumn night outside while cozy and quiet inside. Belle, my wife, has gone to bed long ago, but I am still sitting, half-doing in front of the computer, trying to squeeze in a few minutes of work before going myself. Such are the habits of the nocturnal workaholic I've become. There is never enough time to complete the work at hand.

For the past half-hour or so, as a teacher, I've been trying to finish an essay for a college course, mark some remaining test papers for one of my classes, and read an interesting article from the latest *Macleans* on the art of being happy. But, alas, nothing seems to be getting done very fast. My train of thought is continually interrupted by something haunting me about my past.

For the last while, my mind has played with the notion of writing some stories about my over fifty years in the classroom. Until now, I have only told a few of the more memorable ones to family and friends about times in my life when a playful sense of childhood exuberance and a solemn weight of adult responsibility forever clashed. Many years later, as I finish my career as a teacher, I want to go beyond the oral rendition and write about them. While it is fine to reminisce about my past, what I am really looking for is a much bigger and more permanent record. I want to write in such a way that my generation and my children's have no problem identifying with my experiences. Just that simple, but where do I start?

For what seems like an eternity, I randomly flip through a number of scenes in my memory bank. I am looking for an ideal starting-point to the story of my life. My thoughts seemed to be in a real swirl. A strange scene shows up now and then: a bedroom, two boys stretched across a bed, one talking, the other listening intently. Since it seems unrelated to a classroom, it can't be what I am looking for. It is probably too far back to even count for anything.

In the search for the elusive images, I see nothing that remotely reminds me of that all-important first day at school. Instead of sitting spellbound in a classroom,

I vaguely see myself sitting on the bottom of a bed eagerly listening to someone who looks like my brother with an open book in his hand. While what he says is unclear, his emphatic gestures catch my attention. Hardly the defining moment I am looking for to launch the story of my life! Then, suddenly, the picture becomes sharper.

Now, I remember where it was! As the picture becomes clearer, I see the outline of an early childhood scene of years ago. Of course it is my older brother, Robert, stretched out on a bed reading the latest *Jungle Doctor* book, while I try to get his attention with some persistent nudging. This must have been one of many times I pestered Robert to tell me about his latest school adventures. He was in Grade Four and I was months away from enrolling in Grade One. In the mood, he could tell tales so vivid that I longed to be there in person. If he were not describing a funny incident in the classroom, it was the latest fight in the schoolyard, or a close brush with authority. The real action in many of these episodes was coping with and outsmarting mean teachers and a nasty principal. This evil dynamic duo always seemed to work in tandem when it involved hauling kids to the office on the merest suspicion of being bad.

Here was a born storyteller who fed my insatiable appetite for school, months before I ever set foot inside a classroom. He gave me hope that my break for freedom and a whole new world that went with it was close at hand. Not surprisingly, this initial lure—the sense that I was on to something big—is still with me these many years later. School is one of the few places in life where creative and daring personalities meet to solve complex problems, using an array of tools and resources.

What were some of those big things Robert kept hinting at that would become part of me later that year? For starters, mine would be the daily routine of leaving home early in the morning and coming back in mid-afternoon. During a school day, there would be occasions to read interesting books, learn how to print and write, do exercises from a workbook, play with others in the schoolyard and form some friendships into the bargain. Lumped in with this fare was the limited opportunity to get involved in independent adventures outside an adult's immediate control. If I only succeeded in a fraction of these activities, I might become the person my parents and the public school system wanted: easy to control, polite and a pleasure to have around.

At this time, Dad was a high school teacher and my older brother attended the fourth grade at a nearby school, and both liked to talk about their experiences. Yet, for all that, they sounded as if they came from another world. Everything they did seemed just beyond my wildest imagination. Theirs was a busy routine: getting up early, eating breakfast, going off to school before eight, attending classes, giv-

ing and writing tests, having lunch with thirty other students, meeting interesting people, coming home again in the late afternoon, reading big books, and marking or doing homework.

Hanging around and asking Dad and Robert lots of questions about these situations only hastened my need to know more. The days of innocent lazing around the house were as good as over. Something special was awakening in me—the simple need to personally experience what it was like to be a student. Though I did not know how it would eventually pan out, I was gearing up for school and fifty years of classroom learning and teaching.

In my mind, I can still see my mother proudly telling her friends that I, her serious-faced, little boy, was about to enroll in Grade One. To hear her tell it, one might think that she was about to send a son off to war. Frankly, her aspirations went much further than just attending public school. Occasionally, she would tell her friends that she saw me as a future lawyer, preacher, teacher, or politician. Take your pick. To her, I was either a born orator overheard giving speeches to imaginary audiences or an inveterate reader surrounded by mounds of books pulled from the shelves of the family library. All her hopes for her second child were pinned on what she thought she heard or saw him do; such is the power of adult fantasies.

Now when I think of it, what did she really know about where I would eventually go in life, except off to school for the first time that early September morning in nineteen fifty-eight. While I sort of knew I was heading for something bigger, there was no guarantee that it would also be better. When I became a teacher years later, I developed an interest in how trends actually start. Little events merge into bigger ones, which in turn form the bigger but not always better ones. Everything seemed to be in place to push me into that larger, more fascinating arena of adventure, discovery, temptation and mystery. Little did I know the price I would have to pay for taking those first steps so eagerly yet so casually.



PART I

*My Elementary School Days*



## CHAPTER 1

# The Price of Freedom



*There are cycles of life, of suffering, of survival. The aboriginal view of elements or seasons or song-lines or winds may lack the energy of the linear, but it has shapes which can be tumbled and bruised by any wave and still have meaning.*

*- John Ralston Saul, On Equilibrium*

Now that the prospect of going to school had begun to sink in, I was, forever, asking Robert to supply me with more details. He had already been in school four years, so could be considered an expert of sorts on the classroom. Face it, I was just a typical little brat, with an enormous appetite for another story. That late summer of nineteen fifty-eight went quickly as Mum rounded up new clothes, school supplies and a lunch pail for my big moment. As a very imaginative six-year-old ready to leave for some unclear destination, I could hardly contain my excitement.

Every moment I had with Robert that last week—usually at bedtime—I would start out with teaser type questions. Where did one eat lunch? What was it like inside the boys' washroom? Did Mr. Chase strap anyone on the first day? Did he ever see someone get the strap? Would Kenny—the infamous school clown—be wearing his legendary pink pants? Did Anton really eat fish instead of meat on Friday and go to Mass during the week? And did he really see Miss Bailey and Mrs. Helen smoking in the staffroom at lunchtime? There was no end to what I wanted to know, only because I needed to feel comfortable about the territory. Robert patiently answered all my queries with ample detail, even if they had been asked numerous times before. To this day, I have high regard for my brother's ability to

spin a good yarn, even if I had no way of confirming it. His secret likely lay in spicing up his accounts with a few extra juicy tidbits.

What new gleanings did I pick up from those nightly sessions that final week before school opened? Oh, yes, there was Kenny, whose mother accidentally washed his white pants with some bright-colored clothes. They turned a brilliant pink, and since they were his only pair, he was forced to wear them to school. The rest is history. Then, there was the notorious thief, Eugene, who stole everything in sight from liquor in his Dad's booze cabinet, to cigarettes at the local general store, to money from his mum's handbag. It was common for the cops to turn up at his house—across the way from ours—a couple of times a week to look for stolen goods. Robert had learned from an incredibly reliable but confidential source that Eugene's older brother was doing a haul in the local pen for stealing cars.

Every bit I had on Eugene and his gang only whetted my appetite for more. Sensing this, Robert never came close to exhausting his repertoire of spicy revelations because he had the knack to cook up more to satisfy his little brother. His story telling was so dramatic that I had no trouble wanting to be part of the plots. This might explain my need to hang around Robert every spare moment just in case he had something new to feed my craving.

It was often, just after bedtime, when the lights were out, that my brother got going. The darkened room quickly filled with the tales of intrigue, horror, and mischief, as if that was all that happened at T. S. BELL. Lying in bed at night eagerly listening to these spine-tingling escapades made me want to be part of them at any cost. His was a world where kids outwitted adults, broke rules, played pranks, shared secrets, created rumors, and won a scrap or two.

There was not a day that went by when Robert and his pals were not involved in some new hair-raising incident, like the time Miss Fulton asked the class what they would like for their Halloween party. Her request started out as a bold attempt to get students involved, but went seriously wrong along the way.

Ricky quickly put up his hand and shouted out, with a discernable grin, "Beer and chips." Its impact was so stunning that at first the class went deathly silent. Moments later, Robert could be heard from the back of the room cracking up. End of experiment in democracy! At that point, a very flustered Miss Fulton sternly told Ricky and Robert to leave the room immediately: one for making an impertinent remark, the other for laughing at it. Normally, that would be the end of the story except for one important detail! As part of a sinister plot, the teacher was really sending them to their doom: the principal's office via the hallway. Though he had no actual proof, Robert was convinced that the strap-crazy Chase ordered his

teachers to regularly boot troublemakers out of class for the most trivial offences, so that he could then nab them on his many patrols of the hallways.

As the story goes, Chase, who taught at the other end of a long hallway, always left his room door ajar. This way he could hear the doors opening and closing in other rooms during the day. That was his signal to poke his head out and check for anybody who had just been kicked out of class. He would then seize the offenders, like Ricky and Robert, by the scruff of the neck, march them to the office and administer some serious whacks to their backsides. Since this was the era of tight pants, the results could be most uncomfortable. While he caught his prey this time, there was another famous incident when he did not. A couple of students were out in the hall rehearsing their lines for a play when Chase swooped down on them like a hawk zeroing in on a nest of helpless field mice. Only some quick talking on the part of the teacher prevented that scene from becoming another trip to the office.

Robert once claimed that Chase reserved his greatest theatrical impact for right after lunch when classes were back in and just settling down to an afternoon's work. Suddenly, the door to his office would crash closed with a resounding bang throughout the entire school. This was an ominous signal to all that a beating was about to commence. Because a student was automatically guilty by reason of being sent to his office in the first place, Chase rarely took time to check out the facts. After all, nothing should prevent him from administering a good strapping.

Students throughout the school froze in their seats as they telepathically felt the reverberations of the belt as it made contact with the victim's hands or seat. Such was the power of the man to strike! On one occasion, Chase caught Robert, Eugene and two other unnamed accomplices running in the hallway during lunchtime. He promptly hauled them off to the office for a few well-aimed swats across their hands and, as a sort of humiliating touch, forced them to then return to their class and explain—between tears—why they had just been strapped. This man obviously knew how to achieve the ultimate effects!

Chase's disciplinary style was both methodical and athletic. First, as mentioned earlier, came the banging of his office door as it closed to announce to one and all that punishment was about to start. Then, as reported by his many victims, he would walk over to his desk in a business-as-usual fashion, reach into a side drawer, pull out a long shiny, black belt and order the offenders to either grasp their ankles, or hold out both hands simultaneously. He quickly took careful aim at his target before winding up like a coiled snake ready to strike. Only then, like a finely tuned machine, did he release the strap in a perfect arc at the ultimate moment from around the back of his head. There were no wild swings with Chase. The mechanics of his swing were so effective that some have often wondered if he didn't have golf somewhere in his background. The impact was even more im-

pressive because of Chase's ability to hit the same sweet spot each time. No misses with this guy! Robert claimed his backside hurt for days after, although he made it clear that he never cried once during the ordeal.

To enrich his narratives, Robert would throw in some extras. There was Chase carefully selecting the right weapon for the job from a couple of belts soaking in a pail of water by his desk or even blindfolding his victims before the ordeal. This first embellishment might have stemmed from the fact that on three different occasions Robert recalled Chase using a different shaped strap on him. Whatever the case, this man was both creative and tireless in his delivery as he calmly vented his fury on his defenseless victims. His intense but effortless torque suggested that he was either in shape to start with and used this kind of workout to stay fit, or he quickly got in shape doing it at least twenty times a week.

Catching his prey in places other than the hallway was one of Chase's many special talents. He liked to lurk in the shadows of door recesses and darkened corners while waiting to pounce on his unsuspecting prey. A visit to the bathroom down in the basement during class time was a risky undertaking. Chase's edge in this cat-and-mouse game was that students never knew when or where he would accost them. If Chase did not outrightly look angry or mean, one could not assume everything was all right. The obvious cues were his steely eyes and blank expression, which should have been a warning to all to keep a safe distance. Get within eye contact of him and he might take you in for looking at him the wrong way. Falling into Chase's clutches usually happened when one stepped over the invisible line between good and bad. That could be as minor as forgetting to walk facing the traffic, or laughing at someone else's silly joke in class, talking while eating, running in the hallway, or playing in the wrong area of the playground. Robert figured there was a ton of offences connected with the belt. To avoid any one of them, a student would have to be the teacher's pet, a girl, lucky or downright invisible. For a certain sub-group in the class, belonging to any one of these categories was either not likely or popular, so being caught was inevitable.

If there ever was a person born to the practice of hitting children, it was Chase. It was obvious from the delight he took in each situation that the man had a bad case of strapitis—the continual need to strap students as a means of releasing some pent-up anger. He was once supposed to have asked a student—whom he was about to punish—a strange question as to whether he was a singer or a dancer. When the boy did not respond quickly, Chase grabbed him and proceeded to thrash him until he howled and hopped around the room in a frenzied dance. Such were the legends of a monster about to become reality for me.

My mother walked me over to school that bright, frosty fall morning as my brother had 'conveniently' left with his pals minutes before. It was clear that as we weren't talking to each other, she and I were on very separate missions: she

to enroll her child in the public school system, and I to check out this place my brother called school. In my cocky, naive way, I was bravely telling myself, "Bring it on. This doesn't look as bad as I first thought."

While a fear of going into unknown territory still worried me, it was slowly being replaced by a new expectation that this was my big day. By the end of the day, I would finally have seen Chase face-to-face and walked the hallways of T. S. BELL on my own. No more living off my brother's experiences! Weeks before, any thought of that first meeting with Chase might have triggered nightmares, such as the kind that send a quaking youngster hiding under the bed to avert a prowler.

For a short time that morning, Mom's quiet, reassuring presence eased any potential for these concerns. As long as she was beside me, in my hour of need, as I went to meet Chase, nothing could go wrong. Her strong and steady confidence as reflected in her stride that morning should have told me that I now depended on her more than ever to succeed in my first big crisis. Along the way, she reminded me to be on my best behaviour and to walk home with Robert after school, but nothing more.

We ambled along the rail tracks for about ten minutes before turning up a gravel road sided by many newly built houses and empty lots. Suddenly, on our immediate left, in the middle of large playing field, stood a long, two-storey, green rectangular building with rows of windows along its front and a double door in the middle.

"We've finally made it," my mother said as if she desperately needed to confirm the obvious. As we turned into the yard and walked up the concrete steps to the main entrance, a sign reading T. S. BELL, in large block letters, confirmed that this was indeed the place.

Once inside, we proceeded up what looked like an endless flight of stairs to the second floor, down a very long hall, and past numerous doors eventually coming to one marked in big block letters 'PRINCIPAL'. As Mum and I stood waiting our turn, I was probably too absorbed with the noise of the people around me and the strange smell of floor wax and cigarette smoke to fully appreciate the impact of that word. Until now, I believed I had some control over whatever might happen in my little world, so why worry? But I still had that funny feeling that something was about to change the moment I stepped over that threshold. Years later, I still have that twinge of uncertainty when facing big events. Come to think of it, it probably was Mom's parental sense of duty that made the difference that morning as she reassuringly gripped my hand outside that office, the first big gateway to my future.

For that time outside the office, I stood decked out in new cords, plaid shirt, a windbreaker and brand-new Hong Kong runners, while staring all around me at anything fixed or moving. There were pictures on the wall, people milling about,

strange faces, and drifts of conversation coming from the room in front of us. Robert had not mentioned any of these things but it was enough to occupy a curious mind like mine!

When it came our turn, we walked into a long narrow room to meet a small and serious-looking man sitting behind a large mahogany desk. Finally, I was facing the ‘evil’ Mr. Chase—the subject of many enchanting stories—and all I could do was let my eyes wander around the office. It would seem that I was interested in anything but the man. Secretly, I was probably looking for that legendary bucket of water at the side of his desk but to my disappointment, saw only an empty wastepaper basket.

At this time, all he wanted Mom to do was fill out a form asking for my name, address, phone number, and age. After a couple of minutes of paper shuffling and general inquiries, he got up—an obvious cue that this brief meeting had come to an end—and announced that my new teacher would be Miss Elizabeth Black. She had the Grade One class two doors down the hall on the right. We were to go there immediately, as the bell was about to ring, and give her the yellow copy of the registration form. I do not even remember him acknowledging me with so much as even a hello.

Since I was probably just one of many shy kids he had already seen in his office that morning, why single me out for any special attention. I was just another name with a face that was now enrolled in his school. Since he hardly looked like someone who was capable of terrorizing kids, as my brother previously claimed, I didn’t see him as much of a threat. All I can remember about Chase at that time were his shiny shoes, his red bow tie, a signet ring, wavy hair, and a very business-like face. All marks one might associate with a banker, or a magician or maybe even a hangman, but hardly a principal.

While making our way to my classroom, the bell rang to announce the beginning of school, so Mom tugged at me to move faster. At the second door, she stuck her head in and made a quick inquiry of what looked like another parent as to whether or not this was the room for Grade One students. Before she could get an answer, a rosy-cheeked, bespectacled older lady seemed to appear out of nowhere to indicate that this was indeed the room. Wearing horn-rimmed glasses, sporting a short sleeved blouse that showed off bulging forearms, and having her hair done up in a church roll gave her the unmistakable identity of a no-nonsense schoolmarm. As she identified herself as Miss Black, she quickly added in a deep, hollow voice that she would be pleased to show me to my seat.

This official-sounding offer was the signal for my mother to exit and for Miss Black to take over. I was now under her control as she led me to a spot in the cloakroom. There, over the next year, I would hang my outdoor clothes on the same peg and place my lunch box on the same ledge every morning before sitting

down in the largest desk at the back of the room. On this first morning, nothing seemed to faze me. It was an uninterrupted and absorbing two hours of drawing and coloring a picture of where I lived and what my family looked like, whatever that was supposed to mean to a six-year-old who was hearing these directions for the first time. Every so often, I would cast an inquisitive glance at my surroundings: the manila strips of neatly printed letters, pictures and numbers across the top of the blackboard catching my eye. I reached into the cage of my desk to feel its darkened emptiness waiting to be filled with pencils, erasers, paste, scribblers and workbooks. Everything seemed such a mystery, especially the faces of thirty other pupils as I lifted my head from my task to stare around.

On our way home that lunchtime—because of the traditional early dismissal on the first day—my brother was carrying on with his friends about their new teacher and others. Chat invariably came around to Kenny ‘Pink Pants’ getting into trouble with the teacher right off the bat. His punishment that day was to occupy the seat right in front of the teacher’s desk, which was her way of temporarily heading off any further trouble. That was probably his only big break for the year. Before too long, Kenny was likely heading for his first visit with Chase like a rat to cheese. There would be a lot of strapping in store for that boy over the next year.

There was also unsavory mention of Linda, the ‘ugly one’, which met with some unfavourable comments from Robert because he had to sit right behind her in class. She supposedly farted a lot, had a crummy face, and smelled of tobacco, wood smoke and rotten potatoes into the bargain; reports I luckily was never able to confirm. As I trudged home that day, straggling a few feet behind the gang, I began to see myself as someone who did not really fit in with their conversations; these were not my experiences and, consequently, I might as well not have existed. I was Robert’s ‘dumb’ little brother, potentially hindering his access to his own fun as the occasion arose. My brother seemed to be telling me that now that I was in school, I would have to find my own friends to hang out with. In other words, he was actually saying in an oblique but necessary way, “Get lost, kid. Find your own fun and don’t bother me again.” His reports about the wonders of life in the classroom were over and I would have to seek my own.

How true my brother’s advice was! About a month later, I was busily eating my lunch along with the rest of the class when Chase stuck his head in at the door. Miss Black had momentarily left the class unsupervised. Being the tallest kid in the class and sitting right at the back of the room, Chase had little problem seeing me. To his over sensitive mind, the big, ugly kid chewing his food with his mouth open and talking at the same time spelled trouble. He promptly stepped into the room and motioned me with his index finger to an empty desk at the front of the room. Before I even reached him, he grabbed me by the scruff of the neck, bent

me over his raised knee and began administering a couple of hard swats to my backside.

Since I cannot consciously remember doing anything bad on this occasion, it must have been his way of sending the whole class the message, 'DON'T MESS WITH THE PRINCIPAL'. I did not report the incident to my parents because I could never have convinced them that I was not in the wrong, and that the principal was the real culprit. If I had told them, they would likely have laughed and then reminded me to be on my guard next time. They may even have suggested that I had it coming in the first place, or else why would he have done it. Back then, adults generally worked that way, taking each other's side when it came to dealing with problem kids.

However, I did get some satisfaction from the whole incident. The sudden shock of my being straddled over his knee in front of the whole class caused me to wet my pants. How was Chase to know that I had recently developed a bladder control problem since coming to his school? Maybe the feeling of something damp and warm hitting his raised knee was enough for him to realize this, release me, and then hurry out of the classroom with a very wet leg.

There would be other dramatic occasions like this such as when Chase saw me wearing my trademark scout hat as I entered the school after lunch hour. Instead of simply asking me to take it off, he strode up to me without a word, ripped it from my head and tossed it down the stairs like a Frisbee to the next landing. To this day, I can still hear him chuckling as I frantically scurried down two flights of stairs to retrieve my very precious keepsake. Every time I saw him after that incident, whether inside or outside the school building, I made sure I had my hat off and firmly clutched in my hands.

A measure of sweet revenge for this humiliation came later that year in the person of a secret hero. Ironically, it was not my older brother but rather an oversized Grade Eighter named Roy who was eventually expelled because he threatened to beat up Chase. The obvious problem for Chase was that Roy was over-aged, big and tough and not about to back down. As the story goes, Chase needed three other teachers and eventually the police to help him escort Roy off the school property. Miss Black warned us all in class one day to avoid that boy at all cost, even if it meant walking home with a bigger sibling.

For a few days afterwards, a couple of minutes before dismissal time, Roy appeared, wearing a leather jacket, shades, hair greased back with brylcream, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and trying to look suave like a James Dean out of the movies. Since he was not allowed on the school grounds, he stood on the other side of the roadway, behind some bushes where he could conveniently heckle Chase while waiting for his buddies to join him from school. Robert had me believing that Roy and his punk friends were secretly getting ready for a big fight

with Chase if he ever dared show his face anywhere off the school grounds. If the truth were known, Roy and his gang were probably playing a safe game of hide-and-go-seek with Old Chase just to bug him. At least, Roy's shadowy existence during those weeks caught my attention every day I left for home.

What was really behind this so-called showdown of wills other than the fact I knew which side I supported? To this day, I still occasionally believe in my heart that if such a fight had happened, Chase would have come out the worse for wear, given his five foot five frame and slight, athletic build. Such is the power of a person's imagination when he wants to square his own version of events with reality. For me, Chase was clearly the big bad principal, packed inside a pint-sized body, who exercised ruthless power over not only me but also Roy. As a result, Roy's fight to slay the 'evil giant' became mine. Such were the fantasies of a young boy looking to others to avenge him.

As the year wore on, I heard fewer of Robert's stories. The ones I did hear were thin on detail and, besides, were short on ideas of how to deal with Chase. That was the big problem at hand. Those moments of personal discovery started me on a lifelong journey that involved all kinds of risks, insights and rewards. After that, I was on my own. I would follow my curiosity wherever it would take me in uncovering the mysteries of life surrounding teachers, parents, friends, and strangers.

There would be the occasional moment of high drama involving the two of us. Such as the time when we headed home from school on one of our many trails used mainly to escape detection from our enemies. During the romp through the bush, we became lost, ending up on some vacant building site that had a lot of strange-looking equipment lying around. After checking that scene out for about an hour, we decided it was time to reconnect with the trail and get home.

Alas, darkness began to fall, and the only answer to our predicament was to tramp hurriedly through what seemed like miles of thick, impenetrable underbrush in hopes of finding some familiar landmark like a road or creek. During that desperate trek home, I lost my broad-brimmed hat, my brother broke his thermos, and it was nightfall before we finally struggled home to face two very worried parents. In the interrogation that followed, Robert and I likely accused each other of being responsible for the misadventure in the first place. In the end, we both suffered the same consequences: no supper, a good beating and an early exit to bed. Justice was triply tough back then.

However, such times served only as a reminder as to how far apart we brothers were growing in our efforts to establish our separate independence. As a strange New World awaited, the likes of Chase, Miss Black, my parents, and other authority figures could not always be depended on to keep me on 'the straight and narrow'. Especially when it came to matters of eating properly, tying one's shoes, blowing one's nose, going to the bathroom, avoiding fights, choosing one's friends,

and telling the truth. More often than not, I was on my own to muck through life and experience its fortunes and misfortunes, or so I thought?

It often takes a long time to confirm or reject one's worst suspicions. I always thought of Chase as a mean-spirited man who delighted in throwing his weight around to intimidate others. About thirty-five years later, my mother phoned one night to say that she had just attended a church supper where Chase's sister was sitting at an adjoining table. During the course of the evening, Mum heard this woman openly admit that her brother had to be tough on kids—big and small—because that was the only way he knew how to keep order.

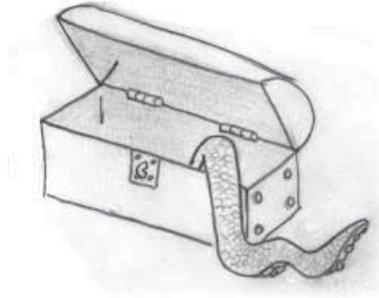
I believe my response went something like this, "What is a one-dimensional man like Chase doing in such a complex world? It is amazing he lasted so long as a principal without triggering a revolt." But then, maybe, I was the exception to the rule that most children don't mind being kept in line for their own good. It is only the ones that resent it who are the problem. I just heard the other day, through the grapevine, that Chase has contracted advanced prostate cancer and is undergoing some heavy treatment. Though I never had much time for the man's nasty manner, who am I to judge or hold a grudge?

After all, he is only one of many adults, who try, after the fact, to justify his questionable treatment of children. At this stage of my life, I am not going to try to alter his position on what is best for children. Like me, he probably second-guesses his past and needs a little reassurance from time to time to prove to himself and others that he always operated with the best intentions. Having said this, I am still thankful that I only had to put up with his wretched regime of fear for that one year before moving on to the promise of a better school in another district.

*Afterthought:* Often the price of freedom is that people leave you to fumble around on your own.

## CHAPTER 2

# What's Best for Children?



*“School lunch is a noon meal served to children in school...  
The value of a hot lunch at school greatly impressed both  
parents and the teachers.”*

*- Janice M. Smith, World Book Encyclopedia, 1980*

It was just about this time that I discovered the fascinating and mysterious world of school lunches. Every kid back in my young days carried them in a metal or plastic lunch kit to school. Emblazoned on the outside was the usual Disney cartoon character or Wild West hero like the Lone Ranger and Tonto. Mine, however, was a Scottish tartan colored pattern with no picture of human drama at all. It seemed that my parents—who did not believe in watching TV—saw little or no value in filling their children’s minds with the images of fake heroes. Inside the box was the standard half-sized plastic thermos which, if not closed tightly, could leak all over the sandwiches and even ruin a favorite treat like a piece of cake or a cookie.

Though my mother always made a supreme effort to make sure that my brother and I went to school with adequate lunches, her efforts often missed the mark in guaranteeing something edible. How embarrassing it was to open my lunch box in eager anticipation of something tasty only to discover a disaster had struck. It was either a leaky thermos causing soggy food or beets soaking through the bread resulting in a pink sandwich! On other occasions, there would be sandwiches made up of similarly weird combinations such as cold wieners, two-day-old salad and peanut butter stuck between two slices of bread wrapped in wax paper. It seemed some people had never really overcome those harrowing war years of making do with less. Spam (the mystery meat), sardines, margarine and egg salad with onion became the main stand-bys in our home during the late fifties. When there was

something in the fridge that needed getting rid of, trust her to find a place to put it in our lunches: day-old salad, cold wieners or dried-out cheese. The only comforting fact about my school lunches was that I received a weekly allowance to buy a couple of bottles of whole milk—never chocolate—to wash the food down.

I was one of those awkward (Tuesday) children who seemed doomed from the start. Once in that Grade One class, I opened my lunch box to discover that my mother had lovingly given me a small jar of canned plums for my dessert. For me, that was generally a signal to skip those wretched sandwiches and devour the fruit right away. In my haste to pick up the jar and start eating, it slipped from my hands and spilled a considerable amount of the syrup over my desktop. I don't recall Miss Black offering any assistance when I brought the problem to her attention. In fact, I might have even detected a smirk on her face. Hers was the opinion that silly boys like me, who couldn't eat their food properly, deserved to live with the consequences of their own misfortunes.

For a whole afternoon, I put up with a sticky sheen of dried plum juice on my desktop. At times, I tried to lick it off only to have the teacher warn me to stop such disgusting behavior. It is not hard to understand that lunchtime, in those early days, was not one of my favorite times in the day. Though I didn't starve for lack of food, I certainly didn't always enjoy what I ate. All through my school years, I never got wind of any wide-scale rebellion fomenting among students as to what they thought should be an ideal bag lunch. There were always the quiet options such as buying a lunch at the school canteen, going home for lunch, or going out for fast food in the nearby town.

Skip a number of years and move ahead to when I encountered school lunches once again in an entirely different format. This time, I was an elementary teacher, and it was supposed to be the good old hot lunch program at a country school, where well-intentioned parents formed a committee to provide nourishing food for their children at affordable prices. The kids ordered the three-course meal a week in advance and, on a Friday, had it delivered by parents to the classroom. When it was unwrapped, it was usually five carrot sticks, half-a-pint of milk, a mushy hot-dog, and a caramel pudding. Invariably, this culinary delight often ended up in the garbage can or smeared on the washroom walls. Honestly, I never saw a child on those occasions express any enthusiasm at the prospect of opening that box containing the customary three items.

