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## Foreword

Please be advised that the content of this book is, on the whole, a fictional interpretation of real experiences. A number of the stories are a continuation of ones found in the earlier volume called “Black Betty”.

## Crisis Management



Those who can't teach teachers to teach, administrate.  
- Nortcote Parkinson, The Peter's Principle

The technical definition of a 'letter of reprimand or direction' is that it is an official indication that an employer is not happy with an employee's performance and demands immediate change. This type of notification goes in the personnel file and can be part of a larger concerted action to terminate employment. That great unknown represents the fear present in most teachers' minds when they receive such a letter. Just the other day, as I was going through some dead files, a letter of direction fell on the floor. It read:

'Dear Mr. Malcomson,  
I order you not to confront Mr. Young at any time during his classes, or in front of his students. If you need to see him, you will exercise one of the . . . .'

The bottom of the letter indicated that a similar memo had gone to Mr. Young requesting him to do likewise. At the time, it seemed like such an overblown issue—Mr. Young and me having the occasional heated discussion in the staffroom. The principal's decision to go to the 'letter of direction' route was definitely an over-reaction. However, re-reading that 'letter of direction' six years later leads me to think that it had the desired effect of jolting us into forming a more civilized relationship. The pen in this case might be mightier than the sword.

Over the next number of years, Mr. Young and I patched up many of our differences. Conflicts involving other staff members tailed off too. Maybe, it is just a case of many of us not having enough energy to spend on pursuing pointless issues. However, there is a twist to this story that needs to be told. I was one of several teachers who often didn't get along with Mr. Young. Before the issue leading to the famous 'letter of reprimand', I had never experienced an open confrontation with him, either in front of other staff members or his students. It was just the accumulation of small misunderstandings beginning to play on me. I knew that I would never be his friend but it, nevertheless, bothered me that so much inexplicable hostility existed between the two of us. I honestly did not set out each day to aggravate this man. I had enough problems of my own to deal with.

How did this silly story begin? One evening, I told one of my colleagues that I'd had enough of Mr. Young's negative attitude and was going to force this issue into

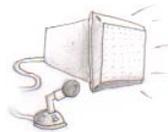
the open. The answer was a crisis management approach: create the crisis and then manage it. He wished me well in my task but one could see from his smile, he wasn't counting on my success.

The only way to pull this off was to venture into Mr. Young's work area without his official clearance. A foolhardy tactic to say the least! With such violations of his airspace, he was known to throw a conniption fit. I did go and got the desired results, which then allowed me to ask the principal to intervene as a mediator to resolve our ongoing dispute. I was under no illusion that this step would resolve the issue but, at least, it might give the problem bigger exposure. During the meeting, a lot of harsh words were exchanged between the two of us. True to form, the principal, in a very firm manner, cut the discussion off at a certain point and ordered us to stay out of each other's way indefinitely. The famous 'letter of direction' followed two days later. Maybe administrators have a place in the process!

The relationship has kind of gone cold again. Apparently, I may have done something to shake Mr. Young's confidence in me so we've decided not to talk to each other. However, this time it is a little different. We're no longer openly or privately hostile to each other. We are just leaving each other alone, in the spirit of that famous letter. Mr. Young retires this year, and I secretly wish him the very best in his new life.

Afterthought: Part of the answer to avoiding needless  
Discomfort is to fix the problem yourself.

## Parents in the School



Consider well the proportion of things.  
It is better to be a young June bug  
than an old bird of paradise.  
- Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson

It is the consensus amongst most high school teachers that it was rare to see parents come into the school to inquire about or assist with their child's education. Usually, parents were too busy, too trusting, too naive or too disconnected with their children to turn up at school to make specific inquiries about them. In this so-

called new era of freedom of access, all this has changed. Parents are now encouraged to be actively involved as ‘partners’ in their children’s education. In other words, make a difference by getting closer to the action. This might mean sitting on a Parents’ Advisory Council, attending parent-teacher meetings, or coaching sports teams.

The following story is about such a parent who decided that drastic intervention was required to change her son’s ineffective attitude towards school. Glen’s mother turned up at the school to check out some interim reports she had just received about his poor test results and work habits. After talking with a couple of teachers, she quickly got the picture that Glen wasn’t handing in his homework. Without even asking the office staff, she went right over to the public address, turned it on and made the following announcement for everyone to hear:

“Glen, this is your mother speaking. You get your homework done and in to Mr. B. right now or I’ll come and kick your little butt. Do you understand?”

From all reports, Glen dropped what he was doing in the gym and took off to the library to finish the overdue work. As novel as this approach might be, it wouldn’t likely work a second time. Glen discovered very quickly that his parent couldn’t hang around the school every day trying to embarrass him into completing his homework.

Where is Glen today and did any of his parent’s well-intentioned harassing make a difference in his choice of career? On the first count, Glen spends his time between two places: work for the town and chasing a dream to become a professional hockey player. He still lives at home and has a reasonably pleasant relationship with his family. On the matter of his mother’s wise counsels and concerns making a difference, not likely! Glen is one of those characters who can make adjustments very quickly as a way of avoiding further hassles. As soon as the problem is over, it is back to the same old attitude of taking one’s time doing things. Oh, I forgot to tell you that he is twenty-five this year.

Afterthought: Quite often parents have a nasty habit of turning up to check on their children’s successes or lack thereof.  
We call these times parent-teacher meetings.

## Two Nice Guys in the System



Nice guys finish last.  
- Leo Durocher

In the last couple of years, there have been an increasing number of incompetent or bad teachers being eased out of the profession, especially in our school district. Quite often, their sad tales get published in the provincial teachers' magazine as a notice of certificate being withdrawn or suspended because of teaching deficiencies. In fact, a few years back, I had to personally fight efforts to get rid of me when a vindictive administrator came after me for allegedly running a poorly-defined special education program into the ground. As it happened, his efforts to have me fired ended up drawing attention to his own ineptitude, but I'll leave that misadventure to another story.

Back to the matter at hand. It is argued that ineffective teachers should never have taught in the system in the first place because they were emotionally unable to handle disciplining students on a regular basis. Their gentle and troubled natures seemed to clash with the brutal realities of classroom life. Students usually see them as being weak and ineffectual. If students call a teacher nice, bright and kind, they usually mean that he allows them to do what they want. His ability to take charge of a situation, either by judiciously raising his voice or knowing what to do next, just doesn't happen and can often lead to chaos. At that point all bets are off, and it is determined that the teacher no longer has the right to be in the classroom.

Admittedly, most of the more seasoned teachers learn these critical management skills along the way because they want to live out their working days in the classroom. Nobody wants to be told they can't do the job. The two people in this story never quite mastered them. They were so inept at 'laying down the law' that their classes became veritable zoos. Students quickly learned to misbehave as though it was normal. To aggravate the problem, one teacher had a serious stuttering problem, while the other had extremely high blood pressure.

Elton, the stutterer, once walked across the hallway to my Geography class and asked if it was true that I allowed my students to fly paper airplanes in the classroom if they had finished their work early. I jokingly said 'why not', so he returned to his class to launch his own air show. Here was a desperate man who

was physically and mentally unable to control and manage his classes and teach at the same time. The students were definitely calling the shots and, as a result, little work ever got done. There were persistent rumors circulating the community that his present disposition was the result of a class from a previous year literally hanging him by his legs out of one of the windows of the upstairs of the old school.

In the case of Alvin, the hypertension-type, students conducted a different kind of warfare but with equally disastrous results. They covered their desktops and classroom walls with offensive graffiti about him and other teachers on staff. Any teacher in the next-door classroom would always be treated to an uninterrupted stream of raucous laughter, thuds of flying objects hitting the walls, and students yelling at each other. Someone commented to me that he never once heard Alvin's voice above the din. Maybe, it was a simple case of it being swallowed up in the roar of the unruly mob. All said, nobody stepped in from the outside to help him restore order.