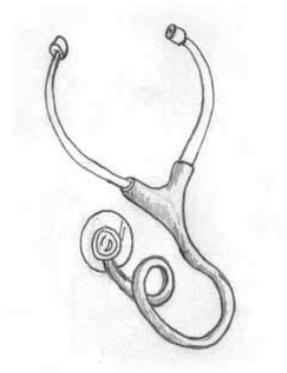
Children should never get too optimistic about what parents and other adults prepare for them in the form of school lunches. By the time the child reaches high school, a bag lunch usually has become the least popular of all options; the most favorite is eating out or buying junk food at the school canteen. It is likely that those countless poor-quality bag and box lunches over the years have led them to this choice of packaged fast food—loaded with chemicals—for their main source of

food. Maybe this sad state of affairs has happened because no one seems to have time to plan for and sit down for a good meal in the middle of the day as other cultures do. In my closing years of teaching, children still come to school with the old reliable bag lunch, of which many of its contents end up in the garbage cans throughout the school, while we adults still try to hammer home the virtue of eating wholesome food. I wonder where we got that idea.

*Afterthought:* Sometimes children should be allowed to decide what is best for themselves, when adults can't lead by example.

### CHAPTER 3

## The Old-Fashioned Physical



*I once knew an eye specialist who did around ninety examinations in the space of two hours. He did so many that he simply lost count.*

- a local observation

In the late nineteen fifties, western countries like Canada were in the process of implementing public health initiatives such as wide scale vaccination against measles and polio. Left over from earlier times was the practice of administering the physical to Grade One boys during the second week of school. We turned up at the medical room one morning where an officious looking nurse met us. She told us to strip down to our underwear and line up at the door. She called us in one

at a time for the check-up. I never recall the girls having to go through a similar examination.

The doctor—an older gray-haired man—told me to stand straight while he put his hands around my neck under my chin to check my glands. He then stuck a little spatula or wooden paddle into my mouth to inspect my throat and probed around for a couple of minutes making some notes before proceeding further. He then asked me to sit on a chair while he tapped my knees in order to test for reflexes. Next, I was to stand up straight so that he could grab my scrotum while asking me to cough. I only learned later that he was determining if I had a hernia.

Weeks later, I came home from school to learn that my dad was taking me up to the hospital for an overnight stay in order to have my tonsils removed. Apparently, an infection, that could spread to other children in the class, had set in which could result in tonsillitis. Once again, I never made the connection between that old-fashioned physical examination and a simple elective form of surgery until much later in life.

The closest thing today that resembles the old-fashioned school physical is the annual vaccination of various school grades for measles, typhoid, and tuberculosis. Nothing too traumatic! Just a consent card and a little prick! Over the years, public health officials have certainly stepped back from intruding in children's lives. Everything now is done with the expressed approval of the parents. There is no more lining up in the nude for a physical!

*Afterthought:* A physical examination of anything usually means that someone is looking for something.

## CHAPTER 4

### Black Betty



*Miss Oosthuizen flies into rages, calls Ray Roe out from his desk, orders him to bend, and flogs him across the buttocks. The blows come fast one upon another, with barely time for the cane to swing back.*

- J.M. Coetzee, *Make Him Sing*

There is a point in time—Grade One for me—when everyone confronts for the first time the raw power of institutional authority. It can be scary and downright intimidating. That day started out like any other. It was a rainy Wednesday in February and all the students were encouraged to stay indoors, in the designated play area, during recess and lunchtime. I came to school with my normal energy and settled in for what looked like another day in the classroom.

Halfway through the morning, a dark cloud descended on my happy existence. The teacher had just instituted one of her many famous decrees to keep order in the class. Any student caught misbehaving three times in the course of the day would automatically receive the strap. On the matter of corporal punishment at this age, this form was completely new to me. I had sometimes seen the teacher haul a miscreant out to the cloakroom for the ‘big one’ and then heard the consequent howls. It never occurred that my number would come up some day. By eleven o’clock, my name was on the big board with a check mark beside it. It might have been for excessive chatting with Richard across the aisle.

By lunchtime, there was still that one check beside my name. Just as I was about to take my seat for the afternoon class, I noticed that there were now two marks beside my name. I rushed over to take a closer look—more out of curiosity than anything else—to discover that in some inconceivable way, I was one mark

away from a strapping. My mind told me to go up and complain to the teacher but, suddenly, the bell rang while I was still sixty feet from my seat, caught out in a virtual no-man's land. In sheer desperation, I tried to race to my seat but Miss Black had already caught me in her sights. I was a 'dead duck'—her catch for the day. I could hear the distant drum roll getting louder. I can still remember her triumphantly going over to the blackboard, at the side of the room, standing by my name with its two checks and putting up the third one. She then proceeded to speak in that wrathful, stentorian voice of hers, "Ian, you know this means the strap after school," and then went back to her desk to write something in a book.

Rest assured, I am not indulging in a glorified exercise of memory recovery when I talk about the psychological horror of that moment. Utter desolation and fear were what I felt then and during the next couple of hours. For a whole afternoon, I languished in my seat unable to do anything but bite my nails. With my head on my desk for the whole time, I pondered that awful approaching moment when I would receive what I could well imagine was a good beating. Alfred Hitchcock talks about the anguishing despair of such a moment in his autobiography. Except in his case, the Jesuit priest proceeded to raise the belt and then stopped short of striking his hand.

I vaguely remember my brother coming to the classroom door at the dismissal bell to pick me up and having to tell him to leave because I was in deep trouble. When the awful moment finally came, I walked to the cloakroom at the back of the classroom. There, in the presence of another teacher, Miss Bell, from across the hall, Miss Black administered, in solemn fashion, six blows on my hands. Each time she went to strike me, she would bark the command, "Hold out your hand!" The strap appeared to be as wide as it was long and it had a big pearl-colored, plastic handle to assist in a better grip and more torque. I remember finding the courage to look Miss Black straight in the face while she wailed on me and not cry at all. Maybe she stopped at six blows when she realized she couldn't make me cry. I don't know but, when the ordeal was over, she told in a rather subdued voice that I could go home now.

The next day, the policy of 'three strikes and you're out' had disappeared and, in its place, some other educationally unsound and silly punishment proclaimed. This time it was sticking one's nose, for ten minutes at a time, inside a small triangle drawn on the board. I eventually got around to sharing the experience with mum one evening, and her only response seemed to be one of adult amusement and curiosity. She asked me why I got it, and I told her that I had yet to figure that

one out myself. There was no talk of intervening on my behalf because the deed had happened months before.

Never believe people when they say that children can easily forgive and forget. What Miss Black did to me that afternoon ranks right up there as one of those severely unjust acts intended to show that life is not always fair.

*Afterthought:* Nothing is as bad as thinking about a situation hours in advance and knowing that it will inevitably happen.

## CHAPTER 5

### A Learning Process



*No man engaged in a particular task has in the forefront of his attention the whole context and implication of that engagement. Activity is broken up into actions, and actions come to have a false appearance of independence.*

- Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*

A child ought to learn a few fundamental things before he or she heads off to school. If parents teach the critical skills, the child will have a normal experience of growing up. This notion—pioneered by the likes of Dr. Spock—has guided many parents through the potential minefield of child-raising controversies for many generations. Some of those essential skills involved things like helping a child control his bladder, wash his hands, keep quiet when adults are around, chew with

his mouth closed, walk facing the traffic, look left-right-left before crossing the road, wipe himself, blow his nose and tie his shoes.

On all these counts, I was a complete failure for the first couple of years of my school life. I was just naturally uncoordinated and willfully rebellious to the point of not being able to do any of these required functions very well. Any attempts, especially under the direction of a teacher, met with increasing futility. One November, in my Grade One class, Miss Black ordered me into the cloakroom just before the morning break to make one last ditch effort to get me to blow my nose properly. I was suffering through a wretched cold, and my nose was crimson red from the rubbing I had been doing with my sleeve. The fresh hanky my mother had sent with me to school that morning was now a wet mass of yellow streaks hanging out of my back pocket. When I wasn't rubbing my nose, I was sniffing aloud and disturbing the relative peace of the class, so Miss Black told me in a very irritated way as we entered the cloakroom, the place normally reserved for serious punishment.

She made me pull out that wet, smelly and dirty hanky and told me to put it up to my nose. On the command of 'one, two, three, blow', I was to exhale through my nose into the hanky. I remember getting all keyed-up for the big blow by gathering my breath, and on the count to "blow" missed my cue by continuing to suck in instead of blowing out. A couple of repeated failures at this and Miss Black was threatening me with a visit to the principal's office for some special assistance. Can you imagine after-school sessions with Mr. Chase—the school principal—to learn how to blow one's nose?

Though she never re-visited this problem, she took me on again later with another futile lesson on how to tie my shoes. She'd show me the procedure, threaten me with dire consequences if I loused up, and each time I would frustrate her by proceeding to tie the world's ugliest knot. Over time, I eventually learned to cope with my poor motor skills. Concerning the problem of a perpetually runny nose, I came to realize that colds usually don't last forever. As for the shoes, there are ways of getting them on or off without tying or untying the laces.

I am more convinced than ever that there are countless adults, from my generation, still haunted by the recurring nightmare of having to both learn and demonstrate correct behaviors as children.

*Afterthought:* Every behavior is a practiced response based on effective modeling, except in my case.

## CHAPTER 6

### Old Dogs, Old Tricks



*Among the penalties, and in the way of applying them in proportion to the offences, one must choose the means that will have the most lasting impression on the minds of the people, and the least cruel on the body of the criminal.*

*- Beccaria, Traite des delites et des peines*

I spent the first few years of school testing the boundaries of personal freedom, creativity and adult authority. The first time I heard the words corporal punishment in school was when Mr. Reynolds, my Grade Four teacher, threatened me with it if he ever caught me looking at the answer key before I finished the assignment. Being the curious type that I am, I immediately looked up ‘corporal punishment’ in the Merriam-Webster dictionary and discovered that it was something I had already experienced back in Grade One but called by another name. What this teacher was trying to create in me was either a sense of fear or wonderment. It might have simply been the very serious tone of his voice, but the effect sent a small spasm of anxiety racing through my body at that moment. I could have assumed by its association with the army that corporal punishment was something distasteful and left it at that, but I would have always been wondering as to its meaning.

I had long ago learned the impact of those words before coming to his class, either through personal experiences at home or through hearing from my friends. I had seen or heard about it before by such terms as strapping, licking, beating, tanning, whipping or a thumping. These are all aggressive forms of language that adults invariably use to instill a sense of fear in children so that they’ll behave.

Corporal punishment was Mr. Reynolds's most serious threat, and he was actually prepared to use it if I did not quickly alter my behavior.

As an instrument of physical punishment, the strap was the ultimate form of terror, constraining those who had never received it. The idea was that a teacher had only to mention it so that whole classes would quake in fear and become immediately submissive. That was the theory! In addition, some of us would push the teacher beyond the limit and force him to lash out in a fury. The fear was gone once the recipient received the beating; his shame and the pain quickly defused because it usually stung only for the first blow and left few visible scars. Word usually got out that it really didn't hurt all that much, given the fact that it lasted less than a minute to administer. Most teachers, like Mr. Reynolds, had their special reason for using corporal punishment and their own unique style of giving it to achieve the maximum effects.

There was the method that involved the long lead-up or wait before it finally happened. The victim would learn his fate and told to expect the strap some time later that afternoon or after school. Consequently, he languished for hours anticipating the event. Then there was the overdramatic scene where the teacher literally hauled the student over a desk and beat him in front of his classmates. In addition, there was the verbal request to the intended victim to step into the hallway or office. This generally meant that the teacher would strap the student within hearing range of the rest of the class.

Some teachers would feel very uncomfortable in giving the strap so that it usually resulted in a couple of taps, while others persisted in raining down six to eight blows before asking the ridiculous question: "Have you had enough?" For the really dramatic and psychological effect, the principal might ask one (boys only) to grasp his ankles before receiving a number of swats on the backside. Any one way, the victim usually absorbed the unleashing of some incredibly pent-up anger transferred through a strip of industrial belting—a major component of most swing seats. The pain was usually, at worst, a stinging blow that evoked the sensation of an 'ouch' but rarely anything more! It was no secret that if a teacher or principal really used the strap to its full potential, they could make any student howl.

The frightening thing about this medieval practice was the array of offences for which one could receive the belt. There was chewing gum, swearing, not doing homework, turning around in class too many times, running in the hallways, talking, day-dreaming, lying, fighting, being in the wrong play area, having a bad day, snow-balling, and general horse-play etc. In other words, any behavior infuriated the teacher! The obvious purpose behind this concept of corporal discipline was to instill a respect for authority in the minds of very impressionable children. The fear of getting the strap would hopefully act as a specific deterrent to aberrant

behavior; a kind of negative reinforcement that never really quite achieved its desired effects.

There are always students like myself who constantly challenge authority by questioning a direct order. One of the silliest moments in this era of corporal punishment came halfway through Grade Four when the principal, one day, proceeded to strap almost the whole class. I know because he appeared at the classroom door and started calling students out one at a time. Some returned bawling or blubbering with puffy red eyes while others proceeded to proudly show off their red hands to their chums before getting back to work. By some stroke of luck, I dodged the bullet on that one.

There was usually unfairness with who received the strap: girls rarely got it. They just never, as the myth goes, acted up. There were a couple of exceptions to this: one of those times was when the ugliest and nastiest girl got it good for persisting in an argument with another student during class time. The conflict escalated from a war of words to someone squirting ink on the other person's shirt to both sides throwing punches. When the row ended, the teacher promptly ordered the two combatants to the office for the strap, with one returning quite the 'worse for wear', the other with a grin.

One of the funniest footnotes to this whole era of corporal punishment came in the late 1970s when the Ontario government briefly re-instated it as a disciplinary option. The picture on the front page of the *Globe & Mail*, shortly after the order was made, showed a bureaucrat processing and mailing out a mountain of belts to various schools throughout the province.

In the modern school setting, the strap, as an archaic form of punishment, has become a distant memory for many of us adults. Some of us can remember receiving it for the oddest of reasons; some even recall having to give it. Today, even touching a student on the shoulder or arm might result in an assault charge. Any talk of the strap today is mere nostalgic yearning for bygone days when the strap was 'king' in running the school.

*Afterthought:* Even an old dog will need new tricks if it hopes to stay competitive.

## CHAPTER 7

### Buddy



*Training is everything. The peach was once a bitter almond;  
cauliflower is nothing but cabbage with a college education.*

- Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

Buddy was a contemporary of my older brother back in the fifties. By today's labeling, many would consider him a mentally challenged learner with serious disabilities such as being unable to process information, store it, and use it. The origin of Buddy's difficulties was a serious car accident when he was ten. It resulted in having a metal plate installed in his head to close a major hole. During the late fifties, as he was attending elementary school, Buddy received little assistance from his teachers in terms of contending with his anger and almost autistic flights of fantasy. There just wasn't anything available for him. Buddy was a loser with very few prospects after he quit school.

The kids around saw him as an oddity or a freak that existed mainly to entertain them, much like a court jester in a medieval court. Every time a huge semi-truck rolled by on the highway outside our school, Buddy would stand up, stare out the window, and then invariably forget himself by scratching his ass for all to see. On the last day of school, when every one was moving on except Buddy, the teacher found him emptying a pile of what seemed like old notebooks into the waste paper basket. Upon further investigation, he learned that Buddy was throwing away scribbled with virtually nothing in them. There was a good chance that Buddy either never truly understood what the intended purpose of a notebook was for in the first place, or never worked in class.

If the latter is true, then it is quite likely that Buddy was daydreaming of the time when he would be able to get out at lunch or after school and drive his home-made dune buggy around his parents' field. Besides being significantly older, Buddy had another advantage over his fellow Grade Six students. He could drive, and

he owned a car, albeit not licensed. Everybody could be allowed a chuckle or two at Buddy's expense but it never resulted in taunting or bullying in the schoolyard. One just didn't mess with Buddy because of that metal plate and the fact that he had so much more than we could ever imagine—wheels and a dirt track. A final but critical point in his favor was that his grandfather was the janitor of the school, which counted for a lot in the community.

There are a lot more identifiable Buddys in the school system today than there were forty years ago. The public school system makes every effort to give them a useful role to play in society, other than being clowns for general entertainment purposes. If Buddy were going through the system today, he would quite likely stay around to graduate on a special program.

*Afterthought:* Sometimes, people appear to be a few sandwiches short of a picnic until you discover it is pate foie and not spam that you're eating.

## CHAPTER 8

# When Not to Tell the Truth



*Leave your stuff in the bathroom. That's right, just leave all those photocopied notes, glossarized textbooks, and purchased study sheets in the bathroom so that you can go in there halfway through the test and look up all the stuff you don't know.*

*- Bob Corbett, *The Cheater's Handbook**

Honesty is one of those virtues we all wish to instill in our children from early childhood. My parents certainly enforced it in my life, however, with one fatal omission. Nobody ever taught me what cheating really meant. I had to go out and learn about it for myself. I lived in a learn-as-you-go environment where there were serious consequences for many infractions like lying. I never knew, until that fourth year in school in Mr. Reynolds's class, that cheating—the act of benefiting from dishonestly obtained information—was even an offence. Call me what you want, an innocent or a nincompoop, I just didn't know. That was all about to change, and I was going to learn a very hard lesson.

One Monday morning, I brought my brand new atlas from home to show to my teacher. Later in the morning, we had a huge district Social Studies test to write on Canadian geography. One of the questions asked was to name all the capitals of Canada and correctly place them on an outline map. Well, I tore into that question with both a passion and a thrill thinking that this was my day. Nothing could stop me! I knew this stuff like the 'back of my hand'.

Just as I finished the test—well before anyone else—I got this bright idea! Maybe I should check out the spelling of some of these words like Charlottetown and Fredericton in my own atlas. I quickly pulled it out, turned to a map of the Mari-

time Provinces to check the spelling and, sure enough, I was right. I quickly put my atlas away, got out of my seat and turned the test paper in for marking. Feeling really proud of myself—conceited is perhaps a more apt word—I casually mentioned to Mr. Reynolds, as I handed in my test paper, that I had even used my atlas to check out the spelling of some of the capital cities. For a couple of seconds, there was an awful pause as he looked at me with steely eyes before replying, “I guess you know what that means?” Then he dropped my test paper into the waste paper basket beside his desk.

My heart sank as I returned to my seat to contemplate the grim reality of getting a zero on a major test. On the one hand, what I had done was undoubtedly inexcusable; on the other hand, I had no clue that such a fate awaited me when I turned my paper in and admitted it. If I had never mentioned it, I would have had a perfect score and a good conscience into the bargain. The main error in Mr. Reynolds’ thinking was that he assumed that cheating and lying were self-explanatory issues to a Grade Four student. However, good teaching as well as good learning should never assume anything like that. Effective communication between teacher and student usually avoids predicaments like this.

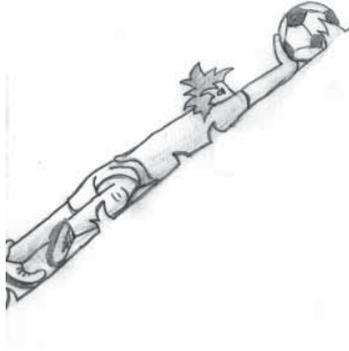
What I acquired from that awkward situation, back in nineteen sixty-one, was a determination never to get caught again where I would be forced to admit to any wrongdoing that I had no control over in the first place. From then on, my being effectively informed and forearmed was going to be the key to self-preservation in the future. I had lost my innocence simply because I did not want to be caught in a jam like that again.

In all the years I have taught, I have rarely had the occasion to destroy a student’s test paper because of cheating. When it has happened, it is because the student in question willfully attempted to circumvent the system by dishonest means. While I have some respect for Mr. Reynolds’s decision—which under the circumstances was the only one—awkward moments like this are avoidable when the teacher tells his students at the outset of a test that correct spelling is not an over-riding issue.

*Afterthought:* Never volunteer the truth if it punishes you for being ignorant of the fault.  
Nobody will ever believe you if you do.

## CHAPTER 9

# A Change in Physical Perspective



*At Sparta there is nothing but the victorious warriors.  
These style themselves the “Equals” – reason, for their desire  
is to be equal with one another and with nobody else.  
Below them are the slaves who minister to them, the Helots,  
who cultivate the fields for them...*

- Bertrand de Jouvenel, *On Power*

Back in elementary school, I never knew literally what it was like to play on a level playing field. I had to figure it out myself. The playground area, where we had our soccer matches and softball games, was on a 10% slope. I don't remember any general rule in which teams switched sides half way through the match in order to even things up. For the regular lunch hour sports, it was no different. The teams met at center field, the ball dropped by a teacher, and the match was underway. There was no referee's whistle to interrupt the flow of play until the next goal. A whole swarm of players ran up and down the field, after a white ball, seemingly oblivious of the 10% slope. Nobody seemed to complain if he was playing on the wrong side of the field or not. A very skilled team could actually win a match or two regardless of playing uphill. I remember being in goal one day at the bottom of the field as one of the opposing team's wingers came tearing in alone on goal. I, of course, went out-a-ways to block off the angle of the ball but he eluded me by chipping it neatly over my head for a goal.

For a while after, I reflected on the ingenuity of that move until I had a chance to see another soccer field or two at neighboring schools and compare their slopes to mine. Suddenly, I reached the timely conclusion that playing soccer on a 10%

slope had a distinct disadvantage, especially if one was on the wrong side of the field and playing against a skilled opponent. First, the goalie had to run up an incline to block a shot and, second, the attacker could wait for the ideal moment when he committed himself to going down. A 10% slope might not look like much when you are running up and down the wings dozens of times during a game. It is another matter when it comes to facing a breakaway attack. At least in my mind, the slope made the difference.

Years later, when I returned to that school for a visit, I couldn't help but notice that the slope was gone, replaced by a nicely groomed, rut free and level playing field. Was my mind playing tricks on me?

The modern child usually plays sports on the most meticulously groomed field surface, completely level, irrigated and equipped with lights and seating. Even with these precautions and assurances of no untoward advantages and increased liability coverage in case of injury, parents can never be certain that their child is playing on a level playing field, at least one that doesn't have a 10% slope working against him. The modern 10% slope includes all sorts of nasty things like having a disability, lacking skills, being the wrong gender, being small, having ineffective coaching, living with overzealous parents, and not being able to afford the training.

*Afterthought:* It is amazing how one's perspective  
on things changes over time.

CHAPTER 10

Beating my Big Brother



*Through thousands of unheard-of-fancies,  
Through times and countries, climb and fall,  
Through helps and hindrances it races  
Relentless, too, towards a goal;*

*- Boris Pasternak, *The Road**

Everybody longs, at sometime or other, to be able to beat an older brother or sister at some sport or activity. I believe ‘sibling rivalry’ is the term to describe this feeling. My chance came early in Grade Four when we met at our friend’s place for our weekly game of one-on-one touch football. The setup was very simple: one-on-one competition with our friend acting as the quarterback! Every week was a blowout in favor of my brother because he was taller, stronger and could run smarter routes, even though I had the special advantage of running after making a catch. On this particular afternoon, the gods seemed to look favorably on me. I turned up with runners while my brother had put on his old rubber boots. Added to which, the field at the back of the barn was frozen solid like a skating pond.

About the middle of the first half, Bob, the quarterback, told me to do what modern day fans would call a streak or wheel route down the near sidelines, and he would try to loft it over my brother’s outstretched arms. I don’t remember running the route but I sure remember the sensation of the ball hitting my hands and chest simultaneously and then charging for all I was worth the forty yards to the

end zone. The shock must have been so great for my brother that he proceeded to drop ball after ball thrown his way for the rest of the game.

At the end, the score was 10-3, with my only victory that season, coming with what amounted to a 'Hail Mary' pass that hit in the ideal spot. Crossing the end zone that day must have represented one of many glorious moments in my life.

I still savor that special private moment when I caught that pass on the fly and raced away from my brother towards his end zone. It was a heady experience in that the adrenalin must have taken over for the last thirty yards of the run. It was also sobering in that it never happened again.

*Afterthought:* Sometimes, good fortune falls into your hands and all you have to do is run with it across the finish line.

## CHAPTER 11

### Learning and Loving to Read



*If only one had time to read a little more:  
we either get shallow and broad or narrow and deep.*

- Michael Coren, *The Man Who Created Narnia*

In this recollection, I intentionally separate the process of learning to read from the joy that accompanies reading after one has mastered the skills. There is an ongoing battle among elementary teachers as to what is the correct way to teach reading: phonics or whole language? In the first method, the student learns the 'proper' way to sound the word so that he can identify it with an appropriate

image or picture. In the second, the reader is encouraged to appreciate the meaning of the word in a greater context of the sentence. Both approaches are valid because they address particular stages at which a typical student is at in his reading experience. I continue to use phonetic rules to sound out words that I can then use to affirm and solidify important ideas in a passage.

If my experiences are true, I spent the first couple of years generally building up a three to four hundred word sight vocabulary based on phonetic principles. Any reading was a chore! However, once absorbed, these key words became the basic building blocks by which to decode other words. Any formal reading I did on my own during that period was very basic in respect to plot, character, vocabulary and main idea based on the *Dick and Jane* basal reader and later *The High Road* series. The real thrill came on nights when my parents would read a story of my own choosing from an adventure book like *Boy's Annual*—long before I began to learn, officially, how to pronounce vowel and consonant blends. During this time, I heard an adult's voice saying the words, which, for the first time, seemed to bring them together into a story.

In Grade One, I had a problem of focusing on the words because I was thinking ahead as to where the story was going. Words were only the mechanical means by which to get at the essence of the narrative. Quite often during oral reading, I would incur the impatience of Miss Black because I was daydreaming about some aspect of the story and had lost my place. Years later, when I had trained myself, with my mind, to see and hear a story's characters interacting, real meaning would then emerge from the pages. A university friend once told me that if we could only write as we speak and think, we would be capable of producing some very natural sounding and simple narratives. I agree!

The same connection applies to reading in terms of how we hear both audibly and mentally. In the last number of years, I have taken to listening to professionally made tapes of major past and current works. As I listen to, absorb and identify with, the various voice types, the constant references to setting, the curious and creative turns of phrases, I enter the story as an invisible but active participant. This ability to insert oneself into a story is essentially the desire to find meaning in words. A teacher's job is to find literature (fiction or non-fiction) that stimulates a young person to see reading as an opportunity to become emotionally and intellectually involved as an adventurer, traveler, neighbor or citizen.

Three series of books did it for me in those early years of reading in terms of their ability to transport my mind to other worlds: *Rupert Bear*, *The Famous Five* and *The Hardy Boys*. Each of these series contained the means by which I could actually read the words and visualize how they formed a plotline. As a result, I invariably experienced enhanced meaning. Encased in many of the plots from these series were both complex and shallow characters that interacted to cause

moments of high comedy, tension and conflict. In those early days, I usually read to enjoy the plot. Critical analysis of character and main idea would come later. The passion for critical thinking eventually took hold when I moved from being a passive reader caught up in escapist literature to become an involved reader who wanted to experience what I read. I never became an effective reader who could rise to that next level until Ms. Tucker came along and introduced me to more challenging books that had many pages, lots of print and few illustrations. There were books like *Jungle Stories*, *Tom Sawyer*, *The Arabian Nights* and *White Fang* to fire my imagination as to where personal reading could really take me. She had read portions of them to the class, thinking that the likes of me might be interested in them, too. What a wonderful person!

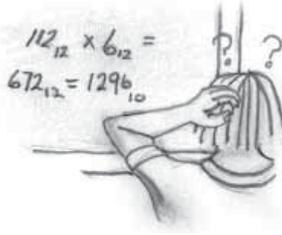
It really comes down to this: until you love to read books and the worlds they create or view, you're simply learning to read words. According to Michael Oakeshott, reading books is a major way in which we both confirm and define our existence. Nevertheless, we have to get into them first to appreciate how language makes them come alive. Nobody is a natural-born reader; he has to be 'massaged' into enjoying the experience. Maybe, that explains why I never caught fire that first year in school. Miss Black put nothing else but basal readers in front of me, with the honest belief that a young mind had to start somewhere.

*Afterthought: Only the best art can order the  
chaotic tumble of events.*

- Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion*

## CHAPTER 12

### The New Math Fiction!



*Such elements are universal logical truths, moral and aesthetic truths, and truths embodied in hypothetical propositions. These are the immediate objects of perception which are other than the mere affections of the perceiving subject.*

- Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education*

There is an old rule of thumb in public education that when a learning program becomes worn-out, quickly revise it, rename it, repackage it and pass it out to students as something new. Initially, the prospect of a new way of learning and a brand-new workbook to go with it is enough to stimulate keen young minds.

A similar situation became both my momentary thrill and lasting nightmare in Mr. Reynolds's Grade Four class in 1962. One Monday afternoon, Mr. Reynolds took a number of his 'better' pupils aside to introduce them to the wonders of the new math. He said this in such a very serious tone that I was led to believe we were about to enter a frontier where only the brainiest could survive and prosper. Under his right arm, he carried six green-covered workbooks with the title, *Adventures in Math*, printed in white across the front. As he hurriedly handed out the booklets, while periodically watching the other thirty students struggling through a math quiz, he said that he had chosen us to do this program because we had proven to be reliable and independent workers. We were told to go back to our seats, read the instructions carefully before answering the questions and start on Lesson One. 'Read the instructions' was a meaningful comment because we were about to be challenged on how to use different counting systems. How fascinating!

For the next three weeks, I sweated through a number of lessons on how to add, multiply, divide and subtract using different number bases like 10, 12, 20, etc. What really fazed me a lot of the time was trying to convince myself that the number 10 could represent something other than just 10. It might be any number as long as the base was defined. If the number were 10 with a base of six, then the

number would be six. Try and transfer that concept to a multiplication process, and it was easy to see how much more unlearning had to occur in my mind.

Every time we got stumped on a question, our hands would go up, only to be told that we were on our own and should read the instructions again. I suppose the teacher didn't want to get involved any more than he had to because he might confuse the other thirty students who were doing the regular math. Later, it occurred to me that Mr. Reynolds, like us, couldn't make the transition from the old to the new. At the end of the three-week trial period, the workbooks suddenly disappeared, and the six of us came back from the experiment in relearning to enjoy basic arithmetic.

Today, enriched learning programs rarely exist for top-end students. Some teachers might argue that the academically advanced achiever can find enough mental stimulation in the curriculum to excel without 'reinventing the wheel'. The 'New Math' was perhaps one of the few attempts to answer to higher needs in the school system by getting students to look at math another way. Nowadays, the learning focus seems to have gone the other way to get the weaker student to understand math at the most essential level. What an interesting reversal of perspective!

*Afterthought:* Four take away four still yields  
zero regardless of what you call it.

## CHAPTER 13

### A Test in Honesty



*But, Mousie, thou art no they lane,  
In proving foresight may be vain:  
The best laid schemes o' mice an' men  
Gang aft a-gley. An' lea'e us nought  
but grief an' pain for promised joy.*

- Robert Burns, *To a Mouse*

Honesty is a virtue that is usually encouraged, constantly expected, and often enforced when found lacking in some people but rarely taught as a skill throughout the school curriculum. While there are no statistics to prove it, there is a general sentiment that stealing or theft in the public schools, like in the public at large, has risen considerably over the last couple of decades. The assumption is that if someone really wants what you own, he'll take it regardless of all the adult moralizing about stealing.

With this background in mind, the following story is a true but pathetic account of how an authority figure really believed he knew how to deal with an incident of theft by appealing to a native sense of honesty in children. Our Grade Six class was involved in a fund-raising project for the Canadian Junior Red Cross. Back then, the teacher collected for the general fund every Friday morning and sent it off at the end of each month to Ottawa. At the end of the school year, we would receive a nicely embossed certificate—probably worth more than we donated—to hang in the school hallway along with other awards of distinction.

On this particular week, an unknown donor put fifty cents in the jar. Not much, I hear you say. *Au contraire!* This particular one was in the form of a huge

fifty-cent piece—almost as rare as a Canadian silver dollar. It rested in the jar on the teacher’s desk for almost a day. Halfway through the afternoon, someone near the front of the class noticed that the shiny, brand-new fifty-cent piece was not in the jar. Mr. Gordon immediately stopped the lesson and went over to look in the jar. This is what some of us might call the beginning of an investigation or maybe even a teachable moment.

First, his helpless question, “Does anyone know who did this?” Stunned silence followed while each class member collected his thoughts, then reactively squirmed and tensed up. When no information was forthcoming, the teacher proceeded to step two and lectured us on the importance of being honest by not taking other people’s property. This lecture usually came to us about every second month over some missing item in the classroom. When that didn’t seem to work, he told us to get out of our seats, move outside in fire-drill formation, and line up single-file outside the classroom.

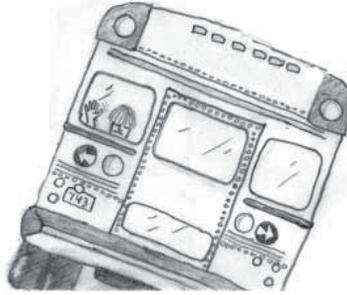
From there we would go into the classroom one at a time and, if one of us were the culprit, drop the coin in the jar with the guarantee of total anonymity. Sounds great in theory! This was a chance to atone for one’s folly without actually suffering the consequences. If Mr. Gordon was determined to retrieve the money, he might eventually resort to searching pockets and conducting lengthy interrogations. We went through this charade three times in the space of ten minutes, each time with the same futile result—no money. At this point, the teacher moved to his standard closure routine. He expressed his disappointment that there was still a thief in our midst, and the class didn’t have the guts to turn him in. Mr. Gordon wanted results but the class was not prepared to give them because it was as powerless as he to identify the culprit. Only one person really knew, and he wasn’t talking.

Having had the benefit of some foresight on the matter of thieving, I leave all such investigations to the administration in the school to conduct, and they usually involve students I might suspect. Wholesale interrogation is a lost cause because the invariable code of silence prohibits students from telling on each other. Common sense tells me that the best way to prevent theft—probably the most serious criminal problem in society today—is to, if possible, lock things up! Money is one such item.

*Afterthought:* Sometimes what one doesn’t know  
isn’t worth the time-of-day finding out.

## CHAPTER 14

# The Day Stan Left School



*Indeed, it is a responsibility simply to embody and exemplify the possibilities of the conversational relationship in a world ever ready to ignore them. Most of us will remain at best briefly in such a place; but the experience of it can leaven our lives even while far away in the world of getting and spending.*

- Timothy Fuller, *Introduction to the Voice of Liberal Learning*

There had been rumors flying around school all week about a new one opening up over to the east, about three miles away, on the Colville Road. This was in answer to the overcrowded conditions that were beginning to make themselves felt at Martin Elementary: classes of thirty-five, narrow aisles and limited desk space. Part of the excitement was that a number of our students would be making the transfer to the new school within the week but no names were forthcoming.

Just the prospect of going to a new school and starting over again fired my imagination. Who the lucky few were that got to attend the new school proved to be an all-consuming mystery until around three o'clock that Friday afternoon when Mr. Reynolds, our Grade Four teacher, moved to the front of the room and began to speak in a rather subdued tone. Right away, the class came to attention. This was the news we were waiting for. "It has become necessary," he said in a rather hollow voice, "for us to say good-bye to a number of students who will be moving over to the new school, starting on Monday." He then rattled off some names but mine wasn't one of them. He said that anyone in the class living in the upper regions of our road above Robertson's place—three houses up from ours—would be making the big switch.

I felt a twinge of disappointment at not getting a chance to continue my education in a brand new school. As dad assured me later, someone in authority had

to draw the lines establishing the border between schools. That was the arbitrary face of a grown-up's world. It was something that, as a child, I couldn't understand but accepted when an adult explained it. For Stan, it was a different matter altogether. How ironic and traumatic! All the way home on the bus, this friend of mine bawled his eyes out at the thought of going to a new school; something I would have literally 'killed' for if that were possible. It seemed like life had come to an abrupt halt for Stan.

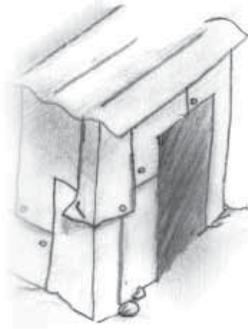
A couple of school days later, I had a chance to see him on the bus because our schools shared the same route. It was as if he didn't even know me. He was an entirely different person altogether, with a new life, bubbling with excitement and not a care in the world. The change of schools apparently gave him a new lease on life and a completely new identity.

Stan's case is mild in comparison to what I see as a teacher today: students making as many as twenty-five school moves in their academic lives with no sense of permanency at all. Then there is good old me! Five moves in my schooling career and nothing too dramatic or uprooting.

*Afterthought:* Change is essentially the opportunity  
to experience something new in life.

## CHAPTER 15

### A Picture of Poverty



*The baby got these scabs on her face and between her fingers and then the little girl and the boy got these sores, these awful sores on their faces and my man said to go down to the clinic and I did. Yes, I did and the doctor told me it was impetigo.*

- Barry Broadfoot, *Ten Lost Years*

To look at the Krueger family you would automatically conclude that they were ‘hill people’ right out of The Depression. So poor that one could even smell it on their clothing. Poverty was so obvious that the parents, as well as the children, had that perpetually grubby look about them: unkempt and unwashed, in other words. Most of the children were at least one grade behind because of some serious learning problem or other. They also had that appearance which came from generations of inbreeding: dull, ugly, and stupid. All these prejudices seemed to lead naturally to some teasing and bullying in the schoolyard as well as in the classroom. For a ten-year-old, like me, whose limited sense of success depended on my parents’ status in the community, the Kruegers didn’t even come close to making it. They were the poorest of the poor!

Word quickly got around the school that Mr. Krueger was permanently on welfare and that the family lived in some tarpaper shack on the corner of his brother’s property on Braun Road. Jack had a serious lazy eye, Steve was epileptic, Leonard had an awful speech impediment, Robert was hair-lipped and Lenny had hideous buckteeth. There was also a daughter called Lillian.

It happened one day, not long before the Kruegers disappeared for good. A couple of boys from the class began to tease Lenny in the schoolyard—he smelt especially high that day because of the warm weather. As things were starting to

evolve, Lillian strode up to me, literally stuck her face in mine and told me to leave her brother alone or there would be trouble. This was a clear indication that she was serious, and I would be the bigger fool to call her bluff. Did this whole incident change my view on how I saw poverty as it stacked up against sibling loyalty? That came much later in life when I began to appreciate that there were better standards by which one should measure people's character than economic status.

That lesson would come when I had actually done some growing up. At the point of confrontation, I probably backed away because I was a bully at heart and realized that I wouldn't get very far if I was found fighting a girl over such a 'cut-and-dried' matter like sibling loyalty.

Educators are now making an incredible amount of effort trying to stamp out bullying in public schools. This motherhood issue will always be at the heart of making schools safer for our children. Most of the recent concern has been over the rash of teen suicides which are a result of group bullying. Tragic as these deaths truly are, the challenge still lies in sensitizing the hearts and minds of schoolyard bullies. Bullying is a problem that reflects what people want to believe about others what isn't true or effective. My job as a teacher is to endeavor to help change those attitudes. Rehabilitation often takes a long time to produce acceptable results.

*Afterthought:* In every cloud there should be a silver lining, just don't always 'bank' on finding it

## CHAPTER 16

### Awkwardness in Learning



*Whosoever has so voluble a Mind,  
that it cannot fix itself upon any Thought,  
he neither can attend long on the Person teaching,  
nor fix what he has learn'd in the Memory.*

- Erasmus, *The Art of Learning*

Always one or two kids will stand out in the vast sea of faces of students from the past simply because they look out of place. I met one such character called Teddy in Grade Two. Big for his age, he seemed to tower over the rest of the class. Every day he came to school dressed in a heavy plaid shirt (thick enough to be a mackinaw), wearing an Elmer Fudd type cap hardly covering very wide ears, over-sized rubber boots, carrying a Mickey Mouse lunch kit, and showing a complete contempt for learning and manners. During that year, Teddy did a number of things that showed absolute disregard for any standards of decency—including learning.

On a number of occasions, he would run around the schoolyard bullying the smaller kids. When that didn't work, he would resort to the really anti-social behavior that usually consisted of sticking his finger up his backside, taking it out and poking it in other students' faces. During the year, Miss Tucker strapped him for pushing another student part way down a flight of stairs. His mother usually sent him to school with some very nice lunches, and he would proceed to pick over them. He would meticulously take bologna and cheese sandwiches apart, and smear the contents over the desktop or on books. Specially wrapped pieces of cheese would find their way into his thermos and fruit, like bananas, would

become weapons in imagined gun battles with other students. At no time do I recall ever seeing Teddy sit down and enjoy his lunch or snack without deliberately making a mess of things.

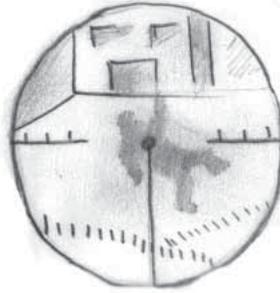
When it came to schoolwork, Teddy was totally uninterested. Modern day experts in the field of learning disabilities would probably view him as exhibiting some form of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder) that prevented him from actually focusing on his work for longer than a minute. As his fellow students, we quickly identified him as the class dummy and clown. Everything he did seemed to come to the teacher's attention and result in immediate discipline. Spelling and arithmetic were those subjects that proved hardest for Teddy. Every test he did usually resulted in a zero. The teacher took it upon herself to help Teddy realize some success in learning. This kind-hearted woman kept him in at lunchtime for a whole week to review a test on which he had previously received a zero. After all that hard work of reviewing and re-testing, Teddy still came up with a good number wrong but, nevertheless, still received congratulations for improving his score.

Teddy left my school at the end of Grade Two to attend another one somewhere in the interior of the province. Gone was the negative role model for the class, if such a title should exist. I am quite sure, however, that somebody else stepped in and took his place as 'class dummy'. Every class had one!

If Teddy were still in the public school system, he would probably be one of those 'special needs' children who would have a personal teacher assistant taking notes for him and helping him complete tests. Teddy's IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) would be so detailed with comments about what he couldn't do that one might wonder if there was anything he actually could do. Back then, Teddy likely survived in the system for about eight years before leaving early to get a decent paying job as a truck driver because that was what his dad did. He could never stop talking about the times his dad allowed him to sit in the big cab and yank the horn as the truck sat in the yard at home.

*Afterthought:* There is always a plausible reason why Teddy turned out the way he did. Perhaps, he wasn't breast-fed when he was a baby.

CHAPTER 17  
November 22, 1963



*This is the time of tension between dying and birth  
The place of solitude where dreams cross between blue rocks  
But when the voices shaken from the yew-tree drift away  
Let the other yew be shaken and reply.*

- T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*

*At 12:30 p.m. Texas time, on the afternoon of Friday,  
November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was killed by a  
sniper as his motorcade crawled through downtown Dallas.*

- William Manchester, *Remembering Kennedy*

Everyone of my generation seems to know where he or she was when JFK was assassinated in Dallas one autumn Friday morning over forty years ago. Such a reference point serves to place most of us in contact with friends, acquaintances, or mere strangers on that day. For years after, as a child, teen and adult, I've studied the Kennedy legend to find out the true significance of this date in terms of the hold it has on people's lives, including my own.

Here's what I discovered! Up to that date in nineteen sixty-three, all I really knew about JFK was what I had read in the front-page headlines as I delivered newspapers. Just an assortment of facts and rumors! I knew that he was the President of the United States and married to 'Jackie'. I had formed a mental picture of his career that had him succeeding Eisenhower in the White House, presiding over the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion and writing a book called *Profiles in Courage*. There was also his conducting of a successful conclusion to the Cuban Missile

Crisis, his meeting Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna, his standing on the Berlin Wall and saying, "Ich Bin En Berliner", and his serving as captain of the ill-fated PT-109 during World War II. In the fifties, he served as a US senator, had a brother called Bobby who was his attorney general in the early sixties, and was 'close' friends with many interesting women such as Marilyn Monroe. All biographical stuff to fill a young boy's head!

What was lacking was a big history-making event to crystallize all that the man had accomplished. Along came November 22, 1963! Kennedy instantly became a slain martyr who stood for all that was decent in terms of principle and vision. Such is the stuff of legend and propaganda, as found in books like *Death of a President*. Children want to believe them because of their natural trust in the adult viewpoint. Alas, this date also became the day when the dream of a better world (Camelot) began to unravel. For the time being, I swallowed that story of a 'great man' having fallen because that was how we were taught to see history: through lens that portrayed our leaders as warriors going out to do battle on behalf of freedom. For me, he would remain a tragic figure for some time, cut down in the prime of his life without the chance to fulfill his dreams of greatness—whatever they were!

I was sitting in Mr. Gordon's Grade Seven classroom doing a weekly spelling test around 11 a.m. that Friday when the phone rang in the office just across the hall. It was always easy to hear because he left the office door ajar. We were a small four-room country school where the principal did double-duty as a teacher too. Mr. Gordon returned minutes later with a blank and ashen face, quietly announced that someone had just shot President Kennedy in Dallas and that we were to put our books away for the morning. He immediately went over to the corner of the room, picked up a small plastic-covered radio set, brought it to the front where he plugged it in and tuned to the CBC. For the rest of the morning, we listened in stunned silence to the sketchy snatches of news.

Most of us did not realize, until years later, how very unprepared the big news services were to cover this event. This, for many of us rural types, was our first momentous event in life where everyone seemed to be waiting for some conclusion. Quite likely, most of us didn't have a clue as to how events were going to unfold that day. Violence was not part of our culture back then like it is now. The commentators seemed almost desperately grasping for any information that would allow them to understand what was happening in this crazy turn of events. All we had to go on was the principal's word that a 'terrible thing' had just happened, and this was enough to rivet us to our seats in rapt attention.

About a half-hour later, just before noon, Mr. Gordon left the room to answer another phone call only to return within moments to announce that the president was dead, that school was over for the day, and that the busses would be along

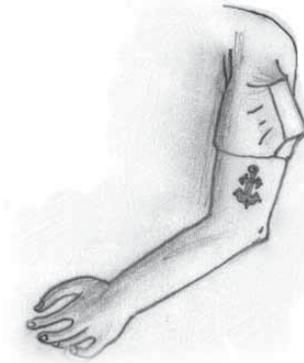
shortly to pick us up. There was no collective eruption of joy at an early dismissal or a tempered sigh of relief that lunchtime was upon us. Only a personal sense of sadness and wonder prevailed in the schoolyard as students filed out into the cool, crisp and clear November afternoon to go home to contemplate the gravity of earth-shaking events taking place a couple of thousand miles away to the south.

Just the other day, I picked up a review on the latest biography on JFK. Amongst the new revelations about his extremely poor health was one salacious tidbit about him having an affair with a nineteen-year-old intern in nineteen sixty-two. This love affair, apparently, went on right up to November 22, 1963.

*Afterthought:* Greatness in a person's life is often measured by how many people are affected by his death.

## CHAPTER 18

### Every Dog Has His Day



*Bad company corrupts good character*

- St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:33

It must have been sometime in Grade Seven when Brian turned up in class one day from a school in the big city. He was three years older than the average student in the class and had a swagger to match. This blond-haired student, wearing a white T-shirt and old tattered jeans, gave the impression that he had been around. You know, The James Dean look! Of course, most of his fellow students could not fail to notice those little things about his person. There was the scar on

the left side of his face and the little homemade tattoo on his right shoulder. Other interesting and telling signs of a special aura were the faint smell of cheap cologne (probably Old Spice), the signet ring on his right middle finger, slicked-back hair doused in plenty of brylcreem, and the special touch of a package of cigarettes neatly stuck into his breast pocket or under the sleeve of his T-shirt.

It seemed that Brian had come from the city to show us country types what it was like to be cool and trendy. Many of us learned very quickly, from hanging around with him, as to how to challenge the teacher and get away with it. Some of us learned about the female anatomy for the first time, a few more of us heard our first dirty jokes, and a couple of us had our first of many cigarettes. Brian fast became both a corrupting and powerful influence that year. There were numerous incidents where Brian would openly tell the teacher that he wasn't coming in for a detention, or that he wouldn't take the strap because his mother didn't believe in it, or that the teacher would have to pass him if he didn't want him back the next year. One might say that Brian had the upper hand in the classroom, and the teacher, who was also the principal, supposedly quaked in his presence.

For an over-aged Grade Seven, Brian had a familiarity with the opposite sex that would make most teens of his day blush. On a number of occasions—with some of us as an audience—he would tickle and fondle a couple of the more willing 'chicks' in the class. Brian was one of those hands-on-type who liked to demonstrate to make the point that he was a charmer. I'm quite sure that, by the way he talked and acted, Brian truly believed that girls found him irresistible and would give anything to neck with him. Oh, how easily many young people fantasize when it comes to expressing their charm!

Not too long before the end of school that year, the illusion evaporated. Brian rolled up his sleeves in the boys' washroom to show me a huge boil festering near his little 'crown and anchor' tattoo, which I learned later, was a homemade job. He said he was too scared to squeeze it because it was painful and the infection might spread. Fair enough, but now he had me intrigued. After everyone had left, I convinced 'tough-boy' Brian to let me squeeze it for him. Well, you should have seen it! A mass of green pus shot all over his precious looking tattoo and down his arm! Brian winced all the time with tears forming in his eyes. Just at that moment, the teacher/principal walked in and asked what we were doing. I immediately pointed to Brian's arm and bolted for the door.

The last I heard about the incident was that the principal was able to administer critical first aid to Brian. In a way, he proved to Brian that he was the one actually in charge. Word did get around, as it is prone to do in a school of that size, and things deteriorated for Brian in the remaining weeks. A teacher caught him bullying a lower-grade student in the playground area and promptly marched him to the office for the strap. As for passing the grade, the principal had the last

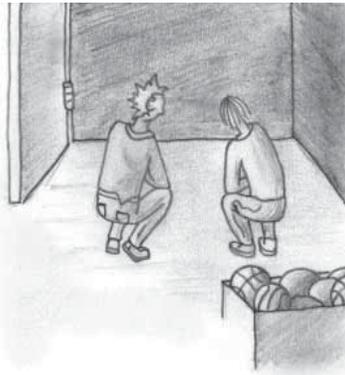
laugh. He promoted Brian to the high school as a member of the slow class. I met up with him the following year on the grounds of the high school and proceeded to get into a fight with him.

My last recollection of him was late in the eighth grade wrestling him to the ground, pinning him down with my knees and threatening to spit in his face. I never saw him again but my tracking of him suggests that he left that program after a couple of frustrating years and disappeared into the vortex of time—who knows where? Let's face it, Brian had his one brief moment of 'fame'—a chance to make the right impression on others but didn't.

*Afterthought:* Every dog has its day, some longer, some shorter.

## CHAPTER 19

### Now, What was that Joke?



*'A man can stand stark naked in the midst of a crowd and keep it gaping for an hour while he manipulates a few coins, or cards, or billiard balls. I can do that, and I can do it better than anybody today or anybody who has ever lived.'*

- Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders*

This is not what you think it is—an opportunity to share the 'best' of the dirty jokes acquired on the playing fields of the public school system. From what I can recall, every class of Grade Four and beyond had a so-called expert on the telling

of dirty or 'off-colored' jokes. In Grade Seven, Peter had the natural capacity to recite an obscene story or joke from memory. His chosen venue was the cramped confines of the sports equipment room—down in the dark and dusty basement of the old school building. Here he served as the monitor of soccer balls, hula-hoops, skipping ropes, beanbags and smut.

What I can remember most about Peter—even if the jokes have long ago faded—is that he was extremely fluent with the 's' and 'f' words when recounting a joke. He also possessed very bad breath into the bargain. The cuss words poured out of him in a Tourette-like fashion: a kind of verbal diarrhea that lasted as long as it took to tell a dirty story. Peter's desire to tell us seemed to match our insatiable need to hear. We were his captive audience. It appeared that he was an expert in time-management techniques. This permitted him to make quick presentations. Five minutes at recess, twice a week, was enough for most of us to catch up on all that he had to show and tell. Telling dirty stories and showing pictures of naked men and women in a conjugal embrace was his routine. There was always a heightened fear that some adult might be lurking in the area so one of us stood guard outside the equipment room. Quite often, it happened to be me. For anyone assigned lookout, there was the small consolation of being able to hear the faint snickers of laughter drifting out from the room as Peter conducted his daily peep show.

The truth of the matter was that Peter's supply of soft porn and smut dried up not too long after the first month because his older brother went to another part of the country to work. Along with his departure went also his collection of dirty jokes and soft porn. As Peter's supply disappeared overnight, so did his popularity. There was no occasion to turn up at the 'room' now that there wasn't anything to see. Added to which, old Gordon seemed to have caught wind that a number of students were congregating regularly in or near the equipment room when they should have been outside, so he shut the area down.

All this was a signal to move on and take up some new pursuit or preoccupation around the school. Our sexual awareness had been raised a few notches but nothing that would likely warp our personalities for good. The pictures seemed to draw our attention to the prohibited act or pose. We were in that room because we were about to indulge in the world of the forbidden. To get away with it was to make it even more appealing and worth the risk.

There was one indirect benefit from the shutting down of this 'illicit' operation. Peter had incredibly foul breath that smelt like something rancid. It literally took great willpower to be in the same enclosed room to listen to him ramble on about adult smut. Now, we no longer had to put up with it. What happened to Peter for the rest of the year? Not much! He, however, failed Grade Seven the following June, and I often think for only one reason. He probably wanted to try

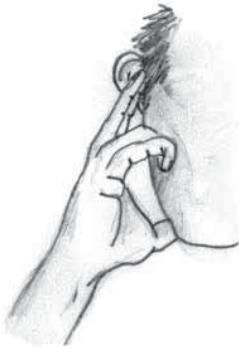
his smutty routine on a fresh batch of Grade Sevens coming through the system the following year.

Currently, the Internet has made pornography so available to the North American public that any child can have access to it at the click of a 'mouse'. To counter this, there are a number of safeguards available to parents to restrict their children viewing such sites. The sad reality is that this might take constant monitoring by adults to be successful. There are millions of websites in the form of chat rooms just waiting to snare our kids at a moment's notice so lots of luck trying to control every last one of them.

*Afterthought:* It is hard to remember anything smutty in one's life because it usually only lasts as long as the last laugh and look.

## CHAPTER 20

### A Conversation



*This inherent 'freedom' of a human being lies not only in his ability to make statements expressing his understanding of himself, but also in the world's being for him what he understands it to be, and in his being what he understands himself to be.*

- Michael Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*

There are not many opportunities to rub shoulders with great people in the school system. In the course of many years in the classroom, one really only gets to

know most fellow students or colleagues well enough to regard them as a batch of familiar faces. We all know how inspiring that can be! My encounter with an important person happened one day just a month into the school year. Mr. Gordon told me that someone wanted to see me in his office to talk about my education.

Now, I knew that I was an excellent student who took his work very seriously most of the time if I felt motivated. In other words, I had great potential to do well if I chose to apply myself! Sounds like one of those routine report card comments a teacher is prone to give a lagging student. As I walked into the office that day, a number of things were racing through my mind. There might have been some thoughts as to how I was to address the superintendent, as this was who he was. I quickly put those concerns to rest when a rather heavy-set man with a gray-haired crew cut got up from behind the principal's desk, extended his hand to shake mine and then asked me to sit down.

Stunned at the prospect of being invited into an adult's world with such charm and ease, I must have stumbled onto the chair and offered some mumbled greeting. When I did finally get my bearings and looked around—remember, this is where I had received the strap on an earlier occasion—I said something that might have amounted to, “Hello, sir. You wanted to see me?” A broad, wry smile came over his face as he said in a very pleasant voice, “I certainly do, young man. I've been looking at your latest district test scores, and they tell me you are doing exceptionally well in school.” There was a slight pause as he reached for some papers on the desk and began shuffling them as he peered at me over the top of his glasses that had fallen down his nose. “You seem to do very well in math and history,” he continued with a very noticeable twinkle in his eyes, and then stopped to hear my response.

Unknown to me at the time, the man had used a time-honored tactic for starting a conversation: stimulating interest by appealing to the other person's pride. I fell for it. I wasn't going to hold much back from a kind-hearted and friendly person who had come to chat with me on matters of a personal nature. Secretly, I belonged to the elevated and mature world of an adult. To prove that point, I began to talk like a little ‘know-it-all’. To my amazement, I launched in to talking about all the time I liked to spend reading books from my dad's library, listening to the CBC and BBC newscasts, poring over my brother's high school math books, and going on interesting trips with my parents. In retrospect, it must have sounded like a verbal torrent coming from a callow mind. However, the superintendent chose to lean back in his chair and listen intently to this great spate of verbal gas. My knowledge, my dreams, and my achievements were unleashed on a waiting world!

After what seemed like an eternity of monologue on my part—albeit ten minutes—this rather imposing and heavy-set man leaned forward, put his elbows on

the desk and said in a very gravelly voice, “It’s obvious, Ian, that you really enjoy learning and do very well at school. Am I right?” I nodded in agreement with the observation and was relieved that at last an adult of Mr. Price’s stature acknowledged my abilities. He continued to smile as he checked over the papers again and, turning back to me, made a startling comment, “Mr. Gordon and your parents think you might be ready to move into the next grade right away. It appears that the present work is not challenging enough for you. Do you think you would be ready to make the move today?” Without giving it much thought, and with the fear that he would withdraw the offer if I didn’t respond in the affirmative, I blurted out a quick reply, “Of course, sir. I would like to make the move.” I said it with that ever-famous trademark of cockiness that would dog me for years to come.

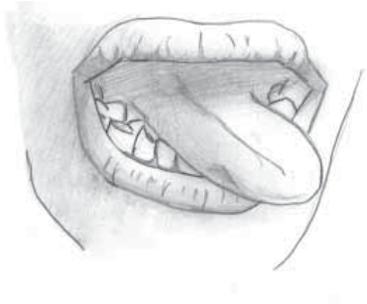
What happened from that moment on was both simple and complex. I went back into the classroom a little stunned at the turn of events but at the same time, swelling with pride and excitement that I was now in a new grade and going to move to the other side of the classroom. Looking back at this pivotal event, after many years in the system, I have some very mixed feelings as to its true intentions. Sure, I was some cocky brat who took great delight in showing off my grasp of book knowledge. On the other hand, I was not ready to handle the result of what we kids referred to as ‘skipping a grade’ or what we might now call ‘going on an accelerated program’. Suddenly, I faced work that was much tougher to handle and required more preparation for tests. Up until then, I was cruising on my native intelligence and my ability to make a good impression.

Now that I had received a promotion, I had to knuckle down and start performing at a higher level of learning. That would certainly take some getting used to. How long did that adjustment actually take or when did that learning curve stop? You may very well ask! In all humility, I wish Mr. Price were alive today to hear me say that what he offered me that day turned out to be more of a lasting challenge to rise to the occasion than a fleeting award of merit. It took a while to realize that moving ahead in my schooling was not so much an award as an adult’s way to challenge me to rise to new levels of academic and social attainment. True education occurs when the learner rises to the level where he is truly motivated to master what he doesn’t know.

*Afterthought:* Scholastic attainment only occurs  
when the individual learns to reach out and  
understand what he or she doesn’t know.