Both these situations eventually resolved themselves when the school authorities decided to take action. In Elton's case, it came when his senior courses became examinable at the provincial level, and parents started lobbying the board for some serious intervention. Instead of simply stepping in and putting the man on a disability pension because of medical problems, the district administration assigned him to the Middle School to teach French. It was like being thrown to the lions. No mercy or sympathy from that group! He lasted all of three days and then was allowed to go home on extended sick benefits, a totally beaten man.

Alvin's end was slightly different. The superintendent came in to his class one day and told him, straight out, that he was starting an evaluation on his teaching performance. On the first day, he caught Alvin on at least a dozen deficiencies in his classroom routines. Most of them were of the garden-variety kind that one might find in other teachers' performances on any given day. This was, however, the time that the old spotlight swung squarely on Alvin's room and things didn't look all that promising. Lesson plans done on the back of used envelopes, swear words and other graffiti covering a good percentage of the desktops and hardly anyone paying attention to what the teacher was saying.

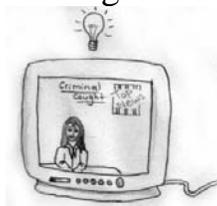
After going through that ordeal for the first day, Alvin looked noticeably shaken and seriously distracted. It was plain that he could recognize the warning signs of possible dismissal. After school, on the second day of the evaluation, Alvin came into the staffroom absolutely devastated but still looking for reassurance. As a man who had come late to the profession, he was hoping that teaching would take him to retirement. At this time of the day, my colleague, Joe, was showing off his new

portable blood pressure monitor to some staff members. When he spotted Alvin sitting on the end of the couch, he asked him to try it. For some strange reason, Alvin –who was normally a very shy man–came over and put on the cuff. The results were shocking but, at the same time, hardly surprising: 215 over 120. As Joe described it later, the poor old guy was lucky to make it home without dropping. The last couple of days had pushed the man to the extreme with a stroke a very real possibility. His flushed and sweaty facial features should have been a warning to those around him that he was not well. This information was immediately reported to the union and Alvin got a small disability pension to see him into eventual retirement.

Happily, there was a positive follow-through to both these men’s lives. They were eventually pensioned off and, in retirement, took up a lifestyle that didn’t destroy their health. Alvin moved south and got married in his early fifties while Elton stayed around town and got into the lives of his children and grandchildren. Twenty years later, he died from the complications resulting from dementia. The fact that they were hopeless at teaching does not alter the truth that they were still decent people who needed a way to escape from intolerable situations. For the powers that be, perhaps, the lesson to be learned is to start treating some of the ‘weaker’ employees with dignity and respect.

Afterthought: Destroy a person’s worth in any system and you inevitably destroy his or her dignity.

‘Truth is Stranger than Fiction’



Life is its own journey, presupposes its own change and movement,  
and one tries to arrest them at their own peril.  
- Lauens Van der Post, Venture to the Interior

There are few places in this world—even remotest Siberia or Patagonia—where one can safely hide from one’s past. The chances are reasonable that someone will pop up who knows you either directly or indirectly. This little truth hit home in a very positive way during my first year of teaching. As a single person and a rookie

teacher, I was ready and eager for a real frontier experience. It was like starting fresh with no ghosts from my past! This meant moving about seven hundred miles from my old stomping grounds to restart in an entirely new community with few props from the past. I was finally on my own, or so I thought!

In the first week of settling in, I began to realize what a joke that was. I learned that one of my student's aunts used to be our family doctor on the coast, a school janitor was a good friend from high school, and a local businessman had graduated with me in sixty-nine. A couple of months later, an old college associate came into town to set up a law practice, and a year after that another college acquaintance came to set up a dental practice. Over the years, all these respective people were directly helpful in solidifying my place in this northern town. They were reference points by which I could determine my length of stay. Each of them offered valuable friendship and a chance to build a valuable social network. This, in itself, put me in closer touch with the outside world. It made me realize that my new home was not some little isolated berg that existed mainly for people starting over again or trying to hide from their past. As a result, loneliness never became a problem I had to work through.