## CHAPTER 21

### A Rude Character!



*Insolence: bold, rudeness, insulting behavior or speech*

*- Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionary, 1968*

Doug was one of those mouthy types who always seem to have too much to say for themselves. This was especially noticeable when it came to talking himself out of tight spots. When the teacher caught him cheating on an arithmetic test in Grade Seven, Doug boldly turned around and said to him, “Prove it!” The response was a swift trip to the office, which didn’t shut him up for long. He was irrepressible regardless of the circumstances. Being cheeky and disrespectful to adults and fellow students was his chief delight: morning, noon and night.

All the way through high school, Doug carried on with his routine of being rude and outspoken. He was always challenging a teacher’s authority by being a smart aleck. However, there was nothing too outrageous to get him expelled. There was this one incident where the two of us had a brief scuffle during gym class while going for the puck in floor hockey. I might have given him a slight push but his reaction was something else! He became downright abusive in his choice of language to the teacher in charge and me. The outcome was that we went to center court where we had to whack each other with a gym shoe. Doug got the worst because he wore very tight shorts and forever afterwards promised to get even with me.

While he was careful not to step too far over the line in those earlier years, his mouthy attitude finally caught up with him when he enlisted in the navy. He was put on ‘charges’ a number of times for being disrespectful to an officer. Eventually, he was dismissed from the forces for insubordination and later convicted in civilian life on numerous counts of drug trafficking. I often had the impression that while Doug was coolly answering back, he was feverishly trying to size up the situ-

ation to his advantage. Knowing what I know now, I would say this behavior was very characteristic of an ADHD personality.

Today, people might view Doug as a fast-talking con artist who was forever trying to hoodwink people into accepting him. I partially disagree. That was only on the surface. Deep down, he was a very inadequate person who showed many attention deficit qualities like falling prey to impulsive urges that would lead to trouble. Invariably, these flaws forced him to resort to bluffing his way out of trouble. The last I heard, he was doing a major stretch in a national penitentiary for trafficking in heroin. One of my contacts seemed to even think that Doug was no longer in the land of the living.

*Afterthought:* The most frustrating and challenging situation to anyone in authority is a person who answers back.

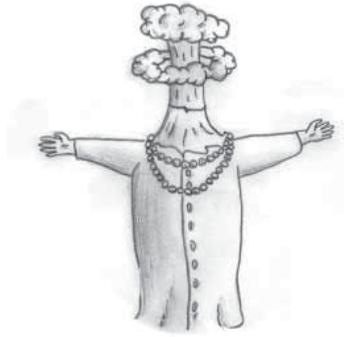
PART II

*My High School Days*



## CHAPTER 22

### Two Sides to a Teacher



*Mrs. Squeers stood at one of the desks, presiding over an immense basin of brimstone and treacle, of which delicious compound she administered a large installment to each boy in succession, using for the purpose a common wooden spoon, which might have been originally manufactured for some gigantic top, and which widened every young gentleman's mouth considerably, they being all obliged, under heavy corporal penalties, to take in the whole of the bowl at a grasp.*

- Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*

In the years I spent as a student in the public school system, I developed a very simple standard for distinguishing between a 'mean' and a 'pleasant' teacher. Meanness repelled, pleasantness attracted. It was just that simple! There were teachers who were a direct threat to the welfare of their students because of their pure nastiness. They liked to yell, hit, mock, ignore, humiliate, hurl chalk, swear, lie, manipulate and nag. These ones made public education a very unhappy experience for a lot of us.

An illustration of this point was Miss John—my high school art teacher—who became very angry every period over the least provocation. Some of us enjoyed irritating her just to see her flip. I remember my older brother, Alec, telling me of his countless efforts to push her over the edge. That was not hard to do at the best of times. It was especially more appealing now that my brother was indirectly counseling me to stand up to Miss John. On this occasion, it was lunchtime, and Miss John repeatedly called me over the PA system to come and serve a detention

in her room for some minor infraction for which she was determined to punish me. I had just finished my lunch in the cafeteria, and I was uncertain as to whether I should go or not. As I was making up my mind, I could see, out of the corner of my eye, a dumpy woman come waddling and puffing towards me through the congested hallway. There was no mistaking her! This was Miss John coming to haul me off for a detention.

There was fire in her eyes and rage in her voice as she menacingly summoned and gestured me to her room. “Didn’t I order you to be in for a detention at the beginning of lunch?” she bellowed at me. There, over on the other side of the hallway stood my brother and his friends, Bob and Ted, giving me the biggest grins possible. In my stupidity, I took this as a signal to answer back. I turned to Miss John and said in a clear voice, “Ugh, I don’t think I’ll be coming to your room today.” The reaction was worse than I could ever imagine.

She (in her early 60’s and at least 300 pounds) went ballistic, bonkers, mad, crazy and wild as she went behind me and started pushing me towards her room. Spit was flying through the air and there was that awful look on her face that foreshadows a seizure. For some bizarre reason, I pushed back. This only forced the situation to get completely out of hand. She immediately changed course and pushed me in the direction of the office through the lunch hour crowd that really must have thought it was witnessing the spectacle of all time. With a lot of huff and puff, she eventually pushed me into the outer office and, then, through the open door of the principal’s office. There she forced me over a desk and proceeded to wail on me with a strap someone handed to her only moments before.

She left the door wide open as she released her fury on my backside. She was announcing to all around that she was in control. She must have struck me fifteen times but none of the blows seemed to register. All of a sudden, another person came into the room, closed the door, told Miss John to stop and me to stand up.

It was the principal, and his only words were, “Young man, this dreadful performance will never happen again. Do you understand?” I must have mumbled a yes because I was quickly released to wait in the outer office while the two adults continued to talk. As I walked out, a number of onlookers stared at me in stunned silence.

Later that afternoon, in a math class that I had with Miss John, she stopped by my desk, bent over me and asked in a kindly voice how things were going with my work and, then to my complete surprise, began to apologize for her tirade earlier in the day. What shocked me then, as it does today, is the impression that I was talking to a very different person. Here was a woman who now seemed to be in complete control of her faculties, when hardly an hour before she was acting ‘insane’. I have since concluded that we—students and teachers—all have a measure of rage lurking in our personalities waiting to raise its ugly head if sorely tested by

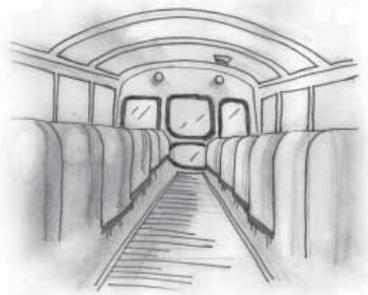
unmanageable circumstances. Some of us are better at controlling this demon, while others have become pathetic victims of vicious mood swings. Miss John lasted another year in the system before taking early retirement.

That kind of outburst by a teacher today would likely merit a major investigation and some form of censure. The only thing that saved her back then was that the teacher was generally right ten times out of ten.

*Afterthought:* In all fairness, teachers (myself included)  
have their off-days like everybody else.

## CHAPTER 23

### Riding the School Bus



*By all the precepts of perspective  
Well-surfaced highway windings rush  
Among the fields, among the meadows.  
Not raising dust, nor stuck in slush.*

- Boris Pasternak, *The Road*

Taking a bus to and from school on a daily basis is a social experience that many rural students have come to put up with over the years. Besides, how else is one going to make it to and from school each day? There are four direct benefits for bus riders: friendships, exciting travel, homework time, and general knowledge. On the downside, there are four offsetting disadvantages to riding the school bus: enemies, monotonous trips, cramped quarters, and crabby bus drivers. On the up-

side, one can quickly forge a friendship by sitting down beside a fellow classmate and striking up a conversation about what went on in school that day. When that dies out—normally in the first ten minutes of the trip—one usually turns to stare out the window, which is a lot better if you happen to be sitting right by one. Some new image like a well-drilling rig or a new car in a local's garage might catch the eye. I took pride in noting these subtle changes and reporting back at the supper table. If I wanted to do my homework quickly—unfinished work often resulted in a detention—then a bus seat offered the best space for doing sums, problems or writing a short paragraph.

A seat at the front of the bus—often reserved for those who misbehaved—afforded one the opportunity to study the driver up close, surrounded by a lot of emergency switches, levers and buttons. In many of my idle moments when I was sitting there, I would often contemplate how he responded to each live situation such as starting, slowing down and stopping. A long bus ride of about six to seven miles would often induce that semi-daydreaming state near the end.

Monotonous trips often resulted in my falling asleep and sometimes even forgetting to get off at my stop and having to walk home from the next one. School district regulations stated that two people could safely sit in a seat at one time. School officials often called it the 'two bum' rule. Since no standees were allowed while in transit, extra bodies had to crowd in to every available space that made for a very unpleasant ride. The ultimate fear revolved around who was going to be our driver for the year. Back then, drivers wore a uniform similar in nature to the old-fashioned milkman. Some were friendly; some were quiet and all business; while others were surly, grumpy and strict.

The drivers—regardless of who they were—had the authority to boot us off the bus if they felt we presented a serious behavior problem. It was just a matter of never thinking of misbehaving with the more pleasant ones because they invariably put you at ease. The grumpy, uptight ones always seemed to put some of us on edge and caused us to act up.

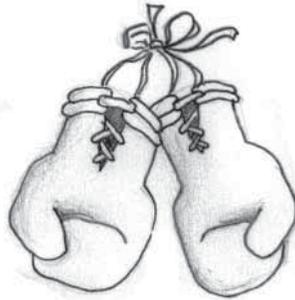
There is one interesting aside to all this bus travel to and from school. A number of soon-to-be accomplished students rode with me: Lloyd, executive vice-president for American Express; Erwin, a big city lawyer; Ron, an engineer for INCO; Bob, a teacher; Robert, a big-name horse trainer; and my brother, Robert, a RCMP officer. If I were honest, riding the old yellow school bus was, for me, not as alienating an experience as some modern riders claim. It was just another routine I had to sometimes endure, enjoy and hate, but never all three at once. When

I hear how far some students have to travel on the bus in today's world, I begin to see how fortunate I was to be part of a small six-mile daily 'milk-run'.

*Afterthought:* Now there's a thought! Give bus students hours of credit towards their education for having traveled to and from school those many years.

## CHAPTER 24

### Fights Never Last a Lifetime!



*Again, there was the shock and he felt himself being borne back in a rush, to strike hard on the sand. There was no chance of kicking this time. The bull was on top of him. Manuel lay dead, his head on his arms, and the bull bumped him.*

- Hemingway, *The Undeclared*

Most of the fights I have witnessed, or been a party to, have usually been un-spectacular and wimpy affairs. A cut lip here, a shiner there, a knee in the crotch or a lot of scuffling around before a teacher or principal eventually intervened. However, this will go down as the bloodiest and most wretched fight imaginable, and I only saw the tail end of it. Bob, a friend of mine in the ninth grade, was a thin and wiry type who lived by his own sense of survival—because his foster parents had little to do with him—took on Wayne in a scrap one day after school.

What started out as a scrap quickly turned into a blood bath. Wayne—with the sharpest, dirtiest, and longest nails imaginable—tore into Bob's face and shredded it like tissue paper. As I came late on the scene behind the school backstop, on the

trail to town, somebody yelled ‘Malky’ and, within a moment, everyone fled the scene with the exception of Bob who was rolling on the ground in what must have been pure agony. The irony was that the crowd had mistook the name ‘Malky’ to mean my dad, the vice-principal, when, in fact, it was only me. That day, I was spared the awful spectacle of having to watch a good friend mauled.

As I accompanied Bob down the trail, I could not help but notice that his face was a mass of cuts bleeding quite freely. I asked him if there was anything I could do to help, and he muttered something about needing a Kleenex to clean up his bloodied face. I had a used one in my back pocket. What was that between friends? I did not hear from Bob for about week because that was probably the time he needed to heal both physically and emotionally. There was never any talk of a return match.

Two summers later, the bottom fell out of Wayne’s life when he accidentally shot and killed his brother, Melvin, while he was playing with a .22 rifle in their backyard. In light of this tragedy, that vicious fistfight of a couple of years before had probably become only a distant and unconnected memory. This is how most fights generally end up: an unimportant incident in the bigger picture of life.

I haven’t seen ‘hide nor hair’ of Bob in over thirty years but every time I’m called on to break up a fight in the schoolyard, I remember that afternoon back in Junior High when he and Wayne engaged in a very bloody scrap. Today’s fisticuffs seem so mild by comparison yet, to the experts in child behavior, so symptomatic of a growing sense of violence and anger in our children. Give me a break! Nothing could have been worse than what I saw that day in respect to physical injury. Like today, that fight had all the markings of two people desperately wanting to settle a score the only way they knew how. The outcome was so final that the two combatants never had to come back and finish it off another time.

*Afterthought:* There is no fight so great—physical or otherwise—that stands to dominate a lifetime.

## CHAPTER 25

### A Sweaty and Smelly Student



*There was a man from Rangoon  
Who farted into a balloon;  
When full, it rose in the sky,  
Where it burst and stunk out the Man in the Moon.*

- adaptation of a limerick

Bob looked forever as someone who had just stepped out of the shower before drying himself. Streaming with rivulets of sweat and exuding the perpetual damp look became the signatures of Bob wherever he went. As part of the Grade Nine Physical Education program, we were all required to shower after class but Bob—with his crummy and wet appearance—managed to dodge that requirement. A possible explanation was that Bob always had that look of having just stepped out of the shower anyway so why try to improve on it. Another possibility was that he resented cleanliness as a mark of decency because it required too much physical effort to maintain. It was much easier to change from sweaty gym clothes into regular ones than to strip and take a shower.

The two drawbacks to his anti-social practice, however, were that the accumulation of all these many sweat baths made Bob a very smelly person and his locker a very foul receptacle of an unwashed gym strip. True to form, I don't remember any adult taking Bob aside during the course of the school year and ordering him to change his ways. Adults just didn't care! It was one of the perils or drawbacks of living in a free and open society! My last memory of Bob came when he and I wrote the Grade Eight French final that year in June. Bob's face was already starting to break down in ugly runny sores and becoming a real mess. The simple

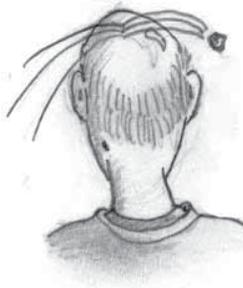
and solemn truth of the matter was that this boy had no hygiene and nobody was prepared to step up and teach him any.

When it comes to not showering after P.E. classes, Bob would not be out of place in the modern run of things. If my experiences are anything to go by, very few high school athletes or P.E. students use the showers after a workout because they have to rush off to the next class.

*Afterthought:* There's little a public school system can do if a person refuses to use soap. That is just one of the downfalls of our free and open society—bad odors!

## CHAPTER 26

### Great Detective Work



*Wycliffe was instinctively repelled, but it made an unpleasant task easier. Even without Julian's cryptic phone call, it would have been inconceivable that his suicide was unrelated to his sister's death, and he had no qualms about exploiting the connection in order to draw out the two women.*

- W.J. Burley, *Wycliffe and the Redhead*

Whenever I think of the term 'persistence', I can't help but think of an old geography teacher of mine, John. It was his dedication to detail that allowed him to catch two students in his class shooting spitballs at his bald head. Kudos should probably go to both sides in this venture: to the teacher for great sleuthing, and the other to the students for being imaginatively bold in the first place. The only

problem is that when they were eventually nabbed, the advantage decidedly went to John's side.

The scene was as follows: John was one of those energetic and inspiring teachers (former coach in the Rome Olympics) who spent a lot of time at the board explaining concepts to the class. He had a fairly bald and shiny pate which, when he turned his back to the students, was a very inviting target for mischief. Sitting right at the back of the class were two of my friends who delighted in firing long-range spitballs at John's head when he turned to the board. Unbeknownst to the rest of the students, this went on for over a week. During this time, John was faithfully collecting all the soggy wads of paper every night, drying them at home and spreading them out on the table in search of legible forms of handwriting. He eventually got what he was looking for because, one morning, he mysteriously handed out a piece of foolscap and asked everyone in class to sign their names.

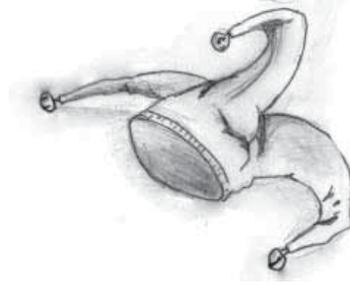
At the conclusion of the exercise, he quietly announced to the class that Rob and Mike were to report immediately to the office. The reward or punishment—whichever way you want to look at it—was a severe strapping. John died a number of years ago but his method of getting at the truth continues to impress me many years later: due vigilance complemented by due diligence usually results in duly catching the culprit. One without the other doesn't work.

In today's classroom, the teacher would probably consider this infraction trivial. The punishment might be, at worst, a short detention or some lines. On this occasion, John was looking for a bigger payback for all the hard work he put into catching the rascals.

*Afterthought:* Watch out for those who might  
have method in their persistence.

## CHAPTER 27

### The Power of the Zany



*After about four rounds Jack has him bleeding bad and his face all cut up, but every time Walcott's got in close he's socked so hard he's got two big red patches on both sides just below Jack's ribs.*

- Hemingway, *Fifty Grand*

There is only one way to describe Ron in high school—a real goof head! He had that constant look of being weird and hung-over. In the years I knew him, I never saw him serious about anything. Ron's true calling in life was to entertain others—a comedian, in other words. There were no limits to his jokes and gags. He could mock you by mimicking your voice, walk, manner, gesture, laugh, and turn of phrase. Nobody—including the mentally and physically challenged—remained untouched by his witty and cruel remarks. That was okay as long as they weren't aimed at me.

On a number of occasions, Ron would make fun of my deep voice and I, unfortunately, had no weapon with which to answer back. How I deeply longed to be able to lift him by the lapels, haul him outside and give him a sound thumping. I sometimes have one of those many fantasies after the fact. It was mere bravado! It was fortunate, perhaps, that it never happened because I likely would have got my lights punched out. Ron was one tough character with his fists. A little self-restraint and wisdom, and a few months later something happened that now allows me to tell a story that should help the reader understand Ron in a different light other than being just a plain pain in the ass.

During a morning PE class in late May, Ron went through one of his many comical and goofy routines with another student during a floor hockey game. A playful shove here, a few jeers and taunts there, the impish roll-of-the-eyes and a little poke of the stick! He did all this to annoy and unnerve the opponent. Nowadays, people might call Ron a bully; back then, his actions simply made him

a clown. Your options, as always, were to either simply ignore him or retaliate at your own peril. Len, his opponent that day, struck back and administered a hefty whack of the hockey stick across Ron's shins.

Now, Len was no pushover when it came to using his fists. I vaguely remember Len as a beefy type, with enormous upper body-strength, and a very nasty temper. Somebody one would not want to tangle with if they could avoid it! In fact, I foolishly took him on the previous year and came out the worse for it. My problem was that I really hadn't mastered the technique of fighting 'dirty' so wasn't quick enough to seek out any unsporting advantage. The martial arts hadn't yet made their way into North American culture.

Generally, good old fighting consisted of going for the head with a right jab while administering a quick knee to the groin. If one was quick, the battle was over in seconds with someone lying moaning on the ground clutching his crotch in agony. Back to the story; upon receiving the well-placed hit across the ankle, Ron turned to his adversary in a blaze of anger mixed with pain, and spurted out a very audible challenge, "See you in the changing room at twelve, you %\$#&\*%^." These kinds of challenges were done quickly and quietly to avoid catching the teacher's attention. Everyone usually tried to suppress personal hostilities because the gym teacher treated any fighting with very harsh punishment. If caught, both combatants would take off one of their runners and administer three well-placed blows in succession to the other person's backside. Woe to anyone who wore tight shorts that day!

At twelve sharp, a number of us turned up to see the fight in an area no bigger than a small classroom, except that the surroundings were strange: white ceramic tiled walls, tiled floors, wash basins lining one wall, urinals and showers the other. Not a classic place for convening a fight but, nonetheless, convenient because it was out of sight of meddling adults who would certainly want to put a stop to it. I was not only here to watch a good fight but had decided—with a little forethought—to back Ron. Both these guys were truly the world's worst jerks—worse than I was—but somehow my intuition told me to stick with Ron, as the outraged victim in this case, who needed some justice for what had happened back on the court.

What happened next was lightening fast. Both fellows got into the traditional boxing stance and moved towards each other in a very gingerly fashion, each looking for an opening. All of a sudden, like a cat, Ron had sprung on Len with a lightening intensity I had never seen before. A quick one-two punch with the old knee to the crotch and Len crumpled to the floor moaning and gasping for breath. It was over! Keep in mind that Len appeared the stronger and healthier of the two

fighters that day but sadly for him, didn't possess the same intensity of purpose that his opponent had.

The thing I most admired Ron for was his fearless determination to win the most sacred of high school challenges for the right reason: his honor. This whole incident rather put his silly and annoying behavior in proper perspective. This person was a fearless brawler. Years later, after high school, Ron went to work with his old man at the local town maintenance yard. From all recent reports, he retains some of his former zany and wild self.

*Afterthought:* Acting strange periodically has its advantages.  
No one knows for sure when to take you seriously.

## CHAPTER 28

### Rocking the Boat



*He put his fingers together and leaned back.  
'In the first place you have to remember that  
normality is a condition only arbitrarily definable' --*

*- William Golding, Free Fall*

Though this story is as bizarre as it is distasteful, it should remind us of the importance of having an emergency escape plan when caught up in a large crowd. It happened in the gym at the junior high that I attended. My dad had called all the students down for another one of his famous weekly assemblies. Can you imagine nine hundred kids standing in a gym—shoulder to shoulder—with the minimum of breathing space on a warm spring morning? Little, pint-size Jared was wedged in among four significantly larger fellows. During the course of the twenty-minute

assembly, somebody noticed that Jared was getting paler by the minute. Probably a lack of air, I hear you say.

At the ten-minute mark, Jared was beginning to feel faint. He suddenly leaned over to one of the fellows and gasped that he was feeling ill. For the next two minutes, he rocked between students like a bowling pin ready to teeter, all trying to avoid Jared like the plague. Before too long, the unavoidable happened. Jared couldn't hold it any longer. A long tongue of vomit shot across the floor; the result of all the motion the poor fellow had to endure. There was a huge commotion that moment as a large swath of students around Jared fled the epicenter. I don't think my dad's booming and commanding voice was strong enough to restore order under those unique and trying circumstances.

Today, Jared owns a large chicken farm in the valley. The power that he and his staff have over those thousands of 'birds' in no way begins to compare with the influence he had over his four friends that day nearly forty years ago.

*Afterthought:* Many accidents can occur when  
one is determined to rock the boat.

## CHAPTER 29

# Changing Schools



*Reason does not work automatically;  
thinking is not a mechanical process.*

*- Ayn Rand, Philosophy: Who Needs it*

There is the old saying: a change is as good as a rest. In the case of school, a change might happen for any one of a number of reasons such as parents moving to another town, the student graduating or enrolling elsewhere because of behavioral problems. A rest is another story altogether. I experienced the first two situations during my time in public school because they were a normal, positive part of growing up. I always got excited when I knew I was moving to something new in my life. Now, what if the act of change took a person back rather than forward in his schooling? Would the outcome be as jubilant? Not likely, you might rightly say.

For Larry, such a prospect became a reality. Larry had gone up to the high school in September 1962, with full assurance that he had left the elementary school behind for good. The Ministry of Education decided to incorporate Grade Seven into the Secondary program. Grade Six had been a struggle but he had passed because the teacher really wanted to get rid off him. Grade Seven proved an even greater struggle for survival than the previous one. He failed most of his courses and developed some serious personality conflicts with various students and teachers; therefore, he had to repeat the grade.

What Larry hadn't bargained for was that the Ministry of Education would reverse its earlier decision and return the Grade Seven classes to the elementary ranks. The only reason I can think of for this sudden switch was that the latest educational research showed that, according to their academic and social needs,

grade sevens would work best in an elementary setting. It was grim news for Larry! He now had to suffer the embarrassment of returning to his old stomping grounds. What made it worse for him was that the high school bus always stopped at the elementary school on the way home to pick up students like Larry.

Such a predicament would never happen in the system today. Larry would likely be in a special program that would have taken care of his learning needs, and that would have been the end of it. I never did learn if this cruel twist of fate ever had a positive influence on reshaping his life.

*Afterthought:* Learning invariably happens  
whatever direction one goes in life.

## CHAPTER 30

### The Mad Librarian



*He was saying one thing, but seemed to imply something quite different by the same words. He spoke with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, but at the same time he was agitated out of all proportion, looked around suspiciously, got muddled, and lost the thread of what he was going to say...*

- Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot*

Old Dr. Nemeth was one of those queer birds who had escaped from the haunts of Communist Hungary during the 1956 Uprising and made his way to the West. He was a through-and-through steel-hearted refugee from the nightmares of the Communist Bloc. He came with a Ph.D., from the University of Budapest, in library science but was only able to obtain a job as a high school librarian. He lived alone on the second floor of the Aldergrove Hotel and drove a little black Morris

Minor. He was a loner with a wretched disposition. His only way of contending with students was to show his madness through weird glares, strange grimaces, quaint phraseology, and queer gestures.

Upon witnessing any of these displays of irrationality, a student usually concluded that this was a dangerous man and worth avoiding at all costs. He stared at students through his rather over-sized, very round-framed and black horn-rimmed spectacles. While doing so, he also had the bad habit of opening his mouth and showing a set of badly fitting and stained dentures, which he seemed to be forever trying to nudge back into place with his grimacing. His balding head, along with these other traits, gave him a rather simian look which, to this day, reminds me a little of the late Menachin Begin, Israel's former prime minister. When he did force himself to talk to students, it was with a nasty and sour voice using the most idiotic of phrases and mixed metaphors. For those who talked too much, it was "Shut your beak, you monkey" or "Be quiet, you idiots. You act like this is a beer parlor when it should be as quiet as a church."

Where students couldn't openly retaliate against this pathetically scornful and waspish man during school, they got their revenge after hours. There was more than one well-substantiated story that involved students filling his gas tank with sugar on Halloween night. Another story that surfaced years later was that he had committed suicide after the board fired him from his librarian's position at the high school.

Looking back on those years when he ruled the school library as if it was his exclusive domain—shooing students out for the least behavioral provocation as if he enjoyed hating them—many things make sense. This old crackpot lacked the ability to relate to others in an area that is most conducive to forming friendships: libraries. For him, libraries were probably places to hide away from the ever-searching eye of 'Big Brother' in Budapest.

To this day, I still wonder how many students the good 'doctor' may have potentially turned off from reading books because he couldn't nurture their needs. Think of all those people who, in their confusion, continue to mistake a bar or pub for a library.

*Afterthought:* There is a fine line between sanity and madness.  
Cross it, and you might never come back to reality.

## CHAPTER 31

### A Knifing!



*Thus the world we made  
Pays back what we paid.  
Thus the dark descends.  
Our means became our ends.*

- Stephen Spender, *A Man-made World*

There are numerous modern administrators who literally quake at the thought that teenage violence might be about to erupt in ‘Columbine style’ in their schools. A ‘zero-tolerance’ policy towards weapons—fake or real—gives them the assurance that, at least, they can send a message that they are being both vigilant and diligent and not be accused of over-reacting. Most of these educators fail to recognize that random acts of violence have been around for much longer than this decade, and that schools aren’t really any safer than the public square.

As a Grade Eight student, I watched a fight ensue, just outside the entrance to the school, between two students who were waiting to catch the bus to go home. As the two were duking it out, one stepped back, reached into his pocket, produced a switchblade and proceeded to flash it menacingly at his opponent. Before long, there was a squeal of pain and the other guy bent over gripping a very bloody hand. It seems that Ken’s knife had caught Gary’s baby finger at the base and came close to severing it.

The strangest thing happened: the victim bound up his wound in a handkerchief and got on the bus to go home as if nothing had happened. Ken continued to attend school, and his opponent was back at school the next day with only a small butterfly stitch to show for the cut. Years later, I came across Ken when I was

teaching up north. He was the x-ray technician for the local hospital and, when I went for some tests one day, vaguely remembered our days together as students fifteen years before. I chose not to remind him of that one singular incident that still puzzles me to this day. What was so serious about that scrap that required him to pull a knife on a fellow student? My older brother was of the opinion that Ken had a foul temper that made him very dangerous to be around.

On the matter of violence in the modern school, things are so bizarre that some school officials prohibit students from watching paintball movies during lunch break, even given the fact that many of them may watch news documentaries in class that show real-live street violence in Iraq and Afghanistan.

*Afterthought:* In the very near future, schools might conceivably become armed fortresses with metal detectors and guards at every entrance.

## CHAPTER 32

### A Very Frayed Life



*Men in olden time who led their life in forests,  
driven by the mere needs and desires of their natures,  
guided by no laws, with no ordering in communities,  
are to be judged rather as savage beasts than as men.*

- Erasmus, *Reason—The True Mark of Man*

There is a natural tendency in all of us to want to play on other people's vulnerabilities before they play on ours. It all likely started in junior high when encountering a teacher who had little or no control over his students.

This story describes the ultimate thrill for any hellion going through the school system today: baiting a weak teacher who has to deal with the demons of a troubled past such as mental instability or alcoholism! Mr. Wall taught Social Studies, grades eight to ten, at a local junior secondary back in the 1960s. Everyone in the

school knew him as the teacher who had essentially gone over the edge. He was on his last legs as a teacher, and every one of his students knew where he was most susceptible when it came to playing pranks. The younger students rarely showed any compassion for this sorry excuse for a teacher who had gone through one too many campaigns in the classroom in his career. He always looked like he was in a state of being permanently shell-shocked.

When I first saw him close up in 1966—because my friend invited me into his class to see how mad he really was—I couldn't help but notice those steely little eyes focusing on me. Truly, he had the look of a lunatic who was coldly calculating his next emotional outburst to fend off the tormentors. 'Charlie', as the students called him because they didn't know his real name, was downright scary. In a classroom of mainly unruly teens, he couldn't maintain order. Year after year, the school administration intentionally gave him the toughest classes—virtual cauldrons of wickedness—with the hope that he would do the honorable thing and pack it in. Year after year, the man would doggedly come back for more indignities.

In a previous school, the parents had banded together and had him dismissed as principal because of his total incompetence. He had actually strapped a whole class twice in the same year. In his reassigned position, he became notorious for being the subject of a lot of personal ridicule and abuse: accepting and eating chocolate-coated laxatives from students, being constantly interrupted, sworn at, lied to, objects thrown at him, and never being effectively able to teach a lesson. His classes were sheer pandemonium to the point of one hearing them as far away as the next hallway. His classroom was always a virtual war zone where kids came to take out their frustrations, abuses and animosities. Imagine, preparing to come to work each day knowing that this was going to be your lot for the next six hours: unmitigated terror and frustration. No wonder he had little self-worth left when the Board got around to giving him his release.

Years later, I have taken some time to reflect on this unfortunate circumstance and feel a deep sense of disgust and sadness as to how the school authorities handled the whole situation. Why would a man of such glaring incompetence be allowed to stay around in the system to destroy the students' chance at an education?

I can come to only one conclusion. School officials didn't care as long as the public didn't speak out. Students at this age level rarely complained to their parents because this would have resulted in an end to the daily sport that they usually enjoyed at Mr. Wall's expense. On the other hand, the Board had laterally transferred Mr. Wall from his previous school because parents—through the PTA—became very concerned about their children's welfare. I suppose the superintendent

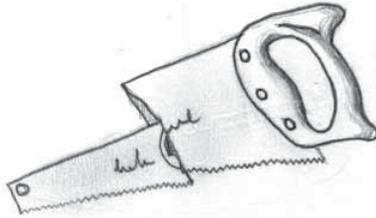
assigned Mr. Wall to a safe haven like a junior high so that he could finish out his teaching days in peace. Nowadays, such a move is called ‘passing the trash’.

Just the other day in the staffroom, I picked up a Ministry of Education circular which announced that parents were about to get the authority to complain directly to the College of Teachers to have incompetent teachers removed or disciplined. I suspect, in the modern sense, the system would never allow ‘Charlie’ to remain a teacher as long as he did. For many kids who had him over the years, the total amount of learning had to be zero.

*Afterthought:* Never judge a book strictly by its covers. There is always a possibility of a surprise or two lurking between them.

### CHAPTER 33

## Succeeding Where Others Fail



*‘Was it all a dream?’ wondered Shasta. But it couldn’t have been a dream for there in the grass before him he saw the deep, large print of the Lion’s front right paw. It took one’s breath away to think of the weight that could make a footprint like that.*

- C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy*

Leaders should always be those people who lead by example more than authority. I will always admire my dad for the excellent workmanship he put in to making furniture. Here was a man who had trained to be a cabinet-maker but had ended up teaching school. He was exact in his measurements, cutting and finishing. The end product always looked aesthetically gorgeous and something for adults to talk about when they visited our house. Unfortunately, he didn’t pass that skill on to me. I was an absolute dolt when it came to working with wood and still am today.

I violate all the rules about planning and designing before executing, so that the result is usually something less than pleasing.

A case in point was the woodwork course my dad signed me up for in Grade Nine. I was so lacking in confidence that I usually stood aside to let others take over the table-saw and radial-arm saw to work on their special projects. The teacher had littered my drawings with red X marks indicating that, right from the beginning, my concept was doomed. Any cuts I made were real hash jobs—wrong place, half-done, wrong blades, etc. For six months, I futilely labored away at this bedside table that was supposed to be ready for Mother's Day, 1965. I was barely passing the course, feeling like a real chump into the bargain, and desperately looking for a solution before the deadline. I remember the day dad asked me how the project was coming along and if it would be ready for the big day. I guess he knew from conversations he had with my woodwork teacher that my project was doomed. As a rule, dad never liked to bail out inept people, so why was he inquiring?

I told him that I didn't want to talk about it. I was even prepared to fail the course if that is what it would take to remove that nightmare of a project. I was useless with machines, and it wasn't my idea of a course in the first place, except that a certain someone wanted to make cabinet-maker out of his son. Silly comments like that! My dad sat back in his chair and listened while I ranted and complained for a good while about the problem. Suddenly, he got up and said, "Ian, I'll see you down in the wood shop after school today for an hour or so." I had no idea what the man had in mind, except that he had a twinkle in his eye that should have told me he was up to something.

That afternoon, he guided me through the project so that each cut and the subsequent fittings were virtually his doing. By the end of the hour, the project was almost assembled and ready for finishing. In the space of one intensive hour, my dad had rescued my reputation and a Mother's Day present from the 'scrap bin'. I never went on to be good at woodworking but I did, at least, develop a heightened respect for people who could come up with solutions to fix imponderable problems. The amazing thing about that piece of furniture was that it became a fixture in our home for the next fifteen years. It became a symbol of what can happen when someone's determined to finish what somebody else has started.

While I now have a heightened respect for people who can do wonderful things with wood, I have not personally acquired any skills that would make me a member of that fraternity. That knack was passed on to my older brother and I was left to do something else.

*Afterthought:* The world needs a lot more people  
who can rescue projects from the scrap heap.

## CHAPTER 34

### A 'Queer'



*But whoso shall offend one of these little ones, which believe in me,  
it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck,  
and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.*

*- Matthew 18:6*

There is a very small group of adults in the public school system that lives primarily to sexually exploit students. Mr. Lacombe was one of these pedophiles who actually went unchallenged in his actions throughout his career. Mr. Lacombe taught high school French, his wife was a counselor, and their adopted son later attended the same high school as I did. Both my brother and I had Mr. Lacombe as a French teacher for the first couple of years. The first occasion my brother had him, he thought that something was seriously wrong in this man's life. He was in the habit of asking boys in the class for old runners. When he got them, he would openly place his nose in them and inhale deeply. Among other strange behaviors, Mr. Lacombe had this bewildering foot fetish but nobody thought to investigate him for it. I guess male body odor excited him and, for us, it was just something to laugh about. There were also other wild stories circulating about him paying groups of male students to take care of his garden though there was precious little evidence of any work done.

When we moved to a new part of the valley in 1966, we took up residence next door to this teacher. My brother and I, who had successfully repelled his advances on one occasion, noticed a number of teenage students sitting in the garden with Mr. Lacombe and sipping on alcoholic drinks. The story we got from his son was that he had hired them to do some gardening. We always wondered what work there was for these students to do because Mrs. Lacombe seemed to do the majority of it herself. The truth is that these boys were probably there for his pleasure.

Years later, we heard via the grapevine that he had surfaced in yet another local school district and was up to his sick tricks again.

In 1986, Mrs. Lacombe finally filed for and got a divorce from her husband on the grounds of lewd behavior. Four years afterwards, their son tragically died in a car accident in the interior and six years later, Mr. Lacombe retired from teaching. Rumor had it that Mr. Lacombe packed up and moved to one of the remote Gulf Islands. His sordid life was just another example of a system that, at that time, had no checks on its employees in respect of their moral conduct. If our family was anything to go by, people rarely talked about such matters at home or around the community. What is astonishing is that most students who had any contact with Mr. Lacombe must have known that things weren't right. However, because of a serious communications gap between parents and teens of that era, the truth remained suppressed.

The real problem was that the adults—my parents included—chose to do nothing about Mr. Lacombe's lecherous ways. It rather reminds me of stories I have read of supposedly good citizens refusing to question Hitler in his takeover of Germany because they could never believe him to be so wicked. Suspecting something and not acting on one's suspicions is complicity, and the inevitable result is the destruction of many lives.

*Afterthought:* All it takes for tyranny to rule is for  
a few good people to say and do nothing.

## CHAPTER 35

### Fading Memories



*How then do we keep memory in context?*

*How do we protect against the linear?*

*How do we build in timelessness?*

*How do we develop a circular consciousness of our own acts?*

- John Ralston Saul, *On Equilibrium*

Many activities have the power to draw students together in happy harmony: campouts, games, graduation ceremonies, debates, and idle chatter. Funerals aren't normally included in this list. I've read somewhere that grief or deep sorrow functions at three different levels: the person or persons experiencing the loss; close friends of the grieving; and outsiders who only observe the grief from a distance. Rather reminds me of the cast of Hamlet and those two courtiers who make it their lifetime ambition to secretly observe and enjoy other people's calamity. The deaths of any popular student or teacher tend to put considerable strain on the population of any school. Then there are the outsiders who have no real feelings to share because they lack any emotional attachment.

In nineteen sixty-six, my old junior secondary was no exception. In late March, a driver, who did not see Christine because of her dark clothing, accidentally ran her down in a poorly lit alleyway in town. It was a totally senseless and tragic death in terms of robbing people of a very close friend, denying the community the right to enjoy her many talents, and causing friends and acquaintances a horrible sense of anguish and helplessness. While school did not officially go into mourning—as it had never been the practice in the past—the principal decided to allow a large number of students the right to attend the ceremony at the local funeral home. Everyone who knew Christine really well—staff, students, and community—was encouraged to be there in support of the family.

Since I didn't really know her all that well, I wasn't too inclined to walk down to the local funeral home and take in a service. From what I heard later, literally dozens of students squeezed into that small auditorium, that late March afternoon,

to hear a Salvation Army major deliver a message of comfort to the bereaved and, also, to eulogies from close friends and relatives. It was an open-casket service with Christine decked out in the most fitting and dignified funereal clothing. There was some sobbing during the service coming mainly from a chorus of Christine's friends situated up front near the casket. There were many tear-stained faces of young and old mourners in the audience. For a brief hour, they shared in a common grief for the irreplaceable loss of a friend.

Then it was over! If I remember correctly, that year's school annual was devoted to the memory of Christine with countless references to her prowess as both an athlete and a budding musician. Then the inevitable veil of silence descended on people's memory! Family moved away while students graduated, went to college, started work, married and began raising families. I don't think I had any occasion to remember Christine for many years after her death even when I started teaching in the B.C. Interior.

I just so happened to mention one day to a student in my class that I had lived in a Lower Mainland area in the middle 60s in a particular town. Without showing any surprise, he mentioned that his family, on his mother's side, had lived there at that time and that his aunt had been killed in a car accident on the back streets of the town. There was no emotion in the boy's voice as he related the cold facts. It was just another moment in time that didn't need any elaborating. Her brief life became just another reference point. Not surprisingly, the student's recollections did not express any great sense of sadness because he was probably too young to be truly aware of the sadness of that time in 1967. Nor did it evoke any feeling of melancholy in me because I had no attachment to this girl's life other than sheer curiosity. Strictly speaking, I was a third-person observer that week. I only knew about Christine's tragic death through piecing together somebody else's report of the events.

This same idea applies to the unexpected death of an adult like Mr. Matthew, Christine's band teacher, less than a month later. His was an extremely violent death caused by his failure to stop at a railway crossing one Thursday evening on his way to a school concert. The car was a mangled wreck, and his body mutilated beyond recognition. My father, the vice-principal of the school, identified the body on behalf of the family. He later reported to my mother that it was near impossible to identify Mr. Matthew except for a small portion of a moustache left on his lip. During the days following his death, there were demonstrations of sorrow and tribute throughout the community, similar to Christine's death.

This time, however, all seven local schools involved in Mr. Matthew's band program closed in order to attend his service in the school gym. Once again, I didn't go because having a day off was infinitely more important than dressing up for a funeral. Besides, I barely knew the man except to see him around the school.

From what others told me, it was a typical memorial service filled with eulogies and reflective music by which to remember a man who did a lot to inspire the confidence of his students.

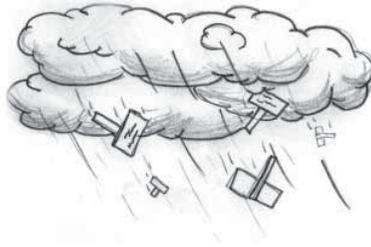
For the following week at school, there wasn't much to say about the tragedy other than our principal making an announcement over the PA about alternate class arrangements for music students. Another band teacher was quickly hired to finish out the year. Word had it that Mr. Matthew's wife eventually moved away though, some years later, I thought I saw a notice in the local paper in reference to a Mrs. Matthew getting married.

Frankly, the only thing that triggered the telling of this story was the fact that I was searching for a set of stories to write about in terms of establishing a lasting record of my life in school, and up popped this one. It obviously has some relevance other than the fact that it is ghoulish, or I wouldn't have remembered it, even if it were only indirectly.

*Afterthought:* Memories often fade over time simply because they usually involve a lot of dead people.

## CHAPTER 36

### Student Protests



*Sir Nameless, once of Athelhall, declared:  
“These wretched children romping in my park  
Trample the herbage till the soil is bared,  
And yap and yell from early morning till dark!  
Go keep them harnessed to their set routines:  
- Thomas Hardy, *The Children and Sir Nameless**

Nowadays, when students protest some political concern, such as the shutting down of a recreational program because of lack of funding, they usually follow a time-honored pattern that the modern media has popularized. It starts with passing the word around a couple of days in advance to gather at a special rendezvous. They walk off the grounds ‘en masse’, followed by a march—with placards—down a main road to a park, and then a slow dwindle back to classes that same afternoon. Presently, there are usually no repercussions for protesting because most school administrators feel that there is some intangible benefit to students exercising their democratic right to protest potential wrongs in the system.

Such a relaxed attitude did not seem to prevail back in the 1960s because principals expected to be in control of their schools, and any show or demonstration of anarchy would reflect poorly on their leadership. Such was the lot of the late Arnold Sorenson, a junior secondary administrator, who was retired early because he forgot to evacuate the school while having a reported bomb incident investigated. Orderliness or the appearance thereof is the optimum word here. Back then, political demonstrations smacked of anarchy and adults generally considered them verboten. Two illustrations of this point occurred in my early school life and serve to remind me of how times have changed.

In Grade Seven, a group of students were annoyed that the principal of our small country elementary school had arbitrarily postponed the annual sports day

because of an unfavorable weather report. The leader of this protest, a friend of mine, rallied about forty students—excluding me—to march on the principal's office with the objective of changing his mind. This was a very creative exercise in democracy in that it included hastily drawn placards, had a designated route around the school playground and through the hallways up to the principal's office. The amazing thing was that there was no tip-off as to when it would happen. The group of protestors made it into the main building before the Principal stopped them dead in their tracks and accused them of unspeakable acts of defiance and sedition.

As was reported to me later by the main organizer, the group got one of the shortest audiences imaginable with the Principal, which went something like this: "If you don't disperse right now, I'll strap every one of you and then phone your parents. Do you understand?" This was the first and, possibly, the only incident in that school's history where the 'riot act' had to be read to a student group of whom some of its members, perhaps, didn't even know the meaning of the word 'riot'. The Principal was one of those old-fashioned types who issued a threat and would have followed through on it if given any encouragement. That was the summary end of the demonstration but the sports day happened about a week later in weather that turned out to be truly inclement.

Another moment of futile protest came in my eleventh year of school when some twenty girls decided to have a sit-down in the main foyer over a ban on wearing slacks as inappropriate attire. One student even phoned the local newspaper to get some much-needed publicity on their campaign against archaic values, and a photographer actually turned up. Those moves probably posed the greatest threat or affront to the Principal—a burly man with a prune of a face—who always imagined himself as being in complete control of his school. In true demagogic fashion, he confronted the protestors in the foyer with the acidic and withering words, "If you don't go back to class immediately, I'll have every last one of you expelled to the board. Just try me on it!" No attempt to negotiate here. Just an incredibly laconic display of absolute ruthless, dictatorial, and raw power! The results were obvious. Some whining and complaining but a general dispersal of the crowd within minutes and one lonely cameraman left standing in the hall wondering what to do next.

These two situations illustrate that the adolescent participants in these protests didn't know how to challenge an adult's authority effectively and collectively. They simply succumbed to the oldest pressure tactic in the book—the unknown effect of a threat. It wouldn't happen that way today because that bluff has worn thin long ago and countless young people have exposed traditional authority as somewhat ineffectual when it comes to a showdown. Today, if students decide to protest over things like the threat to their 'right' to an education, they can



test time and literally copy out whole passages of French and English translations onto his test paper.

I had often been tempted to cheat on exams but always considered Brad's tactics to be a bit risky. I figured that the time it took me to develop a foolproof system for cheating, I might as well spend the time honestly preparing for a test. Everyone in the class knew what Brad was up to but nobody, including myself, was willing to speak up. It was just another case of a bunch of confused and spineless teens endorsing the code of silence.

One day, I decided to share my dilemma with Dad. It was more like a whiny monologue on injustice than a discussion in ethics. As the vice-principal of the Junior High up the road from the Secondary, he was very aware of who Brad was though he didn't seem to pass any judgment on his character. His only concern was that such blatant dishonesty existed in the first place and might set a bad example for others to follow. He then assured me that Brad's actions would eventually catch up with him. My response was that it couldn't happen soon enough. Brad was openly making a joke of hard work and encouraging others to cheat as well. Couldn't Miss Layton, our teacher, actually see what was going on? I was both alarmed and confused.

The funny thing about all this was that I was trying to sound like the victim when, in reality I, too, had previously considered the possibilities of cheating only to reject them because I could see myself getting caught. I was your typical risk adverse character, who had great difficulty following through on bad ideas, even when they looked half attractive. Furthermore, in some eyes, I wasn't really any better than Brad; while he yielded to temptation for the obvious wrong reason, I avoided it for an equally wrong one. Go figure. The only difference between the two of us was that he was a coward who was getting away with it while I was one who was afraid to even chance it.

Brad likely cheated for one of several possible reasons: a perpetual failure to do well on tests; a deep compulsion for dishonesty; and, lastly, an inability to understand how to be honest. If any of these situations were true, I owed Brad a duty to enlighten him as to the consequences of his action or forever keep quiet. Since I wasn't prepared to make that kind of heavy-duty decision, Dad decided to make it for me instead. It was a case of doing something or continue listening to me complain. Parents are usually very good with these tough choices. The plan was for him, as a caring parent, to phone Miss Layton and, anonymously, inform her that Brad was cheating on a regular basis in French 11 class. That was the end of it.

It worked because next day, in front of the class, the teacher made no small deal of drawing to everyone's attention that Brad was a cheat and that every test he had written to that point became a zero. Nobody ever thought to question her incompetence in letting a situation like this go on as long as it did. Brad asked me

afterwards who I thought had ratted on him. Poor guy, he really hadn't clued in. He thought it was a particular girl because she was the 'teacher's pet'. I looked him straight in the face and said that wasn't likely because she sat right at the front of class, and she couldn't very well see what was going on unless someone told her.

In the end, Brad failed the course and a couple of others that he had probably been cheating on as well. Brad's problem was that he was bone-lazy and never cared to apply himself enough to be successful. My problem was that I couldn't bear to let Brad prosper from the avails of cheating. It was simply a matter of an unfair advantage and nothing else. There was no grave injustice or high principle at stake here.

The answer only came to me in full force in later years when I myself was the teacher in the classroom. I reported my concerns to dad because I resented the fact that Brad was getting away with it when I didn't have the nerve to try it myself. In my early years of teaching, I took the position of weeding out students like Brad because he potentially gave learning a bad name. Now I see things a little differently. In my classes today, I don't get all self-righteous about the problem of cheating and go on a mission to catch would-be offenders. I just set tests that are guaranteed to fail cheaters regardless of how ingenious they are in their trade. A hard test usually brings out honesty in all of us. The only reason I didn't cheat on tests was that I knew somebody would invariably catch me—so why try. That is hardly a principle on which to launch a campaign to ferret out cheaters.

There are colleagues of mine who see cheating as so endemic that they have made it their life-long ambition to catch cheaters before they shut down the process of public education. I argue that there are infinitely bigger problems facing the system than cheating. Besides, why rail against cheating as a problem if one is not prepared to take the precautions to prevent it. Generally, anyone will cheat on tests and essays if given half a chance, especially when so much is at stake in terms of outcomes.

I smile as I remember the outcome of Brad's story and go on my merry way cooking up the toughest and vilest tests for my students. If anyone wants to cheat in my classes, lots of luck. He'll never pass my tests anyway unless he knows the material inside out and so if that is the case, why cheat? Since this incident over thirty-five years ago, I have learned to handle issues like this quite differently. I simply raise the bar a little by telling my students that I know most of them would like to cheat if they could but I am not going to allow them the chance. Having acted pre-emptively, I then move on to what I like best, teaching the students to

be prepared to handle tough tests as an exercise in higher learning and not just strict memory.

*Afterthought:* Cheating on tests is like trying to succeed by impressing others with what you don't know.

## CHAPTER 38

### Ransacking the Local General Store



*The suddenness of temptation or, rather, inspiration which (like many that come to an artist) is so quick that he doesn't even notice it leaves no moment for reflection. The imagination sees its opportunity, its prey, and instantly leaps on it.*

- Joyce Cary, *Charley is My Darling*

Many incidents happen during adolescent years that defy any explanation other than the fact that they are bizarre. This is one such story, which demands telling, because it simply qualifies as one of those rare and atrocious examples of kids allowed full rein in the candy store. It happened near the end of Grade Eleven. In this case, it was the corner store just down the road from where I lived and attended high school. As a young teenager, I used to stop in there to buy my cigarettes and candy. The old fellow who owned the store lived in the back of the building with his family. He served his customers late into the evening by having a bell rigged up to the door that would signal their presence. On this one occasion,

close to Halloween, his wife and children moved out because they were unable to deal with his continual drunkenness.

When I came into the store, he was so drunk that he was close to passing out at the counter. I clearly remember asking him if I could have a package of Players Filter. He slowly reached behind him to the cigarette display rack, grabbed a package of Rothmans and dropped it in front of me on the counter. I quickly responded by repeating what I wanted and pushed the money toward him. He was obviously in a bad way and was becoming more incoherent and inoperative by the moment. He kept refusing my money while continuing to press the wrong package of cigarettes into my hand. I sized up the situation with some quick but faulty logic that went like this. If old Roger were giving me a pack of cigarettes and at the same time refusing payment, I'd be a fool not to accept it and get out as quickly as possible before some adult customer walked in. This was a blatant case of situational ethics at its worst.

The big shock and surprise was yet to come. About thirty minutes after I left, word must have got around the neighborhood because dozens of junior high kids descended on the store and, literally, cleaned him out of every piece of merchandise. Apparently, the owner simply sat back, in his inebriated state, and let kid after kid take anything his little heart desired without paying. When it came to my dad's attention at the school the following week, there was the usual investigation and a rounding up of the culprits. Since I no longer attended the school, I was never fingered in the whole mess, and neither did I volunteer any information about that evening.

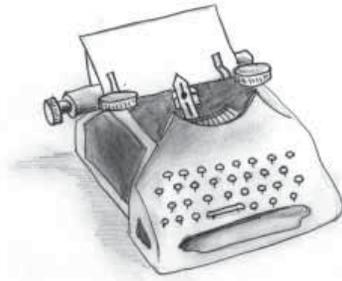
When dad—the 'big bad' vice-principal of the local junior secondary—had collected from each of the guilty parties and totaled the money, there was over seven hundred dollars for restitution. The bigger surprise came when he approached the owner to give him the money and old Roger flatly refused to take it, even after much imploring. You see, there was this thing called pride in the old guy's life. Maybe, this whole unfortunate incident of refusing the money was a roundabout way for him to hurt others by hurting himself. Three months later, the store was up for sale and new ownership took it over shortly afterwards.

In the last few years, I have had the occasion to pass through the area where the old general store was once located next to a Kingdom Hall. A modern gas bar has now replaced the former, and the latter is still what it always was, a church. The real visible change is the incredible build-up of housing estates for blocks around. There is a different way of doing business. This, certainly, is not the world Roger would have been comfortable with, if he were alive today!

*Afterthought:* There is nothing worse than letting  
a bunch of teens loose in a candy store.

CHAPTER 39

## Memories of an Old Typewriter



*The problem of jamming keys has long since disappeared, but generations of typists and keyboard users have been stuck with the Remington layout although substantially more convenient keyboards have long existed.*

- Ursula Franklin, *The Real World of Technology*

The manual typewriter was one machine that dominated my existence as a student more than any other inanimate object. How indomitable was the power or force of an old Underwood or Royal typewriter on the memory of a student from the pre-computer/word processing era? Enormous, when one considers the tremendous impact this technological and mechanical wonder has had over the years: hundreds of essays, test papers, and notes. Mistakes would be carefully touched up with correcting fluid. I can remember briefly watching various school secretaries back in the fifties, sixties and seventies as they meticulously typed every piece of documentation from letters to registrations to final and term exams on stencils and then ran them off on a duplicating machine.

The noise these machines gave off was nothing short of deafening. The return carriage bell, the grating noise of the carriage itself, the pounding of the keys, and the clicking of the back spacer, all were hazards of the job! All these things would conspire to create an atmospheric din equivalent to the steady low-level hum slightly greater than an over-worked fridge or running toilet tank.

For someone like me, who took that one-year of typing in junior high, the experience had other lasting memories. The endless litany of keyboard exercises to encourage finger dexterity, the ringing of an alarm clock to signal the cessation of the drill, the typing room filled with an endless barrage of keys striking paper,

the grating of returned carriages and the grim determination to improve typing speeds.

Old Peters, the commerce teacher, had that dazed look that made him seem like he was both shell-shocked and in his element. Every so often, he would snap out of a snooze and yell for the class to stop if he felt it had run overtime. Back then, I thought it such a pointless activity to learn how to type but my dad (the vice-principal) kept insisting that it would serve me well in my chosen career, whatever that was to be. Well, it did, unbelievably! I never got over forty words a minute in drills, but I was able to use this most mechanical of skills to type many long essays at university, countless worksheets for school, two books and a myriad of e-mails to friends.

Of course, the appearance of new ergonomically designed keyboards over the last couple of decades has contributed to sizeable increases in the above areas. There is just so much more that we can do now that we have the means by which to do it. Just the other day, I took the typewriter out to see if I still had a knack for typing on the old machine and discovered that, not surprisingly, I no longer had it. The keys were heavy, stiff and awkwardly placed.

*Afterthought:* There is not much one can do but change  
when society decides to get rid of old technology.

CHAPTER 40

A Brush with Greatness



*Albeit in his own hall and well-defended, the heart  
of Eurystheus melted within him when he saw the huge  
shoulders and limbs of Hercules and marked the flashing  
of his eye and his stalking gait as he advanced.*

- Charles Kingsley, *The Heroes*

Part of my formal education in high school took me outdoors a lot, where I met people like Terry. He was a high school acquaintance of mine who went on to play professional football with the BC Lions. I had two encounters with this super athlete within the space of a couple of years. One came when a friend and I were playing in a two-on-two basketball game against Terry and another guy at a local park. I was guarding him really close near our hoop when he took a pass and went straight up for a lay-up. Unfortunately, my mouth was in the way and one of my front teeth caught the full impact. Over the next year, I had a black tooth to remind me of that ingloriously painful moment. Such are the mishaps of overzealous youth.

The other time came about a year later when, on the football field in a scrimmage for the Surrey Rams, I stopped Terry, on two separate occasions, from going through the one and two holes in the line. As he exploded through the openings—all two hundred pounds of solid muscle—I hit him low and stood him up. Looking back, I must admit I came out the worse for wear by literally having my bell rung on both occasions. He was one ruggedly built athlete who made a very big impression on me in terms of his incredible strength and competitive nature. To no one's

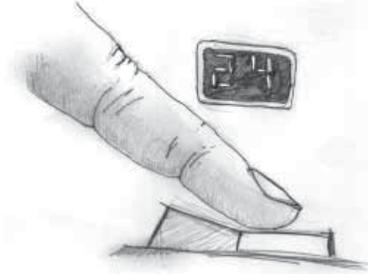
great surprise, he later went on to play nine years in the Canadian Football League as a slot-back for the BC Lions.

This past spring, Belle and I happened to be down south visiting my parents. One night, we were watching the news when a story came on about a fatal two-car accident outside my old town. One of the five boys killed in the crash was Terrence's nephew.

*Afterthought:* Hitting an impact player at the point of attack is often enough to leave a lasting imprint on your conscience for the rest of your life.

## CHAPTER 41

### A Finger on the Switch!



*Where there's a way, there are always two ways.*

- Robertson Davies, *World of Wonders*

One day I watched the Minnesota Timber Wolves play the Dallas Mavericks in a play-off basketball game. It was coming up to the end of the first half when the Minnesota player threw the ball in from the sidelines of the frontcourt with only one and a half seconds left. Instead of the clock official switching it on when the ball hit the inbound player, he started it when it left the inbound player's hands. By that simple error alone, a major crisis ensued. For the next five minutes, both the coach and the play-by-play commentators berated the poor clock official for messing up on what easily could have been an important play at the hoop if the time had not run out.

Watching this spectacle of theatrical second-guessing brought to mind my own short-lived career as a game clock operator. Since I didn't get to play high school

varsity basketball, I still loved the game enough to volunteer for the highly important and pressured position of managing the clock. My first season went reasonably well because we didn't have a great team and none of the games was ever in any doubt at the end.

The second season turned out to be quite the opposite: nerve-wracking, controversial, and downright discouraging. In one game, the play on the court so distracted me that I didn't hear the whistle and, consequently, forgot to start the clock with less than a minute to go. The opposing team's coach came over to the timer's bench screaming about the mistake and asking the referee to replace me. It was a big league game that had a lot at stake in terms of the zone play-offs and a chance to go to the provincial championships. After one more miscue a week later, I decided the best strategy was to resign before things got worse. Nobody in the athletic department seemed to be too concerned about my departure.