On another level, my place in this community has also been shaped indirectly by some outside influences. That very first winter, I was watching the Fifth Estate one night, when I happened to catch some reference to the L. story about a computer scientist/businessman who was appealing the second-degree murder conviction of his business associate. I was hardly into the program when L.'s brother-in-law popped up on the screen to protest his innocence. It happened that my parents knew him from some previous church associations.

Another uncanny moment of nostalgia came a couple of weeks later when I was watching a Fifth Estate program on the disappearance of a Soviet counter-spy who was working for the Canadian RCMP in the 1960s. The investigation revealed that one of Canada's own Mounties had betrayed the operative to the Soviets to certain death. This Canadian 'Judas' was now publicly exposed and subjected to prosecution because he had broken his pact with the RCMP to remain silent and had, instead, sold his story to the CBC. The guy was none other than an Allan who had hired me for my first job in a northern mine two years before. Small world we live in!

I realize that while these two situations are not personal re-encounters, they serve as reminders that circumstances from our past play a major role in determining how we might relate to the lives of others. My little world does not begin and

finish where I live. It connects to a greater cosmos that controls us more than we control it.

Afterthought: Truth is stranger than fiction because we can't control its outcome as easily.

## The Big Settlement



To us he is no more a person now but a whole climate of opinion.  
- W.H. Auden, In Memory of Sigmund Freud

Years ago, before we had a sexual harassment clause in the contract, a teacher could theoretically harass a colleague, consequently be investigated by the board, and ultimately be awarded a decent settlement with the stipulation to resign from teaching. The commission of inquiry set to hear the complaint faced a “he said, she said” scenario. It came down to determining which side had the greatest credibility. This happened on a number of occasions, and each time the board office would back off and resort to a monetary settlement in return for the defendant’s resignation.

On this particular occasion, the board officials threw in another clause that all teachers in the district had to attend an after-school workshop. It dealt with how to identify, challenge and correct sexual harassment that might occur between professionals in a school setting. For a whole two and a half hours we were, as teachers, subjected to a barrage of skits, role-playing, statistics, videos and documented case studies that discussed the serious nature and prevalence of the problem.

There were two actual indignities that afternoon. First, we were there because of the indiscretions of one of our colleagues and the petty desire of our superintendent to make us feel partially responsible for the settlement. Second, the males on staff had to absorb the nauseous insinuation that they had the greater potential to sexually harass any colleague of the opposite sex. To counter this potential problem, the presenters encouraged us to be vigilant in reporting any harassing behavior to the proper authorities. In other words, rat on each other! What an

insufferable ordeal that session turned out to be: a room of very uncomfortable males being patronized by a few well trained females in the art of detecting and rooting out sexual harassment.

At the end of the workshop, I had even less respect for a School Board's and a union's ability to enforce a code of ethics and discipline on its members. A compromise was struck between the contending parties. The Board obviously realized that it would be unable to fire the teacher in question simply because there wasn't enough evidence. When a teacher's serious faults are smoothed over, by a special last minute deal, then we might have good reason to believe the system doesn't work. The ultimate result is that the spotlight is turned from an individual transgression to a sense of collective guilt as a way of creating a band-aid solution.

Afterthought: It shouldn't be surprising that throwing money at a problem rarely works.

### His Day in Court



“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone,  
“it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”  
- Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass

William was one of those likeable, mischievous types who is resourceful enough to think on his feet in tough spots. On this particular day, William came to me during the lunch hour, before Law class, and announced that he would be unable to make it because he had a dental appointment. I said that it was okay as long as he checked out at the office and got caught up with any missing work. That meant getting any notes pertaining to classroom exercises. When the afternoon bell went for classes, I suddenly changed my plans and allowed the students to go down to the courthouse for their weekly court-watch. We went to court that afternoon without William who was, supposedly, at the dentist. As a rule, I usually didn't check out these excuses unless the student had a credibility problem.