My problem was that I couldn't operate the most important piece of technology on the court without allowing my attention to drift. My heart wasn't where it was supposed to be. I was the wrong person for the job. I could never simply be an automaton who flicked a switch off and on in response to the blast of a whistle. I needed to be somewhere else in that gym where I could enjoy the game at the level of real engagement.

This story illustrates another point that there is now a major crisis spreading throughout minor sports over maintaining competent game officials. Fewer people want to do it because of the incredible stress of calling it right all the time.

*Afterthought:* Never let your attention be distracted if you are responsible for having your finger on the switch.

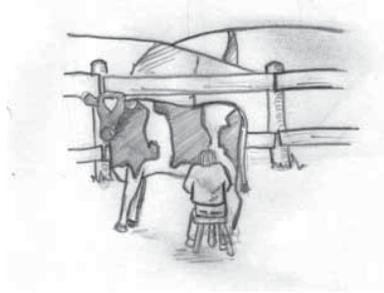
PART III

*My University or Salad Days*



## CHAPTER 42

### Arriving on Campus



*And it is time to go, to bid farewell  
To one's own self, and find an exit  
from the fallen self.*

- D.H. Lawrence, *The Ship of Death*

The summer before I went off to university was one of those harum-scarum times in my life. I was barely seventeen, living with friends, no job, no visible income, my older brother back east in the navy, and my parents having just moved to Trinidad to try out the missionary scene. I had graduated from high school with a scholarship to attend university but other than that little to claim in the way of marketable job skills. For those two months leading up to my first year, I lived with a family out in the country who took pity on me because I was kind of stranded with only the clothes on my back. In retrospect, that period was the beginning of both an unsettling and exciting time as I looked out onto the future with very few ideas of my own except self-preservation. I was a vessel ready to be filled.

There was that sense that I didn't have many options open to me except university. Even the Armed Forces recruiting centre turned me down when I tried to sign up at the end of high school: too young, out of shape, unkempt and slightly confused as to why I was there in the first place. A summer out on the farm—clearing bush, painting barns, milking cows, and whiling the evenings away—at least got me partially focused on enrolling for college that fall. I certainly didn't want to do these activities for the rest of my life, and I don't think my benefactors had that in mind either. Bob, my boyhood friend and the son of the family, was just finishing off his fifth year and planning to start teaching a few months hence.

With September closing in, I was in a state of betwixt and between how I would actually pull this off. I had sent my application in for admissions just before the end of school and had received a tentative acceptance pending my high

school transcripts. At the same time, for a small deposit, the university guaranteed a spot in residence. None of this was the problem. It came down to a matter of how I was to get from the farm to the campus when no one seemed willing to take me at the time I needed to go. I had a few belongings—mainly clothes, books, and a few keepsakes—all stuffed in a duffel bag that dad had given me from his air force days.

During those final days before the opening of the fall session, I was ready to go but nobody to take me; everyone on the farm was truly preoccupied. In my desperation, my mind cast back to a friend named Daryl, from earlier school days, who actually lived nearby. I hadn't seen him in years so why not invite him over for a visit to renew our acquaintance and then, just maybe, ask him for a lift to campus. When I phoned him that Saturday afternoon, I was relieved to learn that he was quite willing to take me out to the university.

During the course of that Sunday afternoon, Daryl and I talked about old times at school five or six years previously and the things that had radically changed for both of us since. However, he still had the old trademark buzz cut for a hairdo, had a mill job, a decent car, a girl friend and, furthermore, was an elder-in-training in his church. What a study in contrast to me! Unshaven, long hair, smelling of smoke, and slightly disarranged. After the hour of pleasantries at the house, I said my good-byes to the family that had befriended me and jumped into a car with a person I used to call a friend but now only needed to get me out to campus.

This is where it gets very interesting! As he drove down the highway into the big city, he started to share with me the real reason for offering me a ride. During the last number of years after we had parted at the end of Grade Eight, Daryl had got involved with the Jehovah Witnesses through an uncle of his. As a relatively new convert in the Watchtower organization who had taken some instruction on how to do one-on-one witnessing, Daryl was earnestly reaching out to me as a new prospect. He wanted to know my views on the future of the earth, Jehovah's judgment of the world, the need to be secure against approaching calamities, and the need to be one of those hundred and forty-four thousand redeemed.

For a whole hour, he carefully explained how his religious beliefs had made a big difference in his life. Always one for getting into lively debates over matters such as truth and religious affiliation, I probably had lots to say though I can't recall any specific responses. My mind was likely set on getting to campus and Daryl's nagging presence was only a minor irritant that I had to endure.

As we pulled into the parking lot to unload my gear, I turned to Daryl and thanked him profusely for driving me out, and said that I would be in touch with him in the very near future. In turn, he wished me the very best in my new career and hoped to be checking in on me from time to time. He helped me inside the residence and then quickly disappeared out of my life just like that. Thirty-five

years later and those expectations of renewing an old friendship have never materialized.

*Afterthought:* How long can a friendship be depended on?  
As long as it takes one to get to the next stage of life.

## CHAPTER 43

### Nightmares Can be Very Real!



*The King of Israel answered, "Tell him: One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off."*

*- 1 Kings 20:11*

I had a nightmare in my first year of university that was the equivalent of finding oneself in an impossible situation with no way of escape. I was in the process of studying for a first-year history course and had just received a call from the Ministry of Education informing me that I had not finished off a high school French course (not my strong suit). As a result, I would have to complete it before receiving my high school graduation in order to enroll in university. All the dream did at the time was compound the already existing anguish that came with adjusting to university life.

Unknown to me at this time, the same scenario was actually playing out with a friend of mine. Ray enrolled at university at the same time with one exception: he had not officially completed his Grade 12 graduation. This anomaly was the result of the Ministry mistakenly granting him graduation status in spite of not passing the Chemistry 12 government exam. It was quite likely that Ray had successfully

dealt with this oversight by convincing himself that it was official if the Ministry said so. The end of term rolled around, and Ray turned up for one of his exams on campus. That was the last time any of us saw him as a university student. There are only two possible explanations for his disappearance: either Ray found the work too hard and left, or he got a letter from the Ministry saying that he still had some work to finish before calling himself a high school graduate.

How would I have resolved this distressing revelation? I'm not sure but I am content to leave it to that pile of unresolved worst nightmares. Otherwise, I would probably want to clear up the 'overhang' and move on with my life rather than trying to avoid it.

*Afterthought:* Nightmares are usually the product of over-wrought imaginations. On a rare occasion, they might prove to be very real.

## CHAPTER 44

### Writing a Test



*It is not true that the educator is the one who educates,  
and the child always the one to be educated.*

*- Carl G. Jung, Psychology and Education*

One of the preliminary requirements for entering first-year University back in the sixties was to write a major intelligence-aptitude test covering six cognitive areas including reading comprehension, analysis and expository writing. The can-

didate had to sit for five hours on a Saturday just before classes to write this battery of tests as a way of proving that he had the stuff to make it through an undergraduate program. The problem was that it didn't really count for anything. At least, nobody shared the results with me until I decided to inquire—more out of curiosity than anything else—on the eve of my graduation five years later.

From the moment I finished them, I knew that I hadn't done very well mainly because I was terribly unprepared for such a mammoth task. The scale was something I had never encountered before, and I think the university put all its students through the exercise simply to daunt them. While I might have stuffed my head with countless facts about life and had an inflated notion that I knew something, the test showed me to be lacking in the intellectual abilities to use higher reasoning skills. As I was to discover later, I had done so poorly that the Testing Services Branch had put my results in a file marked not likely to make it past first year. I was coming to the big campus as a callow youth with an inflated opinion of himself and an uninformed view of society. How was that to change over the years, you may well ask? Quite dramatically, if the following two stories involving test writing are anything to go by!

To use a golfing cliché, essay writing in college was usually for show, while test writing was for dough. Since many professors and instructors have to this day a strong premonition about plagiarism, they always put the heavier emphasis on formal testing to establish how much the student actually knows in the course. The teacher usually reserved big tests for two occasions: midterm and finals and held them in either a classroom or an auditorium. The mark was usually out of one hundred and the questions—many of which were analytical and evaluative in nature—covered a great deal of the course. There were generally two responses a person could have to this kind of mental challenge: get ready for it or try bluffing through it.

Many times, I tried the latter with very spotty results. There is nothing more futile and despairing than to sit for a three-hour exam and not feel confident that I was in control of my thoughts. I simply hadn't cracked the books the way I should have, and mediocrity would be my lot for the first year or so until that attitude changed. Since formal testing is one of the most artificial of evaluative exercises in the modern school—very little of the knowledge that goes down on test papers will actually be used in real life situations—there has to be a bigger purpose for doing them. It took a while to discover that tests were not really an exercise in thinking so much as it was an attempt to determine how much I knew about a general corpus of knowledge that represented the course. Reading the text, taking copious

notes, doing practice exams, not studying late and attending classes became the avenues for improving test results.

A couple of testing situations indisputably prove this point. In third year, I enrolled in a history course on the Reformation. The course requirements were rigorous: four major essays, two major exams, four classes a week and an incredible number of readings! I managed to wing the essays, do most of the readings, attend some of the lectures and write the exams. On the last score, poor timing almost proved my downfall. I lived off campus and had stayed up late the night before to do some serious cramming.

Around three in the morning, I crashed on the sofa without setting the alarm for my usual wakeup. I must have dozed off and on for a number of hours because, when I finally awoke, I couldn't believe the clock showed eight and my exam was at nine. That would have been all right if I was living close by but, alas, I was on one of those hard-to-negotiate bus routes that took more than an hour to travel. When I finally stumbled into the lecture hall for the exam, I was half-an-hour late and just moments away from being able to write it. Everything on the test paper that morning was a blur, as I rushed from question to question frantically scribbling down whatever I could remember, which was precious little for starters. What I hadn't accounted for was that a test, under the best of circumstances, is a harrowing experience, so why make it worse by coming late. The outcome was that I barely passed the test and eked out a mediocre C for the term.

Another circumstance describes the opposite effects of the above fiasco. This time, I wrote a third year Political Science final under significantly more favorable conditions. I had done less than spectacularly on the major term essay and was looking for a chance to redeem myself on the final. To do this, I set up one of the most rigorous study schedules imaginable. There was a weeklong review of all my course notes, readings, and midterm questions. At the end of this review, I went and wrote what must have been a topnotch three-hour test on comparative political systems of the west. The result pulled my grade up from a C to an A and proved once again that there is no substitute for being prepared.

As a high school teacher today, I hear many students openly admit they have a mental block when it comes to passing tests. I always use test scores as a way of differentiating between the exceptional student and his average counterpart. Has this generation given up on the challenge of writing a decent test paper because it requires too much effort and attention to detail?

*Afterthought:* Panic can be very real, especially  
when one isn't prepared for the next step

## CHAPTER 45

### Campus Life



*A Saturday, late in the balmy night of revels, the Common lawn  
Full of small groups crossing from dorm to dorm, cruising the parties  
That flared like bonfires in the landscape of campus.*

- Jonathan Lethem, *Super Goat Man*

I spent my first couple of years living in residence. It was a time when I was prepared to deal only with the safe and secure side of life while trying to live within my means. Living off campus entailed all kinds of problems that I wasn't prepared to handle at that time. It essentially came down to not liking the inconvenience of bussing it into university every morning and finding it hard to secure a compatible roommate.

Because of that decision, I lived in a little ten-by-twelve room that had a bed, a desk, built-in drawers, closet and a window looking out onto a courtyard. There was a common bathroom just across the hall and a lounge on the first floor at the entrance. The rental price was just over five hundred dollars a term for living in virtual rabbit-hutch conditions. Linen was available for changing once a week and I had my meals in a common dining room. On the surface, it was comfortable but spartan for someone who was in the habit of sleeping in and having to rush to classes.

The downsides to all this supposed convenience of being just a stone's throw away from classes was that it was never really conducive for studying or having an appetizing meal. For me, the life of a student has always meant living on the edge of the surreal when it comes to putting up with interesting and strange circumstances. First, it was a matter of moving from a very sheltered existence at home

to a campus dorm full of literally dozens of new faces and ideas buzzing around its halls at any time of the day.

Next, because of the potential for socializing in this large milieu of humanity, my door was invariably open to catch anyone moving in the halls. That usually meant inviting someone in for a smoke or a coffee. Not a very good recipe for getting any work done! Then there was the standard meal fare one received three times daily at set times. Substandard institutionalized food, long lineups to have a meal ticket punched, and a lot of forced conversation were the average run of the day. The canteen was open in the evening for those who didn't want to go off campus for their snacks. During those years, there was only a Chinese restaurant and a pub open on campus after hours but not much else. Nowadays, it has become a Mecca of entertainment and commercial venture in its own right, so that no student has to set foot outside its gates to seek diversions.

To go off campus then usually meant catching a bus just outside the residence and riding it in one of many different directions across the city. For many, the big attractions were sporting events, restaurants, movies, shopping, attending church, late-night chat, the symphony, and sightseeing. My biggest regret was that I never established an effective relationship with the city during my stint on campus because I was never willing to go out and experience the culture diversity it had to offer. For me, it was just a case of tagging along with friends to indulge briefly in any number of the above pursuits. I knew that at their conclusion, I would be back on campus living the prosaic routine of a student: eat, study, recreate and sleep.

*Afterthought:* So much about college is legend, so little is true.

CHAPTER 46

Math with Professor Heywood



*There was a young man named Bree  
Who was weighed down with M. A.s and Litt. D.s  
It was plain to be seen,  
From the strain on his brain,  
He was killing himself by degrees.*

- Source Unknown

I was never a strong math student in my high school days. I worked for everything I got in those courses, and when I didn't I invariably failed. First Year Calculus was no different. The course was one of those classic examples of my not working hard enough to make the grade. By a twist of circumstances, I derived something infinitely more beneficial than even the experience of a passing grade. I had a chance to meet someone who truly enjoyed American literature like Thomas Wolfe's *Looking Homeward, Angel*. I often regret not applying myself a little more in that course. Then, at least, I could say that my hours spent in that stuffy, malodorous classroom had not been in vain.

The person who started me on the road to literary enlightenment turned out to be the professor's wife, who was starting on her M.A. in American literature. I met her one day when I stopped by Dr. Heywood's office to drop off an overdue assignment. As the door was fully open, I walked in only to notice a young woman sitting by his desk. Perhaps another student who was going through the same woes I was. I hesitated for a moment as I waited for Heywood to accept my paper. This he did but to my surprise he, then, introduced me to his wife, Cecilia, and we immediately started talking about an obscure short story that Tom Wolfe had written

about home life in the Carolinas in the thirties. In the space of fifteen minutes, we talked—more like I blathered and she quietly listened—about the nuances of the American novel in the life of the individual. Wolfe was trying to make sense of his life in an autobiographical way—a torrent of intellectual bombast—much the same way I was with mine.

While I felt good that someone was actually listening—or perhaps pretending to—I couldn't help but notice that the old professor was totally preoccupied marking papers at his desk. As I turned to leave, he lifted his head from his work and told me that I had barely passed the assignment and that I needed to spend a lot more time on supporting my answers with proofs. Then he smiled and wished me a good afternoon.

*Afterthought:* There are ways of drawing a person back to the task at hand.

## CHAPTER 47

### Tanking



*And Mike will be the home-run king  
Who snarls and waits to hit  
One, loud and long and hard and high,  
Way out beyond the wall.  
So let's get started—What? You? Oh, yes,  
You can be the ball!*

- Shel Silverstein

University frosh were the supposed bane of everybody's existence, especially those who were brash and obnoxious like me. The unwritten ethos of campus residence was that such individuals required snapping into line quickly so that they didn't cultivate bad attitudes and end up disturbing the peace. Such a view may have stemmed from the power-hungry Victorian times when upper class men dominated and bullied newcomers. The practice of initiating newcomers into the ways of campus life was still a rage during my days and somewhat unavoidable if one didn't want to be seen as a sissy or poor sport. Remember, this was a strictly coercive action, and the greater resistance on the part of the victim usually resulted in greater misery and pain. The only answer to philistinism is passive resistance.

The unsuspecting first year man could be ambushed anywhere in the building, stripped, hauled out to the fountain in front of the library and unceremoniously dumped in for everyone to see. There were times when the perpetrators tied their victims to trees and covered them in honey and feathers, shoe polish or ketchup, only to release them an hour or so later after imposing considerable torment and

discomfort. The three that I witnessed during my three years on campus amounted to a venting of mischief, a releasing of collective fury, and an inane desire for attention. In other words, a modified version of a lynching! This emotional cocktail often resulted in an evolving plan that only emerged as certain minds came to bear on the problem at hand: achieving the greatest effects by imposing the most graphic humiliations on the victim. Hence, shoe polish to the gonads, rose bowling, or honey and feathering were well-tested tactics to deliver the coup de grâce to that end.

Years later, I happened to be leafing through an edition of 'Time' magazine and came across a small clipping on a case involving a family of a student suing a major American college because he had been paralyzed from a hazing incident. The amount of damages sought was in the millions. Because of all the publicity, this college board of regents was considering banning all hazing activities on or off campus. Administrators were trying to stamp out any horseplay with severe sanctions such as expulsion. What a change in attitude from my generation when initiation rituals were considered simple rites of passage whereby the individual could be inducted into the vagaries of adulthood with a little fun at someone else's expense.

One of the strangest—and probably the last—episodes of tanking I ever saw was of an East Indian fourth-year Math student. Since all the frosh had been done in by Christmas, the upper-class people started to pick on some of their own and Sindhur's name came up. They pounced on him as he came out of his room one afternoon, quickly pinned him to the floor, and proceeded to tie him up. Almost like magic, Sindhur's body went limp and lifeless as his tormentors started to drag him outside to the fountain. In the end, I think his plan of passive resistance was so effective that the gang got so frustrated at his inertia that they gave up halfway across the courtyard and dropped him on the ground.

*Afterthought:* Give us a few more years and we'll  
be roasting each other over an open fire.

CHAPTER 48

The Summer that Made Me



*One day there arrived a swarm of honeybees.  
They congregated in the wall in the kitchen garden,  
and plans were being discussed to catch them and put them in a beehive,  
and from then it was only a question of summer  
days for there to be honey for tea. . .  
honey to be spooned up to one's heart's content.*

*- Edna O'Brien, Mother Ireland*

My first year in the Arts program had been nothing short of a big disappointment. There were plenty of mediocre marks and one big F in First Year Calculus. I had plenty of opportunity to meet people, party, recreate, fall in love, pick up some bad habits along the way, miss lots of classes and generally leave less than a favorable impression on my teachers. It was beginning to look like all these excusable excesses were conspiring to write me off as a dud of a student. I dashed my assignments off with little planning, did little review for exams, and was always more interested in relaxing in the company of friends over a few beers. Plainly speaking, I should look elsewhere for my future because I didn't have the royal jelly to make it as an academic. On top of that, I was returning home with little to commend me and even depending on dad to pay for my smokes; something, I may add, that did not sit well with him. How depressing!

Things changed very slowly the first week back. My parents had returned from a frustrating tropical mission stint and were starting to build their third home in the space of twelve years. That was their style. Starting over was easy for them.

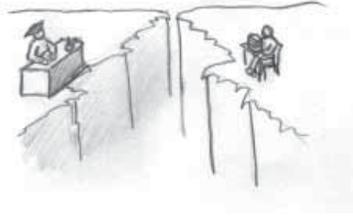
Dad had a good paying job to come back to and they had money in the bank at their disposal. To shake me out of my lethargy, dad put me to work on the building site doing a lot of grunt work such as lifting and carrying lumber, nailing, digging drainage ditches, and stripping forms. He reasoned that the best antidote for my 'softness' was a stretch of hard physical labor.

Throughout that very hot summer, I did virtually nothing else but eat, work and sleep. The girlfriend I had during my first year of college left me. No need associating with someone who needed a serious transformation of character! There was even a time when I attempted to stop smoking with the use of Nicorette gum—the forerunner to the modern day 'patch'. By the time I returned to campus that fall, my whole outlook on life had seemed to change. I had a little of my old physical stamina restored; I wanted to make amends for the less than halcyon first year; and I started to develop some political values from extra reading on the side. It was a summer I nearly sliced a finger off with the skilsaw, stepped on a nail, got in a major fight, and learned to live with my parents because there was no alternative. What a crash course in behavior modification that turned out to be.

*Afterthought:* One more summer at home was  
all I needed to make my final breakout.

CHAPTER 49

A Teacher Who Made Sense



*There was an old man from Nantucket  
Who kept all his cash in a bucket;  
But his daughter, named Nan,  
Ran away with a man  
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.*

- Source Unknown

It took almost two years to find a teacher on campus who actually took an interest in his students. Most of them were academic hotshots and eggheads who wouldn't deign to talk even with undergraduate students, especially those struggling to find themselves in life. Lee was different. Fresh out of a doctoral program at Princeton, he had landed an assistant professorship in English at the university.

Right off the bat, the man opened up to us on a social level that made learning about English literature so much more invigorating. For the first time in my life, I started to write as a way of expressing how I thought. Every sentence fulfilled a purpose: interrogative, exclamatory, and declarative. Every sentence was an extension of the one before it. His love for the Romantic poets and early moderns like Hardy, Conrad, and Ford Maddox Ford wore off on his students because he was prepared to share with them that extra nugget of knowledge that tantalized their sensibilities. In hindsight, I am sure Lee was a big picture person who was always probing for geometric and golden relationships in literature, as proof that logic is at the heart of all concepts.

About thirty-five years later, I just happened to be talking to a younger colleague in the staffroom about the respective universities we attended. My ears perked up when he mentioned my old alma mater and, without thinking, I asked him if he had taken Lee's course on the Romantics. He had and proceeded to

exclaim how meaningful Lee had been in his academic life. I, myself, had come close to signing up for it by correspondence a couple of years ago but because of the duration of the course and the cost, decided on another one. Now that the university has reduced the course to a three-month session, I think I'll give it a shake in the near future. There is a lot I can learn from having Lee as the classic instructor who still likes to learn himself.

*Afterthought: An effective teacher's wit  
and charm should last a lifetime.*

## CHAPTER 50

### Learning How to Think and Write



*What we gain through thought or reason is self-mastery.*

*The good man is master of himself.*

*- Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self*

It should not be readily assumed that when a person arrives on campus, he or she is able to write and think at a competent level. If universities personify everything that is pure and wonderful about the world of reason, they must have an extremely difficult job keeping that image intact with philistines like me wandering their halls. I honestly did not learn how to think clearly through an intellectual or, for that matter, a practical problem until well into second year, and only after third year could I effectively write about it.

I could verbalize all right because nobody really listens very intently anyway. It might have been a case of not having enough exposure to ideas and time to think them through that caused me to falter in the writing process. Is there a critical mass out there where all three domains come together? Probably not! I likely mud-

dled along until I eventually encountered success. Various teachers and friends encouraged me to grasp the nettle and learn how to put my thoughts coherently on paper. Let me briefly explain how painful that process was and still is. Back in those university days before the word processor and the Internet, I would start with a pile of notes and references that I had collected on a topic. A few nights of intensive reading told me what was available for a thesis, and then the real grind started. My outline consisted of a skeletal framework and plenty of marginalia to guide me as I eventually worked through my often-tedious argument. My instructors often demanded that I present a comparative argument that looked equally at both the thesis and the antithesis.

When I finally got going, I had mounds of notes and scraps of paper from which to construct a five to ten thousand word essay. I always gave myself plenty of time to complete the task because I simply did not perform well under pressure. There were generally two or three rewrites longhand until I was satisfied that it was ready to be typed. The two decisive tests were how strong was the evidence to support the thesis and did the syntax make sense. I usually reserved two nights for doing a finished copy. That entailed hauling out the old Royal typewriter, buying lots of correcting tape, and pounding away late into the night.

It was always a relief to hand the blessed thing in and forget about it for about a couple of weeks while a tutor marked it. Then there was the agony of waiting to have it returned, and seeing firsthand what a person of eminent ability thought of my academic masterpiece. I have kept a few of my essays from those Herculean struggles, and I never cease to be amazed at the amount of thought and preparation I invested in them just to receive a decent mark. Collectively, these tomes represent the beginning of a lifelong process by which I am continuing to put pen to paper and make sense of my thoughts. Since I talk more than ever—as a teacher, husband, father, and friend—it is paramount that I record many of my borrowed ideas for future consideration.

*Afterthought:* I can't think of a more accurate way  
to communicate than to put pencil to paper.

## CHAPTER 51

### Hugh and Dick



*There was a young fellow named Sydney,  
Who drank till he ruined his kidney,  
It shriveled and shrank as he sat there and drank,  
But he had a good time at it, didn't he?*

- Source Unknown

These two characters came into my life between second and third years. We came together in a provincial parks program building access trails for the public in wilderness spots. We were the typical students: smoked, drank, read, discussed, joked around, and worked when we had to. Hugh and Dick came as inseparable friends from another university in the province and they had an invincible plan to make real money that summer. When I first met them, it was over coffee in the camp dining room. During that fifteen-minute coffee break, I learned that they had arrived with a stunning entrepreneurial plan to sell dope to the young tourists who invariably flocked to this pristine resort.

A daring and provocative enterprise but for the fact they made no sales that summer. What went wrong? For starters, they had not done sufficient surveying of their potential market to realize that this area was not the favorite hangout for young university types. Secondly, since their camp jobs as bull cooks did not allow them to get out and canvass the area for prospective customers, they trusted in business coming to them by word of mouth. Lastly, they fell foul to the number one problem that plagues all up-and-coming businesses—the very real temptation to consume the product yourself if business is slow. That way, at least it doesn't go to waste. All through the dog days of summer, Dick and Hugh dipped into their

bag of dope—five or six joints each a day. There was one at wakeup, one after clean-up, two in the afternoon during their extended break, and one as a night capper.

What was interesting to watch in this whole saga was not the gradual diminishing of the quantity of weed so much as the quality of these two people's health. While the kilo of marijuana lasted the entire summer, Hugh and Dick underwent some noticeably negative changes in their personalities. While they had been vibrant and alert in May, by the end of August they were lethargic, morose, and downright sickly looking. When it came time to return to campus that fall, both fellahs decided to drop out: one to travel abroad, the other to shack up with his girlfriend somewhere on an island. Is it possible to say that this was a business proposition that was bad in one sense but good in another? The drugs certainly altered their minds in a harmful way but they may also have opened up some new lifelong possibilities.

*Afterthought:* There is always that outside chance that Hugh and Dick have made a fresh start somewhere in this world.

## CHAPTER 52

### Ted and Bob



*I once thought a lot of a friend  
Who turned out to be in the end  
The southernmost part  
(As I'd feared from the start)  
Of a horse with a northerly trend.*

- Source Unknown

Welcome to the far side of campus life, circa early nineteen seventies. If I ever needed a mental boost to get going in my second year after that so-called disaster in the first, Ted and Bob were going to provide it. They were roommates who knew each other quite well in high school and decided to hang together in college. However, it might be surprising to know that these two characters had opposing views on what it would take to be successful in life. In some magical preposterous way—the symbol of Ying and Yang comes to mind—they complemented each other. Opposites, after all, are supposed to attract. Ted was the hardworking type who came across as a slouch, while Bob was the slouch who gave the impression that he was on top of things, simply on the merits of his oratorical powers. Impressions can be quite belying.

Ted went to all his classes and completed all his assignments like any dedicated student should. He was a math major looking to expand his knowledge of the world by taking an eclectic array of courses from both the sciences and arts programs. He was polite, quiet, studious, attained respectable marks, had a car, held down a weekend job at a local sawmill, and rarely found time to party at all. He was your total package. At least that was the impression. Bob, on the other hand,

was noisy, lazy, heavy smoker, failed most of his courses, had no car, never seemed to need a job, and partied throughout the week.

As an observer of both their characters over two years, I came to believe that the former was heading for a reasonable modicum of success, as opposed to the latter. The last time I ever saw Ted was the summer of nineteen seventy-three. He came over to pick me up for some serious drinking in New Westminster and to talk about his plans. In the course of the evening, he expressed a real serious discontent about his life on campus. He had no direction in life, he hated math, and he wanted to travel very much. There were also the telltale signs of too much pot smoking: lethargy, apathy, and resignation. Ted was just a burned-out student who seriously needed to review his options. From what I was able to determine, Ted, with wild-looking Afro and thick glasses, never came back to finish off his degree. What a pity!

Bob, to the contrary, dabbled in many courses in the vein of political science and philosophy, talked a 'good' line and seemed to be up on the most current political interpretations available. Bob obviously read a lot on matters such as dialectical materialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat and its application to Canadian society. Maybe, he had it all figured out that the long sought-after revolution was about to happen on the West Coast. After all, a socialist party had just come to power in Victoria. When Bob wasn't expatiating about politics, it was history of modern warfare and this, quite often, was over a game of snooker as he proceeded to destroy others and me. Bob finally disappeared from campus near the end of the year mainly, so it would seem, from lack of attendance. Later, Ted pointed out that his departure signaled the start of a new 'career' in drug dealing in the Lower Mainland.

What is truly fascinating about these two odd people is that they were so seemingly opposite in personalities and yet so alike in their outcomes. Ted openly smoked dope and dropped acid, while very few of us ever saw Bob do them. Ted worked hard in all his courses, while Bob rarely got up before noon to attend his classes. Ted came from a blue-collar family while Bob came from a wealthy one, which had made its money in real-estate deals. All this information serves to mask the real reason why these two unlikely guys hung out together. Ted was a 'druggie' who depended on Bob, the 'dealer', to supply them. Ted had to hold down a job to support his habit while Bob was raking in the cash, hand over fist, selling to the likes of Ted and other students as his customers. Ted, the relatively smart one, lost too many brain cells during his stint on campus and gradually withdrew to a less threatening lifestyle. Meanwhile, Bob, the not-so-smart one, realized that it was time to move out into the real marketplace and become a fulltime drug dealer. It

is my sincerest wish that my speculations here have no bearing in reality but given the information at my disposal, I wouldn't bet against them.

*Afterthought:* There is a rule somewhere that says that opposites in life feed off each other.

## CHAPTER 53

### Campus Politics



*The pillars of the large hall were adorned with red  
Fustian and with the tender green of birch trees.*

*Through the leaves gold letters flashed, shaping themselves into words:*

*LONG LIVE...PROLETARIAT*

*- Gorky, Atheism, Marriage, Dancing*

Before I ever came to campus, I had very little clue as to what was meant by the world of politics. Sure, a high school friend—now a big city lawyer—talked me into handing out some pamphlets on behalf of Bill VanderZalm during the nineteen sixty-eight election that swept Trudeau to power. Then, it was simply a matter of style and no abiding substance. The message was, vote for the party whose leader represents the greatest promise of change, especially for young people.

My sophomore year became a time when I discovered the world of political ideology in a hurry, not only from an election perspective but also from an issue vantage. Many fanatical university students were willing to argue some of the

untenable positions simply because they believed in their inherent illogic. The Marxists espoused the notion that they existed to liberate the world's poor from American capitalistic oppression. The Leninists believed that they had the right to unite all socialist forces in a world revolution from some place other than Moscow. Then there was the New Democratic Party who promoted socialism inside Canada. To complicate matters even further, this was the beginning of the environmental era with Greenpeace and the Sierra Club. For the traditional diehards, there was a sprinkling of groups like the Progressive Conservatives and Liberals. It was still a big deal to go and listen to a significant national politician wax eloquent on his visions and ideals. If you didn't catch that show, there was the campus or local press. All these groups—plus many other fringe parties—proclaimed their ideologies in one of two major publications: the *Ubyyssey* and the *Georgia Straight*. No issue was taboo; everything from gay initiatives to opposing 'fascism' in big government was topical. The enemy was anyone who chose to ignore the rights of students to change society for the better. The student body even elected its first gay president in the early 1970s and that's how controversial campus politics was back then.

It was the middle of the Vietnam War era and the social atmosphere was rife with controversial issues that turned some of us into political radicals overnight. A conservative right-wing party ran the province and city hall, and had little time for dealing with the student politics of protest. Then suddenly it was over! The dream of making a difference vanished around the mid 1970s. Vietnam was over, the NDP were bounced from office, and most of us were moving on to work in safe and secure jobs as lawyers, teachers, accountants, or nurses. The jargon of revolution gradually turned to that of financial security and smart investments. I kept my membership alive in the socialist movement for a couple of years more till I realized that times had definitely changed and I was no longer seeing things as confrontationally as when I was a student. I have essentially turned into an opportunist and a pragmatist, devoid of any passion for things unless they work to my immediate advantage.

*Afterthought:* Going through life is like touring the proverbial waterfront. You stop only long enough to want to move on.

## CHAPTER 54

### Campus Sex



*A wanton young lady of Wimley  
Reproached for not acting more primly,  
Answered, 'heavens above!  
I know sex isn't love  
But it's such an attractive facsimile.'*

- Source Unknown

There were some older guys in campus dorms who were shagging their girlfriends all the time and boasting about their exploits to anyone who might listen and revel in the sordid details. There were notables like Nory, the sophomore, and Ken, the senior, who did not spare any intimate details over supper in the dining hall of their lovemaking.

The few times I chose to listen—especially to Nory—I got the distinct impression that what I was hearing as a virgin were the pure flights of fantasy deliberately served up to make the likes of me feel even more inadequate. Nory undoubtedly had something of a relationship with a young Chinese co-ed, Louise, from the girls' wing of the residence that might be akin to play sex. To hear him brag, he was the master of all kinds of delicious kinky sex routines that I had yet to learn. There were times when he especially brought her up to the floor to parade her around the various rooms, including mine, before he took her into his room and closed the door. An hour later the door would open and out would come Louise with a big smile on her face and as tidy as can be. The obvious message from this cheap charade was that they had just engaged in the pleasures of heavy sex as a couple deeply in love and enjoying each other's pleasure. Nory was also quick to

let everyone know that Louise was his concubine of sorts who turned up in his room at his bidding for a weekly servicing.

Years later, I have often wondered what ever came of that relationship: Nory, the smooth-talking poser and Louise, the cute, narcissistic Oriental chick. Sex on campus is much like those proverbial fish stories; the legends start to lose their size after a while and pick up a bit of an odor along the way. This brings me to my second story involving Ken, a good friend of mine in fourth year. He was a commerce major who liked 'balling' chicks wherever he could get them. Unlike Nory who was a sociopath, Ken was a conscientious fellah who tried his best not to brag about his so-called bedroom achievements. His 'modesty' was due, perhaps, to the fact that he had another problem to deal with; he was infamously flatulent to the point of making people sick to be in the same room with him when he dropped one. Therefore, there were these two opposing features about Ken that always played havoc with my image of him: a 'great' lover and libertine but a notorious farter.

In the middle of his graduating year, a single solitary event intervened in his life to clear up this confusion once-and-for-all and get him on track to a more meaningful lifestyle. He was taking a one-term marketing course that he needed for graduating. Because of a more pressing engagement coming up around the time a major term paper was due, Ken decided to take a short cut and plagiarize. In the course of an evening, he borrowed sizeable portions from what he considered was an obscure article in a Harvard Business Review, 'cut and pasted' a beautiful essay, and got on with his date.

The problem was that his instructor had read the article and was very familiar with its contents. Ken went home for the Christmas holidays and, while there, received a special Christmas card from the Dean of the Faculty of Commerce asking him to stop by his office on his return in January. Though the contents of the letter didn't exactly spell it out, Ken could read between the lines and knew the gig was up. His only strategy was to fall on the mercy of the Dean and accept the punishment, which was failure in the course with a chance to do it again during summer school when everyone else had graduated. Unbeknownst to Ken, it was during those lonely summer months on campus that he was destined to meet the true woman of his life and catch the first break in his otherwise dissolute life. In fact, he is still married to her today and she, apparently, calls all the shots.

*Afterthought:* It is amazing how susceptible men are when they fall into the clutches of the opposite sex.

## CHAPTER 55

### A Man Called Ernie



*Several times I noticed on his face, in his look,  
the cunning and contented smile of a man who unexpectedly  
discovers something which he has hidden away.*

*- Gorky, On Leo Tolstoy*

There are notable characters that pop up every so often to make a huge positive difference in one's life in respect to focus and direction of ambitions. Once again, the circumstances in which I met Ernie that Sunday morning during the summer of 1972 are nothing short of uncanny. What this bond led to was a friendship that spanned the next thirty years and brought us together on numerous occasions.

I was on my way to visit some friends up the valley—hitchhiking of course—when a driver pulled over to offer me a ride. The moment I got into the car, I noticed something very different from other times when I hitched. To start with, the driver wore shades, was an African-American and started with a friendly handshake. On the dash of the car was an open package of extra-long menthol flavored cigarettes. As he pulled back onto the highway, he asked me where I was heading, and I told him the Otter Road area. His name was Ernie, and he was out from Chicago visiting some friends in the Langley area. One of them was an old timer named Jim Hill who was in the extended care unit of the local hospital because of some medical complications. As he drove further along the road, he started talking about American politics, and the need for the younger generation to lead the country out of the quagmire of Vietnam. He had voted for Humphrey and McGovern in '68 and '72 but only because he was a registered Democrat who saw them as the better of two evils.

I remember giving him a Rothman cigarette and hearing him say that it was too strong and offering me instead one of his very long mentholated cigarettes that took forever and day to smoke. He wanted to know what I was studying at university and seemed to be impressed that I knew a little bit about how the American political system worked. During our desultory chat those short twenty minutes, we covered everything from his early boyhood in Kansas City, his career

in the marines in Korea, his family, his time at Northwestern University, his present job with the Chicago City Welfare Department to his interest in moving out to the Pacific Northwest. I weighed in with a brief family background and a little tidbit about my political leanings, and then the journey was over for the time being. Before he left me at my friend's place, he took my number and promised to look me up in a week or so.

I didn't give any more thought to his promise until the following Friday after work when my mother told me that an Ernie Harris had phoned and was looking to get a hold of me. I hesitated for a second wondering what this person was up to and then made the call that changed my life forever. He came and picked me up on Sunday morning and took me to visit Jim Hill in the hospital and then over to his friends for lunch. In the space of those few hours, I learned more about human courage and tenacity from talking to one of Langley's oldest living pioneers. The son of a former black slave in the Florida area, he came to the Langley community in his late teens and established a farm in the Murrayville district in the midst of a lot of racial discrimination. One story that came out later through other sources told of the time when Jim went to jail for beating up a man who called his white wife a 'nigger lover'.

Over the ensuing years I knew Ernie as a close friend. I never took the time to determine why he chose to follow through and establish a relationship. He was thirty years older, a Negro and lived thousands of miles away in the American Midwest. It turned out that those features didn't matter a hill of beans. He wanted a friendship and I was willing to provide it. The man was truly amazing when it came to taking photos with his huge box camera, discussing literature and talking philosophy. Later, when I married and started a family, we went on a major tour of the Eastern United States with its conclusion in Chicago, Ernie's hometown. For a whole afternoon, we met and talked about everything under the sun, just like that first time twenty years before. To show how considerate he was, he took us over to the Museum of Natural History, where Belle and the boys could look around while we sat on a park bench and yaked for what seemed like hours.

What was the basis of our friendship? Both of us liked to talk and listen at the same time. A strange practice, I hear you say, but not really, when you consider that there were big gaps of time between our encounters. One evening, in the year that Belle contracted cancer, I received a call from Ernie in Chicago to see how things were going. He didn't sound healthy, and he was planning to see a specialist about some serious back pains. We talked about a number of things going on in our lives, and I promised that I would do some research for him on the Internet in

terms of his medical condition. That was the last call I ever received from the old guy! Any attempt to reach his home by phone proved futile.

*Afterthought:* When good friends leave your life for a while they usually leave a wonderful fragrance behind.

PART IV

*My Teaching Days*



## CHAPTER 56

# Farting in the Classroom



*Gene, Gene, made a machine,  
Joe, Joe, made it go,  
Art, Art, blew a fart,  
And blew the 'blinkin' thing apart.*

- Source unknown

The quality of air in most classrooms today—even with the latest air exchange technology—is generally poor. The simple explanation is that there isn't enough power in any ventilation system to replace bad air continually with good for a large number of students. The little inflow vents for each room barely work. Somewhere in the building stale air piles up and is not readily flushed out. By two o'clock in the afternoon, minds and bodies become oxygen-starved and, consequently, sluggish and inert. Factor into this a student who accidentally farts or exhales bad breath, and the teacher may have an environmental crisis on his hands. The air goes from being stale to being downright putrid and unpleasant to work in. The results are usually major headaches and drowsiness by early afternoon.

While I've regularly tried to discourage my students from farting, there will always be those who take great delight in using it as a weapon for manipulating the feelings of their peers. The following two stories make this point quite eloquently. In the first year of work, I was teaching noun-verb agreements to an English Eight class in Portable three at the back of the school. It was right after lunch, and the kids were settled down to doing a follow-up exercise when Aaron put up his hand and asked me to come over and help him with his work. Little did I know what I was about to walk into. As I learned later, Aaron's parents usually sent him to school with pickled moose meat sandwiches. As I reached his desk, stuck in the corner, away from the rest of the class, a fecal smell hit me—perhaps overwhelmed

is a better term. Most kids, when they do something like this, break down in uncontrollable giggles—but not Aaron! I stepped back from his desk and studied his face only to see it full of innocence. It obviously hadn't hit him as it did me!

I've always wondered if Aaron set me up for this surprise, or was it a case of not having any self-control and no sense of smell. About a minute later, the stink had passed from the corner to the center of the room where kids started to gag, hold their noses and laugh hysterically. Everyone seemed to know that Aaron was the offender. His reputation for blowing 'propane' farts had apparently traveled with him since Grade One. Meanwhile, Aaron remained calm as if nothing had happened: in other words, a sociopathic farter. My simple solution to restore some semblance of order was to open the door to a blast of Arctic air.

Another story concerns a fellow I met when I was teaching in Australia. Paul was the head of the math department at the school where I taught. He and his new wife made a very big impact on my wife and me in terms of the holidays they took. Their idea was to go to a remote beach or holiday area, rent a caravan, kick back and read book after book in each other's company. Belle and I have since adopted that model as an ideal way to get away and have a restful and inexpensive vacation. Having said that, I also learned that there was a dark side to this man's character—a flaw in his otherwise sterling character, you may say. He had the capacity to produce silent farts that were noxious to say the least.

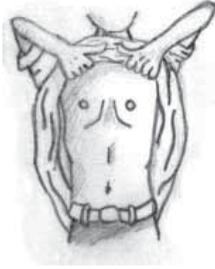
According to a couple of very reliable reports, he used to walk around the classroom and take great delight in silently 'dropping his guts' around groups of students who weren't working effectively, and then walk away with a straight face. The desired effect would undoubtedly be a couple of minutes of mass confusion as students tried to vacate the area—very hard in a crowded classroom—and accusations would fly back and forth as they tried to pin down the offender. The teacher would then step in and restore order. Ordinarily, a person could only use this tactic sparingly because students would eventually figure it out by the process of elimination. Paul's ploy was definitely a simple but devious one of dividing and conquering his opponents. It was never determined if it resulted in better classroom management or relations.

I have noticed that, over the last few years in the classroom, there has been a decreasing number of the notorious farting types or 'bad asses' as I have been known to call them. It might be that diets have improved, or anal humor has become unpopular, or this generation of learners appreciates clean air more than previous ones.

*Afterthought:* Any kind of gas, as part of its expanding nature,  
has a habit of seeking out the most inaccessible spots.

## CHAPTER 57

### A Ridiculous Sight



*Be careful what you wish. You may get what you ask for.*

- Variation on a Chinese Proverb

A word of wisdom to teachers who insist that students do exactly as told: be careful, you might get more than you asked for. A case in point: in my first year of teaching, young Daniel came into my English class encased in a heavy parka. It was the middle of winter, and I had jacked up the temperature in the portable to compensate for the blustery cold day outside. He was a small boy to start with, and the coat seemed to engulf him like a huge cocoon.

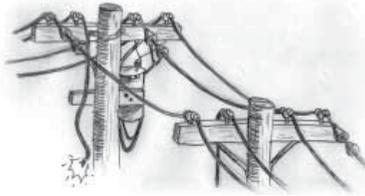
Just as class got under way, I asked Daniel to take his coat off because it was now overly warm in the room, and its very bulkiness seemed to encumber his work. He outright refused! This in turn set up the classic confrontation that most students enjoy—a showdown with teacher versus student. After my nagging and threatening him for about a minute, Daniel reluctantly gave in and started to take off his oversized, fur-lined, waterproof jacket that had a unique hood and visor. I never saw the class so quiet and filled with expectation. In retrospect, it is likely they knew something I didn't and were willing to let this drama play out at my expense since I was unwilling to back down. Daniel had nothing on under the jacket—just a bare chest. This immediately prompted howls of laughter from the class! I guess it was just one of those days when Mum had not got the washing done on time.

Daniel is presently a major broadcaster somewhere in Western Canada. Every time I hear his name, I can't help but think of that zany incident thirty years ago when I had to coax him into taking off his parka.

*Afterthought:* In most social settings, a man  
looks ridiculous without his clothes.

## CHAPTER 58

### A Confused Parent



*A diller, a dollar,  
A ten o'clock scholar,  
Why do you come so soon?  
You used to come at ten o'clock.  
Now you come at noon!*

- Source Unknown

There are times when the lines of communication between teacher and parents break down completely and confusion reigns. It is at this point that the tough questions are asked, the awkward responses given, and the dissatisfaction registered. I have experienced these times and have learned to handle them graciously. After all, the parent is usually searching for answers to educational problems that continually bedevil him and his child.

One such situation happened many years before I ever got into teaching but always stood out as a reminder of the ultimate sample of confusion to avoid. A boyhood friend, George, was in the Grade Four class at a rural elementary. At the end of the school year in June, he eagerly expected to pass the year and move on to Grade Five. When Ms. Falconer handed him his report card, he was happy to learn he had passed. In the section reserved for the traditional teacher's comments, George learned that she had congratulated him on passing the year and wished him a pleasant summer.

Short-lived was his joy when he turned to the back where the promotion was 'certified' by the all-important principal's signature. There, to his dismay, were the fateful words, 'assigned to Grade Four for September'. George was understandably stunned at the sudden reversal of fortune. The rest of the class, by now, was excited at the arrival of the summer holidays ahead and the fact that most of them were going on to the next grade. No one, in his right mind, would want to stay behind and endure another year of the same assignments, lose touch with one's friends and have to endure the shame of being labeled a failure. The all-time re-

cord, in my lifetime, for failing Grade One was twice, which meant the student, in this case, had to spend three years learning his ABC's and how to read.

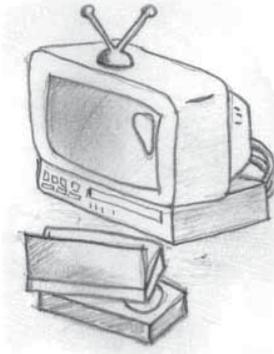
When George took his report card home that afternoon and showed it to his dad, there were now two confused people as to its conflicting messages. Mr. McCord took the report card in hand, got in the car and drove over to the school to have a word with the principal. His only explanation was that, in a situation such as this, the principal has the last word. Someone had made a mistake but, just the same, George would have to take Grade Four over again. It was that simple. George's grades throughout the year showed a serious need for improvement in areas like arithmetic, writing and reading. Repeating the grade would make all the difference. One must remember that this happened back in the mid-fifties when there was little recourse of appeal to the school board. The principal's word was final. George's dad might have come with a well-prepared argument that someone had made a mistake but left with a sense of frustrated resignation and bad news for his son. George repeated Grade Four and eventually dropped out of school at Grade Seven.

Today, this scenario might have been vastly different with programs such as learning assistance to slot George into so that he could keep up with his peers. You might get the occasional situation where the parents request their child repeat the grade because of a serious skill deficiency, though this is rare. The result is that many kids, who the schools socially promote, generally run out of special programs by the ninth or tenth grade and quit.

*Afterthought:* Teaching is like many professions. Saying what you mean does not always mean what you say.

CHAPTER 59

A Truly Laid-Back Teacher



*Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:  
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have known.*

- W.H. Auden, *The Unknown Citizen*

When I first started teaching thirty-two years ago, I had limited exposure to what was acceptable in terms of teaching conduct on and off the job. Siegfried, the school French teacher, was one of those memorable characters who expressed everything that could be uncharacteristic of a teacher. His sole concept or value was to entertain the students with games and movies; his one enforceable standard in the classroom was to agree to whatever the kids wanted, and his only set of clothes was a dirty white turtleneck and black pants. His only friend consisted of a dachshund named Barbie. At the back of his classroom was a shopping cart full of videos of all descriptions. No student ever got less than an 'A' in his class for just being there. The bohemian that he was prevented him from really ever caring about what anyone said on these matters. I never remember him wearing anything else but a 'white' turtleneck, black jeans and a leather jacket.

Years later, after the district had finally forced him to resign, he was reported to have made a serious bid for another job in an adjoining district. What gall! Perhaps, he thought people had forgotten what he was like and would be willing to give him another chance. Not in this small town where stories continue to circulate for generations afterwards! One of the incidents took place in his first year of teaching when he used his classroom as his residence after hours. The principal drew the line when he started keeping his dog on site. During those months, Siegfried had moved in assuming it was his new home. After moving out, he continued

to play his saxophone in his classroom most weeknights after coming back from the bars. Not a normal, respectable image to have as a teacher!

In the classroom, Siegfried would usually open with the standard line that there were three options for the class that day: a game of French bingo, a video, or an exercise out of the textbook. With such options available, it is not hard to understand why students did very little constructive work in his classes. He used to sign out all kinds of unrelated videos and films from the district resource center to show as the need arose. That was usually four times a day. He had a shopping cart available at the back of his room to hold them. He was always smart enough to have a back-up lesson around just in case the principal dropped in for an unscheduled visit. During one of his many showings, in which the lights were off, certain students apparently stuffed part of an old salmon into the radiator duct, resulting in a horrible smell in the room. Once again, nothing seemed to bother him. He simply opened the windows to clear the air.

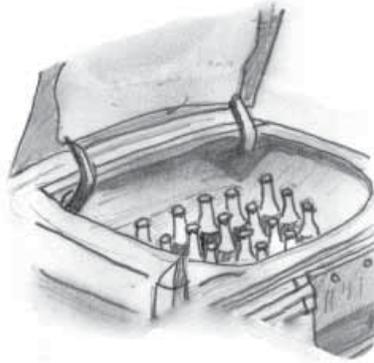
This charade lasted ten years before an indiscretion finally caught up with him. He showed one video too many. Apparently, one day, while he was in the staffroom, he noticed a video in the return box to the resource center. Without even checking the title or even previewing it, he grabbed it for a same-day showing for his junior French class while he did some other business outside the school. Much to his later consternation, it turned out to be a rather frank discussion of teenage sexuality, which eventually led to some rather harsh parental complaints as to the suitability of the film. Siegfried wisely added up his chances of surviving this latest attack on his competency, quietly submitted his resignation and left town within twenty-four hours.

There are so many safeguards built into the present educational system that a dud like Siegfried would never be able to fool others that he could teach. Today, superintendents double check references as a way of preventing undesirables working in the classroom. Back then, there was little attention given to background checks. Anyone coming through town claiming to be able to speak and teach French was virtually hired sight unseen.

*Afterthought:* Contrarians are the hardest people to dislodge from a system. Nobody knows if they're really a genius or a fool.

## CHAPTER 60

# The Expedient Thing



*One of the most striking differences between a cat and a lie  
is that a cat only has nine lives.*

- Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

There are many predicaments in public education that a teaching college or university never quite prepares its students to handle. Frankly, there isn't a whole lot of theory that covers the weird and unpredictable. If the unexpected and strange happens, one is usually forced to resort to a quick, seat-of-the-pants decision that often results in attempting to turn a blind-eye to the problem. Hopefully, it goes away or it doesn't come back to haunt one's career.

This story took place over twenty-five years ago. At the time, I was a young teacher who had taken on the responsibility of co-coaching and sponsoring the Senior Boys volleyball team that year. Part of my duties involved driving a competitive team to a number of provincial tournaments. At the same time, I was responsible for handling emergencies. Since many of these players were also members of a varsity basketball team I coached later in the year, I felt it was an ideal opportunity to strengthen my rapport with them by assuming additional responsibilities.

Towards the end of the season, in early November, it looked like the team—ranked high in the province—was heading towards a possible provincial championship. As teacher-sponsor, I continued to file reports with my principal about their performance on and off the court. What a challenge that was! Some of these players were proving to be the worst little jerks imaginable. The last place they needed to go was a provincial championship to have their already self-infatuated egos stroked some more! For political reasons, I chose to ignore their cockiness,

rudeness and immaturity in the interests of a so-called greater cause. In fact, I was already compromised by my silence.

The other coach—a former star student-athlete from the school and a local mill worker—was the real driving force behind the team’s success. While he drilled the team on the fundamentals of serving, blocking and setting, they seemed to regard him as a god who had an incredible way of appealing to the whims and fancies of young girls in our school. While the staff—including myself—might complain, he was continually invited back to coach teams because of his winning record. It was the early eighties when schools made little effort to run a criminal record check on any volunteer help in the school. For me, it all came down to agreeing to help another human being provide an ideal training ground for young people and create a seamless fit for the upcoming basketball season. Many of the volleyball players would later become my basketball players, and George would then be the official bus driver.

The whole issue of who George really was and why I was a bad judge of character became evident the night the team celebrated its third place finish at the provincial tournament. It was bittersweet to say the least. Remember, this was a team loaded with talent. Finishing any less than first was essentially a devastating defeat. We all arrived back at the hotel, and George asked me to come out to the car to help him carry in some stuff for the players. Wasn’t I surprised to discover, when he opened the trunk of his sleek, fire engine red ‘80 Trans-am convertible, fifteen cases of neatly stacked beer. Admittedly, this scene initially shocked me. It wasn’t a part of any normal post-game celebrations.

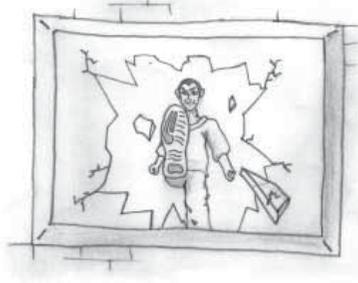
After a few gut-wrenching moments, I grasped that this was celebration time. He was treating the team to a good night of partying in recognition of its hard work. My job was to hang around and keep watch over them so that nothing negative happened. As things transpired that night, there was no school policy handbook to bail me out. There was only one of two choices—stay or leave—and either way my career was in the proverbial sling. As I helped George bring the cases into the room, I knew, by my actions, I had chosen the former. No time to think about the long-term consequences!

One thing I knew for sure, my decision that night put me in a real bind. My employers had just enacted a tough, no-holds-barred drug and alcohol prevention policy. If someone had reported this incident, I would have lost my job even though I was in a tough situation and had chosen to act expediently.

*Afterthought:* Part of the art of teaching is responding to problems even after they happen but before they get you into trouble.

## CHAPTER 61

### A School Brawl



*When angry, count four; when very angry, swear!*

- Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*

I have been involved in a number of schoolyard fights during my childhood but none compare to the live brawl I saw as a teacher. To say the least, it was a very fascinating and troubling event! It was nineteen eighty-five, and I was on a teacher-exchange in a school in Western Australia. This school represented families from the lower end of the economy, with a close to forty percent divorce rate, and a larger than usual representation of aboriginal students in attendance. These demographics exist as a backdrop to what I am about to describe.

On the surface, Cyril Johnson School was a reasonably happy and safe place to teach and even learn. However, there was that persistent undercurrent of social unrest that seemed to haunt the place. It had a reputation of being a low-end school, with many programs for the socially maladjusted, the mentally and physically handicapped, and the mildly psychotic. These students were included in the school as an attempt at social integration. The only students left out were the aborigines who kept to themselves or formed gangs to protect their own interests. A number of my colleagues felt that the root cause of this alienation was the historical recognition that the white and aboriginal cultures could never mix.

It was about lunchtime on this particular day, and rumor was circulating around the school that something big was about to happen. The much-beleaguered deputy head had taken on, as his main task that week, the challenge of breaking up the Jackson gang (the biggest in the school). One must remember that Australia has had a long love-hate relationship with legends like the Kelly Gang challenging the law. At around noon, the deputy principal (equivalent to our vice-principal) managed to get Wesley, the ringleader, into his office. Halfway through the heated discussion between them, a crowd of aboriginal children began to grow on the walkway just outside the office. The room had large windows that allowed outside

ers to get a clear view of any inside proceedings. They heard shouting and saw threatening gestures between the deputy principal and Wesley.

Suddenly, the deputy principal reached over to the near corner where he was sitting and produced a thin bamboo cane. At this point, he is supposed to have said to the other deputy in the room, "I think I've had enough guff from this young monkey. It's time we showed him something." Cutting off young Wesley's escape route from the room, the deputy principal grabbed him, pushed him across his desktop and proceeded to give him an old-fashioned caning. Keep in mind, he was doing this in plain view of a spellbound audience in front of his office window. The majority of this crowd was Aboriginal students.

What happened next was nothing short of catastrophic. Three of Wesley's brothers and cousins came out of the crowd, walked up to the window and, almost in unison, gave it an enormous kick that sent the glass shattering inward towards Wesley and his 'tormentor'. The scary thing was that a bunch of people followed through the breach into that pokey little office to rescue one of their own. The hilarious thing was the scene that followed: two aboriginal girls beating up on the poor deputy principal and the older woman principal (in her late 60's) trying to pull them off. By now, the whole school was in an uproar, and our job, as teachers, was to coral the crowds away from the office area. A couple of smaller scuffles were breaking out among rival gangs in the inner courtyard at the same time.

Sirens could be heard in the background as the local police turned up in their little ice cream-like vans to restore order. Strangely enough, in this whole melee, the white students kept very quiet and seemed to play the roles of bemused spectators. After it was all over, the principal addressed the whole staff with expressed shock, hurt and indignation that such an incident had ever happened in the first place. Such violence was so uncharacteristic of such a fine school. Keep in mind, she had only been in the school a few short months and may have been guilty of confusing it with her previous job in a posh part of the city. The ability of school fights to continue to draw large crowds of supporters over the years might reflect the helplessness of the system to offer any suitable alternatives for such combative sport.

My wife and I had the occasion to watch a brilliant film on the treatment of the aborigines in Australia in the 20th Century. It dealt with the politically sensitive issue of race purification, resettlement and integration of aboriginal children into white society. Watching it left me with the same strong feeling I had years ago at

Cyril Johnson that no amount of effort and good will would ever achieve assimilation of one culture by another. So why even try?

*Afterthought:* Regardless of all the attempts to stamp them out, school fights undoubtedly continue to receive top billing in terms of entertainment value.

## CHAPTER 62

### Revisiting the Class from ‘Hell’



*Don't look back. Something may be gaining on you.*

- Satchel Page, *How to Keep Young*

I struggled with a class in my second year of teaching that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy. They were literally the meanest, little hellions imaginable. Try as I might to control them, no strategies seemed to work. I really allowed them to run me ragged throughout the course of the year because I felt unable to break down their tightly knit camaraderie. Everybody in the class seemed to know each other on a personal basis from being together in previous years. Try and isolate one or two from the rest of the group and you could invite a confrontation with everyone.