As we arrived in the courtroom to be seated, one of the students turned to me, in surprise, and quietly whispered that William was sitting beside a lawyer next to the witness stand. As it turned out, he was there in court to face a charge of a minor in

possession of liquor in a public place. Afterwards, when I confronted him next day on his dishonesty, his only excuse was that he didn't want anyone in the class coming down to watch him suffer through a public trial.

As it was, he got 'the book thrown at him' anyway on a number of counts: a seventy-five dollar fine, awkward moments before the class while in the courtroom and an unpleasant encounter with his teacher. I don't think I followed up on his lie with any disciplining because he had suffered enough. Furthermore, William probably thought twice in the future when it came to using 'a dental appointment' as an excuse to skip school.

I had the privilege of meeting up with William a couple of years ago. He presently runs a successful cabinet-making factory somewhere in the Interior, is married and sits on a municipal council. I got the very strong impression that he hadn't lost his verve to talk himself out of a tight corner.

Afterthought: Very few of us can tell a lie that won't eventually come back to haunt us.

### A Note on the Floor



For two weeks, I was consistently able to train the snails.  
And then suddenly as the training worked, it failed.  
- Daniel L. Alkon, Memory's Voice

Normally I don't make a big deal about notes that I intercept during class or find on the floor after dismissal. Such scribbling is generally the work of a couple of immature girls who still feel the need to be childish. In a lighter vein, I might read them out to the class if they are not offensive. That way I get to embarrass the culprits and entertain the class.

This particular occasion my reaction was different. It was the end of the school day, and I walked up the ramp to the back of the theatre where a large number of young girls usually sat. I noticed on the floor, in front of one of the seats, a crumpled-up scrap of paper that had some writing on it. Being my habit, I reached

down to pick it up and, for some strange reason, smoothed it out and started to read it. Normally, I don't bother to look because they generally express idle scribbling at best. This time it turned out to be an anonymous query from one girl to another about the purported size of my rigging. There was also some lewd suggestion as to what I would be like in the sack. Initially, my reaction was one of wry amusement that someone in my class would be stupid enough as to waste their time joking about my sex organs. As I began to twiddle with the paper and stare at the contents a second and third time, I suddenly became quite annoyed and angry that certain students would show such disrespect for me as a human being. Consumed by a sense of growing rage, I suddenly became determined to hunt down the little creeps and make them accountable for their wretched attack on my character. I truly believe it was their sole intention for me to find that horrid note, read it and feel personally hurt. Well, they weren't disappointed.

To do that, I had to overcome a problem! Five classes had used the room that day, and I didn't have an official seating plan because I switched students around, on a regular basis, as a means of controlling their behavior. However, I did have two advantages: a piece of evidence and an approximate location. I adopted my old geography teacher John's method of deductive elimination. Carefully compare samples of various students' writing with the note. To narrow the field considerably, I eliminated my two senior classes because I couldn't really imagine any of those girls stooping to something so crass. I then reviewed my lesson plans for the day and found that one class—my junior history course—had been spread out around the theatre to accommodate project work. My major difficulty here was that I couldn't place a particular student at a specific seat. My vague recollection told me a group of girls had sat there during the class but, without the actual evidence to connect them to the note, I had nothing but a hunch.

To determine who wrote the note, I went to the student files that I kept in the classroom and started to rummage through this particular class. Each file contained a considerable number of pieces of student work. To simplify matters, I was looking essentially for two girls who had got into something over their heads. I narrowed it down to three girls who had a similar printing style and decided to confront them next day just before class. I made no attempt to contact the office because I was afraid the principal would intervene, louse things up and let the girls go with only a meaningless scolding. My investigative technique was to interview one at a time so that the girls could not possibly collaborate their stories. I explained my concerns to the first one—the one I least suspected—and told her point-blank that I had strong reason to believe that she was involved in the prank because she was sitting in that back row near the site of the note.

Upon hearing that I considered her a chief suspect in this whole affair, she went into a denial mode. When I insisted that I knew the ugly truth, the tears started to flow. It was at this moment that she implicated two others while claiming only remotely to know about the note through a telephone conversation she had with the main culprits the night before. Admittedly, I raised my voice to help my cause but I wasn't in any mood to waste my time being lied to. I dismissed her and asked for the other two girls to step out. In moments, they had confessed, were hanging their heads in shame and asking what I was considering for a punishment: a trip to the office, maybe? Not likely in this progressive day-and-age! I wanted a bigger pound of flesh. Back in the good old days, such an offence would probably result in a few warm hands, but how times have changed, mostly for the creative better.

Wisdom, in times like this, usually comes in creative leaps and bounds. I remember calmly replying with, "No, you are going right to the phone to call your parents. Afterwards, I'm going to sign you up for eight half-hour counseling sessions on how to be a more sensitive person." In two out of the three students' parents, I received praise for taking the approach that I did. On the matter of the first girl, the parents were rather disappointed that I had judiciously grilled her to extract the truth. A much softer approach would have done the trick, was their argument. I hastened to point out that she wasn't likely to reveal anything about the incident unless I had considered her a prime suspect in the first place. As it was, the whole interview took less than five minutes because I chose to express my anger in a controlled but incisive manner.

Two of these three girls turned out later to be model students in my class. Decisive pruning at the beginning often leads to much fruit in the long run as my old dad used to say. As a general rule, I'm more comfortable instructing upright minds than investigating devious ones.

Afterthought: It's amazing what one can make out of a sow's ear.

## A Last-minute Recruit



A man who is to educate really well, and is to make the young grow and develop into their full stature, must be filled through and through with the spirit of reverence.

- Bertrand Russell, Principles of Social Reconstruction

How hard is it for an administrator or school district to find a replacement for the following year for a mechanics teacher as school is about to close for the summer? At times it is really difficult considering that a lot of competing districts have already snapped up this type of instructor months in advanced. Our mechanics program had lost its teacher to another program through a transfer and so an active search began in June and ended in July with the appointment of Mitch from the Prairies. The interesting thing about this person is that when one first saw him one would immediately think of him as anything but a teacher; maybe a Marlboro Cowboy look-alike in a stretch or some salty sea captain with a handle-bar moustache. Mitch came in with little advanced billing other than that he had trained to be a P.E. teacher and had taught automotive mechanics on a native reserve in the Prairies. He was now coming out with his common-law wife to the valley for a new start on life.

It became very apparent early in the term that Mitch was clueless as to what he was doing in one of the most dangerous parts of the school. Within a couple of weeks, the serious accidents involving students began to happen. The well-developed program he inherited in September was in shambles by October. Equipment was being destroyed and tools were literally walking out of the school never to return. Everything he did proved that he was unfit to teach or be around kids and even adults. His efforts to supervise the girls' volleyball program got him reported for inappropriate behavior. His conversation in the staff room was lewd most of the time. Everything this guy did or did not do appeared to meet with an investigation and a letter of direction or reprimand: more than eight in three months. This must have represented some kind of record for being in the professional doghouse.

By the time semester break rolled around, the district had enough and fired him for propositioning one of the support staff on school grounds. Even at this stage, there were still those on staff and in the union who felt Mitch had been the victim of some very unfair treatment. But those who had to represent him at these many

hearings admitted that every time he opened his mouth in his own defense, he self-destructed. Those responsible for hiring him, in the first place, conceded more diligence should have been used in checking out his references. However, to excuse its poor judgment, the board offered the excuse that the hiring was done out of a need to preserve a program. After all, the references seemed to check out at the time, and the man seemed eager to teach. What more could one ask?