All were potentially capable of mastering the skills and concepts of English Eight but most, instead, chose to be slackers and troublemakers. The administration and counseling department proved unwilling to offer any solutions for modifying their behavior. Their attitude was that the students were my concern for five hours a week and the situation should not require any outside intervention. Hadn't I trained to teach school and, at the same time, handle rude and inconsid-

erate children? One of the counselors even told me that I would have a lot more overall success with the class if I learned to relate to individual needs.

At that time, the category of 'learning disabled' student didn't exist. Consequently, there was no help for the weaker academic types in this class. I was on my own and didn't succeed very well at coping with ever-emerging demands on my time. My only hope for enduring this hardship was that I had three other reasonably good classes which, strangely enough, qualified me for assuming a bad one as well. The older teachers on staff told me that it was only natural that I had one to make me human. I was forever losing my temper with this class and then trying new things to trigger some respect. I tried everything in my power to survive this crisis. Keep in mind, this was in the pre-stress era when people were considered professionals if they weathered the storm. I even had a couple of the little jerks come up to me, on the final day of classes, and tell me to my face that this was the worst class they had ever had. Secretly, I was glad that I had caused them what, I hoped, was a payback for all the stress they caused me.

One of the parents, Mrs. Morris, phoned me that same day to ask if I was prepared to pass her son, Stuart, even though he was failing badly because of an extreme case of laziness. When I said 'no' to her absurd request, she went 'nuts' and called me the most incompetent and unfit teacher she had ever met—my first exposure to parental rage. Having endured this insult at 3:00 p.m. on the final day of school, I was prepared to end this unfortunate chapter of my teaching career. However, I have this bad habit of taking old carcasses out to the backyard and burying them with the idea of digging them up at a future date. In this case, it has taken thirty years to perform a post-mortem on this class from 'hell'.

Here is what I've learned in hindsight. I later became 'good friends' with several students in the class, and at no time have we ever talked about that year in English class. Many of those students stayed around, married and had children of their own. Many have struggled as parents and experienced their fair share of hardships and heartaches. Many of these children continued to struggle with their education right through to graduation because of weak work habits. More importantly, I never got to face this class again because the elective system kicked in and sent the students on different course paths through the curriculum. The ultimate reward of having made it through that year is that I even have the privilege of teaching some of their children down the road.

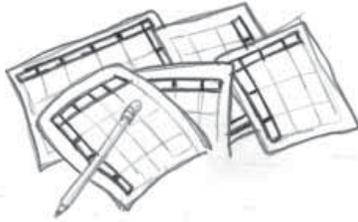
To avoid encountering those kinds of classes again, I come out swinging on the first day with a ruthless plan of absolute tyranny. Its objectives are to run the little 'blighters' into the ground within two to three weeks. No prisoners taken! Speak harshly and carry a 'huge stick' metaphorically speaking. The only reason I didn't use any repressive measures back then was that I was still under the illusion that the system would help teachers in their classroom management problems. When

that didn't happen in 1976, I learned that I would have to use my own sense of survival to enforce my presence in the classroom. I would apply this concept a few more times in my career before I became comfortable with it.

*Afterthought:* A swift resolution of a problem in September makes for a very peaceable time the rest of the year.

## CHAPTER 63

### Balancing a Register



*If life is not realization of a program, intelligence becomes a purely mechanical function without discipline and orientation.*

- Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History*

In the first couple of years of my teaching career, I had to keep a daily register of attendance. As an official school document, it could be called on at any time, for inspection, so it behooved us all to keep it in good order. The big challenge came at the end of the year when the teacher had to balance the darn thing. There were rows and columns of numbers that needed totaling as a way of double-checking for accuracy. Since it was one of those last items of business a teacher did before leaving for summer holidays, a good couple of hours were devoted to the task on that final day. Do the job right the first time and you got to turn your attention to more important things!

The daunting thing about this exercise was that those columns and rows quite often never agreed in their tallying. In my brief experience with registers, I have seen teachers fudge the numbers, refuse to complete it, period, and even break down in tears over the total inanity of not getting them to balance. The overwhelming fact was that, while teachers were dedicated to getting registers to balance, nobody in the Ministry probably cared two hoots if they ever did. Imagine

someone in the Ministry spending their summers checking the accuracy of over thirty-five thousand registers! What these official government documents really came to represent was the slavish mentality that most of us had and, perhaps, still have about obeying without question, even if the task is inane.

Secretaries now keep attendance on a computer in the office. Absences are sent in at the beginning of first class, a printout of 'lates' and 'absences' are made available to teachers during the day, and a short summary is resubmitted to the office at the final bell. While teachers keep their own unofficial attendance records, any quick check of a student's attendance record is done from virtually anywhere in the school.

*Afterthought:* If only someone could have  
sat down with us and explained it!

## CHAPTER 64

### A Practical Joke



*And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, “Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?” and sometimes, “Do bats eat cats?” for, you see, as she couldn’t answer either question, it didn’t matter much which way she put it.*

*- Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland*

Early in my teaching career, I had a senior geography class made up of a lot of jokers and slackers. Much of their academic life was devoted to fooling around and wasting other people’s time. A couple of them even had the special ability to charm you into thinking that they were doing something constructive when they were not. The deviant ones had to be watched. While they were conning you up front, they were up to no good behind the scenes.

As a habit, I usually brought my lunch to school to heat in the staffroom at break time. On this occasion, I was in a rush and grabbed a can of ‘Chunky Soup’ as I was going out the door. When I got to the classroom, I placed my bags—along with the soup can—on my desk. I had this particular class second block and had them effectively engaged in seatwork in preparation for a unit test. Along came lunchtime, and I took my can of ‘Chunky Soup’ to open it in the staff room. As I opened it, the feeling of eager anticipation slowly turned to disgust as I suddenly realized it was a can of dog food. I proceeded to turn the can around in my hand to see if I had mistakenly read the label. On looking at it to see if somebody had tampered with it, I opened the lid again to see if my eyes were deceiving me.

Since I was determined to get my lunch, I got in the car and drove over to the local grocery store, where my wife had bought the soup, to explain my problem.

I remember Alice, the store clerk, looking initially puzzled, but eventually going over to the appropriate shelf and taking down another can of 'Chunky Soup' and handing it to me. In her mind, she quite likely knew that I was the victim of some prank. All I wanted was to have my lunch without any more interruptions.

Over the ensuing years, I have occasionally thought of this incident and have, on more than one occasion conceded the possibility of a clever caper. At times, I've had a can of 'Chunky Soup' hanging around on my desk. A switch of cans could easily have happened if there was some kind of conspiracy to get it from my desk into the hands of the two pranksters who, by the way, were close friends. If this was the scenario, then I obviously missed something because it had to be the smoothest undertaking imaginable. Nah! It couldn't have happened that way. The problem was simply a matter of some disgruntled store employee changing labels while on the night shift.

It is interesting how pranks continue to have a life of their own long after they've appeared to play out. Just yesterday, one of those suspected pranksters came over to our house to give me an estimate for a roofing job. As I looked him straight in the eyes, I thanked him for his time, took the estimate, and said that I might be giving him a call after I had checked out the competition. It was not hard to see that he was eager for my business, but could I really trust him to do a good job on my roof? In fact, he came back a couple of times to press me on the matter; each time I was non-committal. In the end, I took the better quality bid of three, and his wasn't it!

*Afterthought:* In some of life's little mysteries, being able to speculate is as good as knowing the truth.

## CHAPTER 65

### An Angry Parent



*Mules are good if tamed, and noble Sindhu horses, and great elephants;  
but he who tames himself is better still.*

- as translated by Irving Babbit, *The Dhammapada*

One of the most awkward situations to handle in the school system today is trying to placate an annoyed or angry parent who is looking for answers and will stop at nothing to make you, the teacher, feel miserable. There is only one solution to dealing with this kind of difficulty: avoid it at all costs or tough it out. Such an incident happened to me about thirteen years ago. I had just received a very good teaching evaluation by the superintendent. Now, I was back in the class teaching a lesson on the role of the constitutional monarchy in Canada. Boring stuff, without a doubt. Ross, sitting at the back of the classroom, persisted in talking while I attempted to deliver my lesson. After a couple of warnings, I told him in a very exasperated voice that if he persisted in attempting to ruin my lesson, I might be very tempted to drop his letter-grade. What started out as a joke did not end up that way!

There was no real justification for saying this because I wouldn't have carried through on my threat anyway. I had just broken a cardinal rule in teaching: never commit yourself to something that you don't plan to follow through on. However, the moment I said it to Ross, I knew it would come back to haunt me. His face went white, his lips went into a pout, and he stopped working for the rest of the period and, instead, put his head down on the desk. When the bell for dismissal rang, he and another friend approached my desk and accused me of being really insensitive and harsh. I quickly replied that I was likely guilty of overstating my frustrations but was satisfied that I had made my point: end of case!

To cover for myself, I hurried down to the office to phone Ross's mother to explain my lapse and offer some hurried apology for such a blunder. By her cold and unfeeling voice, I could tell she was anything but sympathetic to my plight. In hindsight, it was wishful thinking on my part to believe that decisive action was going to bring a quick end to this slip of the tongue. Two days later, I got my

answer. I was walking into the staffroom when the principal called me over and asked if I would meet with him and Ms. Albright right after recess concerning a complaint she had about my teaching. I replied positively, knowing that I was about to be castigated for something I was trying to forget. I gave my version of the story—for what seemed to be the umpteenth time—and then the mother launched in with a commentary on my questionable teaching tactics.

There was no let up here. This ‘distraught’ woman was on a mission and that amounted to totally embarrassing me in front of a principal for whom I had little regard in the first place but now looked to as a possible ally. She lamented the ‘fact’ that I should be allowed to exercise such strong-arm tactics on a young teen whose ‘self-esteem’ was poor for starters. No clarification or apology on my part would deflect her from her tirade. She eventually ran out of things to say but ended on what she must have thought was her best card; she reminded me that she could have gone across the street to the board office and complained to the superintendent to the point of jeopardizing my job. When she left, my principal smiled and turned to me and said, “Now you know what I have to go through on a daily basis with irate parents and, by the way, congratulations on the good report.” With that final word on the subject, I left the room a slightly chastened but relieved person.

Since then, I have learned to be more discreet in what I say to certain students in my classes. I rarely use hyperbole when correcting a student because one might take it the wrong way. Teaching has become a whole lot more stressful because of the continual challenge of having to know the students in terms of their sensitivity to admonitory remarks. One false step and it might be a trip to the principal’s office for a lot of awkward explaining. There is an interesting follow-up to this tale. Just this past spring, I learned that the police apprehended Ross as a major ringleader in a huge drugs bust in the valley. It is my sincere hope that nothing I did to him back then to damage his fragile self-esteem indirectly contributed to him eventually running foul with the law.

*Afterthought:* The time to be political is when  
you realize you can’t win for losing.

## CHAPTER 66

# Home Schooling



*Others say, Law is our Fate;  
Others say, Law is our State;  
Others say, others say  
Law is no more  
Law has gone away.*

- W. H. Auden, *Law is Like Love*

In the spring of 1993, my wife and I embarked on one of what was, we thought, the most interesting and daring concept known to humanity. We enrolled our children on a home-school program, while we continued to go to school to work. We started this home-school project during the teachers' strike in 1993 and ran it all the way to September of 1997. What motivated us more than anything was the feeling that our boys were eager to get ahead in their learning and the public system was only holding them back with monotonous seatwork. One has to understand that this was in the middle of the era of accelerated learning and head-start programs. Both boys enrolled in a very progressive French Immersion program at the time we made the switch.

To avoid having to do too much extra planning, we decided to use a provincial correspondence program with all its available instructional resources. It was the same as the school curriculum but with higher learning expectations. Our job, as parents, was to get the boys organized so that they treated their lessons seriously, finished them effectively and studied diligently for the exams. As the official teacher in the household, I got the delightful job of organizing Peter's (our older son) work. That wasn't hard because the young man was motivated to meeting deadlines and excelling on tests. On the other hand, Belle, as a school secretary,

took on Eliot (our younger son) and had to help him organize his timetable, answer the questions in full, check over his work, and prepare for tests. Of the two, he was more inclined to play video games so there was the additional challenge of getting him to enjoy reading as something other than a laborious exercise.

Our main goal in this whole enterprise was to encourage our children to become independent learners; something we weren't confident was consistently happening at school. This meant getting them to check out reliable sources, process the information gathered for a wide variety of questions and, finally, providing adequate answers that contained supporting evidence. Over the next four years, we saw our boys become self-motivated, independent and successful in their efforts to master the curriculum. Peter finished a year early with extra credits in the sciences and languages. Eliot finished up to the end of his ninth year and then enrolled in the high school to complete a very successful last three years in the academic program. Both have gone on to productive and rewarding stints at university in the fields of accounting and computer science/technology.

There was a definite downside to all this: the boys did not have anywhere near the social contact they might have had if they had attended public school. This was the main reason for Eliot returning to the high school when he did. In doing so, he made the transition very smoothly while demonstrating a superior ability to concentrate on his studies. In order for this kind of home schooling to work well, there has to be plenty of contact with your children in respect to maintaining rules and deadlines. Children who go on correspondence as a last resort, without these safeguards in place, usually fail and end up back in the public school as castaways.

*Afterthought:* Every so often, individuals and families should do one hundred eighty degree turns. It is amazing what happens with such planned innovations and reversals.

## CHAPTER 67

### What's in a Name?



*Dracula was the product of the wild imagination of the author; the only thing the vampire shared with any historical prototype was the name.*

- Radu Flores and Raymond McNally, *Dracula: Prince of Many Faces*

What's in a name? Not much unless it draws attention to some personal quirk or idiosyncrasy! For that reason, most of us have attracted a certain nickname or two down through the years. Mine was for a long time Igor. I got it in high school, experienced a five year hiatus in college, and have learned to live with it ever since. The story behind it is long and complex, and only years of having to endure the occasional reference to Igor in the community have I got truly used to it. It originated in Grade Nine when another student commented that I had a deep voice that reminded him of a character name Igor out of a Frankenstein movie. At the time, I thought nothing of it. This was the age when we were often tagging each other with names that accentuated a physical or social peculiarity.

As the name Igor persisted over the years, I was increasingly unable to handle it in an effective fashion so that I would eventually come out ahead. I chose to regard it as a direct affront to my character when it was really only childish teasing. When the name resurfaced in my teaching career, I took every step to stamp it out because I saw it as a direct threat to my reputation and authority as a teacher. Over thirty years later, while I may have won the battle in getting students to respect me, I lost the war in not being able to prove to others that there is something infinitely more important than protecting a name. How about a chance to develop some character?

Only in the last thirteen years have I lost my self-consciousness and purposely gone out of my way to draw people's attention to my Igor-like voice. I have told people—close and distant—that my booming voice, up to a certain time in my life, was my formidable weapon that, in turn, may have caused some people to feel

uncomfortable. I now have lost that defensiveness by admitting that my voice is a small part of my character. Get to know me and you'll invariably feel comfortable with me. Continue to regard my voice as freakish and you'll always see me as just Igor.

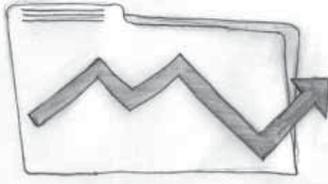
Over the last few years, several of my well-meaning but naïve colleagues requested that I alter my voice in order to become more approachable, less testy and not so gruff-sounding. Each time this was suggested, I reminded them that I was powerless to change something that was as natural as my voice. What was their motive? Obviously, they were trying to get me to change because they could not tolerate my Igor-like voice. In spite of refusing to bow to their demands, my voice has modified gradually because there is less need to use it as a weapon of control as I grow older. There will be times when I will want to use it to instill some much-needed fear into someone like a student who hasn't taken me very seriously in the first place.

I have not heard anyone call me Igor in years. If someone were to do so now, I would respond more out of surprise and amusement than shock and consternation. After all, there is a lot more to a person's character than a name.

*Afterthought:* Can you imagine the amount of time we waste fighting things that really don't matter.

## CHAPTER 68

# Stock Market Gurus Extraordinaire



*What goes up must invariably come down.*

*With stocks the only problem is determining  
which comes first!*

- a popular saying based on personal experience

I've known a good few stock marketers who teach on the side. Some of them have been relatively successful to the point of thinking about quitting teaching and moving full-time into the business. Others have not given up their nine-to-five jobs yet. They all had supposedly reliable stockbrokers whom they could dial up, at a whim, to get the latest hot tips and status of their accounts. Many of them 'fished' in the murky waters of the Vancouver Stock Exchange in the area of penny stock ventures.

A conversation at any time with them would invariably come around to the vagaries of stock and equity investments. Every one had a fireproof strategy that was about to pay off on some very handsome dividends. If you looked in the staffroom hard enough you might find, on any given day, a prospectus or two lying around with a bunch of numbers in the form of quick calculations covering their surfaces, usually near the phone. Aubrey advocated selling short; Jim, anything his broker told him; Ian was into gold stocks; George had a line on junior mining stocks; and Dave only dealt with the higher priced stocks on the TSE (Toronto Stock Exchange).

Then there was another stock junkie who was not part of this staffroom troupe. He came from my dad's era but played the stock market with equal fervor. Bill lived in Vancouver and commuted to work every day in the Fraser Valley to the same school at which my dad taught. The route usually involved going through the Deas Island Tunnel. On this one occasion, around eight o'clock, a fellow teacher who usually traveled the same route happened to notice that Bill had pulled up on the side of the road near the entrance to the tunnel. Thinking that Bill's car had broken down, he quickly pulled over to see if he could offer any assistance. When

he got to the door, Bill had already rolled down the window and proceeded to notify him that everything was fine. He just needed to stop to get the latest stock market quotes before going into the tunnel and losing reception.

Since the turn of the 21st century, I can't remember anyone on staff openly bragging about his or her stock portfolio. It might have something to do with the lean and mean times we live in and the lagging fortunes of stock markets around the world. Professionals like teachers who were planning to retire early on their windfall profits are now staying in the profession considerably longer.

*Afterthought:* Emergency situations often demand practical solutions. It is all a matter of what you consider an emergency.

## CHAPTER 69

### A Nail Biter



*The lesson of our time I sore:  
Having and to have no more,  
Within the smoky reference  
Of life and its indifference.*

- Charles Madge, *Ode*

Have you ever been in a competition where everything in your coaching career comes down to one game or, even better, one play? Such an encounter with destiny occurred for me nearly twenty-five years ago, and I can still remember it as if it

were yesterday. I had coached a competitive basketball team over a period of four years and saw many players develop a topnotch grasp of fundamental skills.

This team held together through all kinds of struggles and only got better as a result. Our goal—as part of a three-year plan—was to play in the Provincials and do very well. In the zones that year, we won every game handily in the round robin portion to the point of almost assuming that if we kept our composure, we would be on to the final. This wasn't a case of over-confidence because the team worked hard and had earned the right to look beyond the next game.

There was one weakness in this argument: what would happen if we didn't play our standard game and, instead, turned in a mediocre one with lots of fouls, sloppy play making and a couple of nagging injuries? To top it off, we were playing the zones in our competitor's gym where the noise could be deafening at the best of times. Unfortunately, the second scenario became our *modus operandi* for that night.

Everything that could go wrong went wrong. The players were tense, the coach didn't make good substitutions, the 'chemistry' on the court in terms of execution was awful, and the home crowd was starting to sense victory. With less than thirty seconds to go, we were down by a point and in possession of the ball in our own backcourt. Our point guard, Dean, drove up the court to center and threw a perfect pass to one of our cutting forwards who had a clear path to the opponent's hoop. Instead of driving right in and laying it up, the forward pulled up short—within five feet—and decided to bank it off the backboards. His decision—based more on nerves than anything else—resulted in a rushed shot that caught too much backboard and caromed off the rim into the hands of the team. That was it! We choked!

Our time together as a team had come down to one play. Losing the game was bitter enough at the time; learning a week later that the team that beat us in the zone championships did quite well in the provincials was galling. Since then, I have taken great delight in tracking where these team players have gone after that devastating experience.

Some of the fellows have turned out to be effective people in their chosen careers while others are still struggling to get established. Most of them retained a love for the sport and continued playing at the recreational level. I did a few more years of coaching at the junior level but gave it up as a vocation because it took me away from my wife and family. There was just far too much time required to put a good team together to have it come down to one game.

*Afterthought:* Never plan for ultimate victory;  
just hope to be there when it happens.

CHAPTER 70

Stepping in for a Teacher



*But he did not listen.  
Heeding but his will,  
At full speed he bounded  
Up the wooded hill;*

- Boris Pasternak, *Fairy Tale*

When we talk about doing exceptional deeds or acts of kindness for other people, we are usually referring to an adults' world. What I am about to tell might turn your view of life on its head. It was February 1983, and I was driving a group of students back from the basketball zones in the Nass Valley, late on a Saturday night, over some very treacherous and snow-bound roads. The weekend had been a colossal washout in terms of little sleep, stress from coaching, looking after the needs of a dozen players and the additional aggravation of traveling over a hundred miles of bad roads in the middle of breakup with no backup driver.

As I got to around Mile 35 of a seventy-mile journey to the main road, I turned to our manager, Chris, a Grade Eleven student and told him that I had to stop for a while for some sleep. He looked at me, then at his watch and said the most unbelievably cocky words for any teenager: "I've got to be home for eleven for a party, sir. I'll take over the driving." My immediate response was, "Do you have a license, Chris?" "Yeah, I just got it last month. You need sleep. Get in the back," was his quick, order-like retort. In robotic fashion, I yielded to his command, moved into the back and fell into a deep sleep—like Jonah in the ship—for what amounted to over an hour's drive.

I awoke only when we hit the pavement of the main highway. At this point, Chris turned around to me with a triumphant grin and said, "I believe it's your turn, Malcomson." Only later did I learn a couple of things about that part of the

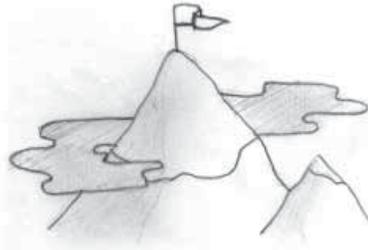
trip: Chris had no license and that things were totally under control in terms of no narrow escapes.

To this day, I dread to think what the alternative would have been if this daredevil of a character, Chris, had not volunteered to drive in my place. Sitting out in the cold, along some deserted stretch of the road, waiting for the coach and teacher to catch up on some much needed sleep was like Hobson's choice: not a very attractive proposition.

*Afterthought:* There is a very special student who can both think and do and not worry about the unexpected consequences.

## CHAPTER 71

### Thirteen Most Useful Decisions



*There is a time for everything,  
And a season for every activity under heaven.*

*- Ecclesiastes 2:20*

Only in the last number of years have I begun to compile lists of accomplishments as a way of taking stock of my life. This list is no different from others in that they only represent choices I have made that fortunately work out to my benefit. Keep in mind that decisions are always two-sided. There are those that fall into the category of free will where the individual naively supposes that he is in control from start to finish, and then there are those that happen because of outside forces such as another person. Here they are in the order of importance!

1. I decided to quit smoking at age twenty-five. I have enjoyed a healthy and prosperous life since. Much of this choice had to do with the fact that I was about to marry a person who didn't smoke.

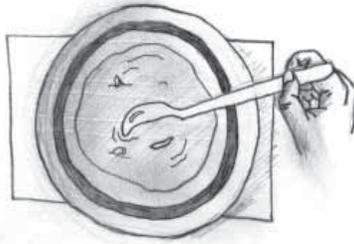
2. I married Belle, though, in reality, she agreed to become my wife and, in so doing, became my main organizer and handler through thick and thin.
3. We've raised two sons—my wife was as much, or more, a partner in this as I.
4. We paid off our mortgage within the first three years of our marriage. It could never have happened if my wife and I had not agreed on some spending goals and stuck to them.
5. I determined to turn around a mediocre evaluation of my teaching performance. It could never have happened if certain of my colleagues had not had confidence in my teaching abilities.
6. I took a master's degree at the beginning of my career. It would never have happened if a couple of friends hadn't put the bug in my ear to get it done. The monetary benefits have been enormous.
7. I helped Belle to recover from her bout with cancer. This would never have happened if God had not put His healing touch on her.
8. I ran a personal best time in the Vancouver City Marathon. It would never have happened if a young person had not hooked up with me in the last six miles and challenged me to go all out.
9. I turned down a principal's position at Spirit Lake. My dad (a retired teacher) advised me that accepting such a job was more of a career breaker than a career maker. Being an administrator today is definitely a career buster.
10. I retired from basketball coaching in 1987. Actually, the transportation supervisor yanked my bus license because of a serious accident I had the previous year while transporting students. No more coaching meant more time to spend at home on weekends helping Belle raise the children.
11. I have finally learned the fundamentals of the golf swing. Persistence does pay off as well as all the tips along the way. The secret is a half-turn rotation on the windup and shifting of the weight forward on the follow through while keeping your eye on the back of the ball. Everything else will take care of itself.
12. I went on a teacher exchange in Australia. Somebody at the ministry-level had to see something beneficial in my going down Down Under for a year with my family. What a brilliant experience that turned out to be!
13. I stayed in teaching when I could have easily abandoned the course during the hard times. Belle's wisdom had a lot to do with keeping me in line.

I continue to add to this list of accomplishments daily. I hope and trust that I will never stop achieving until the day I die.

*Afterthought:* Sometimes it is a healthy pursuit to tally up the blessings in your life just in case you don't understand why you are successful.

## CHAPTER 72

### An Old Student on the 'Skids'



*Will any be as we have been?  
And will we be when we are old?  
Sleep, Mary, sleep. An older wind  
Is rising, and the rain is cold.*

- Robert Mezey, *The Dark Head*

This story arises out of one of the most humbling and revealing encounters in my whole teaching career. I was with my wife in Vancouver while she was getting cancer treatment. She was into her third round, and I decided to spend a few hours, three times a week, working at a local mission to keep busy. It was the annual Thanksgiving dinner, and my job this day was to serve meals to the homeless. The scale of the operation was huge, from the back of the kitchen right out to Cordova Street. The staff served twenty-five hundred meals beginning at ten in the morning and ending at one in the afternoon!

One of the first meals I took to a table was to a fellow I had taught in school nearly twenty-five years before. He had no trouble remembering the English class at the local junior high school. Jerry told me he was down in the city with his wife

and family looking for work. She and the kids were outside in a group waiting to be seated. I thoughtlessly asked him where he was staying and he mumbled something about a homeless shelter just up from the mission. He slept in their car while the wife and four children slept at the shelter.

By my estimation, he must have been close to forty. In the brief time together that morning, my wife's illness and my personal apprehensions suddenly didn't look so important anymore. Jerry's face expressed a weariness of life rather than a fear of impending danger. I gathered that he had come south to start a new life but nothing had yet worked out. Their only concern now was to get a hot meal before deciding what to do next. He thanked me for the meal and promised to look me up if he ever got back to town. Sadly, that has never happened. On that day, my teaching him two and a half decades ago had as much meaning as the fact that he was native while I was white. The food was hot and delicious, the surroundings were warm and dry, and he had met someone he knew from the distant past who was prepared to listen and not pass judgment.

In the last number of years since that encounter, I have not seen Jerry and his family back in town. The rundown shack they lived in at the bottom of the town has since been bulldozed.

*Afterthought:* What is both the best and worst situation you can encounter when you're down on your luck in a strange town? Meeting someone who knows you from your past.

## CHAPTER 73

### A Note of Triumph



*Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,  
See how these names are feted by the waving grass  
And by the streamers of white cloud  
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.  
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,  
Who wore at their hearts the fire's center...*

- Stephen Spender, *The Truly Great*

I want this book to end on a grand note because that is where my career is at present. With God's grace and the wisdom of others, I have realized a degree of victory over a series of difficulties that have plagued me through the years: indecision, impatience, impulsivity, anger, and a need for revenge. I have found practical answers for every one of them so why not take some time out to celebrate with an ultimate moment of experience. About twelve years ago, I trained for a whole year in order to participate in a marathon in the big city.

This exercise was an attempt to finish something I had started in Australia five years previously but had failed to finish because I wasn't in top shape. At the same time, another teacher and I were going to use the event to raise money for a local charity. The daily training sessions were grueling as I ran up to fifty miles a week, and once a month I did a fifteen or twenty mile stretch. I pushed my body to the absolute limit and endured some interesting aches and pains in the process.

On the day of the race, I still had a lingering doubt that, perhaps, I wouldn't finish. Maybe I would fall victim again to the 'psychological' wall—the point at which the under-trained runner powers out. An amazing thing, however, happened this time that illustrates the point that running in tandem with someone else at a critical juncture of the race quite often spurs one on to greater success.

At the twenty-mile mark of the race—where bad things are supposed to happen—I caught up with a young lady who was beginning to struggle with her pace and, like myself, needed some motivation. As I pulled up beside her, I introduced myself and told her, without thinking, that we could start pacing each other to the finish line six miles away. Something interesting happened at that moment. The adrenaline began to flow and the endorphins kicked in.

The last six miles became a virtual sprint between two athletes—one a young college type and the other a middle-aged man—and we were across that finish line in very impressive times. Up to that point in the race, I had no one to motivate me to exceed my potential as a long-distance runner. All my training was stored-up energy that I needed to transform into superhuman action. Just that one brief moment of encounter I had near the statue commemorating the ‘Miracle Mile’ at the old Stadium site made the difference. If I had continued running through the finish line at the Plaza of Nations, I figure I might have run another three or four miles because, as the kids are apt to say in school today, “I’m in a zone.” Ten minutes after finishing the race, my legs cramped up and felt like rubber making me a virtual cripple for a couple of weeks afterwards. I have run one other marathon since.

In hindsight, training for a marathon proved to be the biggest physical challenge I had ever undertaken to that point in my life. I shed weight big time, I honored training schedules through thick and thin, and I was able to work my way through three nagging injuries. I have since used it as a model for working my way through major difficulties that demand radical solutions.

*Afterthought:* When you feel weak that is  
the time to put on that extra spurt.