Three years later, the position of Mechanic's teacher at our school has finally been filled with a fully certified teacher, albeit one with very little formal background in the trade. While this new teacher shows considerable potential in running a good shop program, it has been another case of the district being unable to attract the ideal person to fill the position. I am told that this will be a recurring problem for years to come because of the unwillingness of qualified teachers to settle in northern communities.

Afterthought: In all cases, it is impossible to fit a square peg into a round hole, even if it involves administrators doing the fitting.

## The Disappearance of a Student



The end of any tale is arbitrarily determined.  
As I now end this one, somebody may say:  
but how on earth do you know all  
these things about all these people?  
- Iris Murdoch, The Philosopher's Pupil

If I were asked what was the greatest mystery overhanging my teaching career, it would have to be the disappearance of Donna, a former student of mine nearly twenty years ago. She was around seventeen when she vanished one weekend in the spring of 1991. There have been a number of theories as to her disappearance but no real clues as to her fate. There were some leads, plenty of searching, considerable grief and, in the end, very little to show for all the efforts. A similar case, a year earlier, involved another native girl who, too, had disappeared along the same stretch of highway but whose remains turned up a couple years later in some out of the way spot close to town. No such closure for Donna!

One of the saddest situations I ever witnessed happened when I encountered Donna's stepfather in the local mall putting up posters inquiring as to her whereabouts. The glazed look in his eyes and the quavering voice, as he asked me if I had any information, told me that he wasn't having a very good day. What sympathy I could show was tempered by the fact that I was unable to do anything practical to solve the problem. The lack of closure for the family in this drama was most agonizing.

I remember my friend, Victor, telling me once about the relief he and his wife felt when the police finally discovered the remains of their son on the North Shore Mountains many years after he had been reported missing. In his case, he had run foul with a mother bear and its cubs. In this case, Donna's file remains open as a missing person. Her parents still have not given up hope though many of us have long ago drawn the fateful conclusion.

While I was composing these stories, there was a large-scale murder investigation ongoing in Vancouver though Donna's name hasn't surfaced yet in any of the numerous identifications of human remains. There remains a horrible lack of closure to the whole situation. Another young woman went missing this past month while on this same highway further east. As my teaching career comes to an end, seventeen women have disappeared hitch-hiking along the Yellowhead Highway over the past thirty years.

Afterthought: There is no such thing as a complete mystery.  
Somebody out there has to know something.  
He's just not talking.

## Home Schooling—Part 2



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 1991, my wife and I embarked on one of what was, we thought, the most interesting and daring concept known to mankind. 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 teaching strike in 1991 and ran it all the way to September of 1996. 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. We had enrolled both boys 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 curriculum 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 work (our oldest son). 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 and do less reading, 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 of information, then processing the information for a wide variety of questions and, finally, providing adequate answers that contain supporting evidence. Over the next five 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 lots 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.

Nowadays, my school district reaches out to accommodate all kinds of home-schooling types. There is a coordinator who is empowered to cookie-cut all kinds of learning arrangements by which a student can combine home and school learning situations. Young Johnny can do a mix-and-match assortment of courses that fits his learning needs and interests. Oh, how language changes to fit the needs of the individual and not the big concept. It might be conceivable that in the years to come, Johnny will be doing a program that he personally designs himself and finds an adult to occasionally supervise it. That new reality could be called student-centered learning and is presently being contemplated by those overseeing the educational needs of this province. The student learns when and where he or she wants to and receives a certification based on whether they feel they have met their own learning objectives.

Afterthought: Every so often, individuals and families should treat themselves to one hundred eighty degree turns. It is amazing what happens as a result of such planned innovations and reversals.

## A Hostile Parent—Part 2



Mules are good if tamed, and noble Sindhu horses,  
and great elephants; but he who tames himself is better still.  
- The Dhammapada as translated by Irving Babbitt

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 eight 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. Pretty dry stuff, under the best of circumstances. Debbie, sitting at the back of the classroom, persisted in

talking while I attempted to deliver my lesson. After a couple of warnings, I told her in a very exasperated voice that if she persisted in attempting to ruin my lesson, I might be very tempted to drop her 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 appear to commit yourself to something that you don't plan to follow through on. However, the moment I said it to Debbie, I knew it would come back to haunt me. Her face went white, her lips went into a pout, and she stopped working for the rest of the period and, instead, put her head down on the desk. When the bell rang for dismissal, she 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 and I was satisfied that I had made my point: end of case!

To cover for myself, I hurried down to the office to phone Debbie'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. A. right after recess concerning a complaint she had about my teaching. I replied positively, knowing full well that I was about to be reprimanded for something I was trying to forget. I was allowed to give 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.

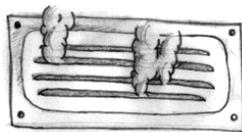
There was no let up here. This 'distraught' woman was on a mission which amounted to totally embarrassing me in front of a principal for whom I had little regard in the first place but now looked to as a possible ally. She lamented the 'fact' that I should be allowed to exercise such strong-arm tactics on a young girl 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: a reminder 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 simply because it may be taken the wrong way. Teaching has become a whole lot more stressful because of the continual challenge of having to know your students in terms of their sensitivity to admonitory remarks. One false step and it might be a trip to the principal's office and a lot of awkward explaining to do.

In the first week of my last semester of teaching, I received an interesting phone call from a concerned parent of very dysfunctional student. She was phoning to hear my take on why I had roughed up her son in the hall during recess. I very calmly explained the circumstances surrounding the incident: I had confronted the young lad over his refusal to serve a lunch-time detention for continually coming late to my class. What he had reported to his mum as roughing up was nothing more a shoulder tap to get his attention. On hearing my explanation, she hastened to add that her son was a bad kid who needed correcting and that she appreciated what I was trying to do to straighten him out. Before hanging up, I did advise her that she was welcome to pursue the issue with the principal if she didn't like my explanation. She quickly responded by saying that she was satisfied that I was telling the truth and that would be the end of the matter. Now there's a parent whose got her head screwed on properly.

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

### Fixing a Problem!



A weapon almost restricted to the Great War, toxic gas could be released towards the enemy from cylinders positioned in or in advance of the front line, but being dependent upon wind direction was hazardous to the releasers in that it could blow back.  
- Philip Haythornthwaite, The World War One Source Book

Every new building has its settling pains. Adjustments are constantly being made to correct problems that were never foreseen in the original building plans. Some of those flaws included fissures in the mezzanine floor, malfunctioning heat exchanges, leaking roofs, and badly hung doors.

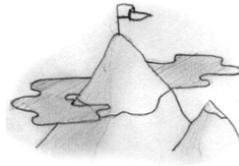
The worst of them all were two particularly offensive ones: the air vent from the teachers' bathroom going into the main air duct and the lack of a proper air vent to prevent sewer gas from building up in the system on hot days. For a whole year, the students in my classes—normally very quiet and hard working—could hear the disconcerting tinkling of people relieving themselves in the washroom next door. Every little sound coming from space was amplified because the normally contained noise was directed out into a virtual echo chamber in the main air vent. Complaints went to the office on a continual basis, work orders were filled out, inspections were made and yet the problem was not resolved until the following year.

Apparently, to correct the mistake required some major rearranging of the heating vents in that section of the school, so summer was the only time it could be done. When it came to the other 'foul-up', the builders had forgotten to install a large enough air duct to release the buildup of gas in the sewer lines when the facilities are being used to their capacity and the weather is both very hot and humid. Once again, for at least three weeks some of the staffroom conversation was taken up with sharing news about the latest gas attacks in various classrooms and the hallways and what might be causing them. Various theories were put forth but, like most things in the education business, nothing practical emerged as a long-term solution. It turned out to be a problem that didn't alarm the powers-that-be, because it eventually got fixed somehow in the list of summer things to do over the following year.

An internal ministry report has been made public recently on the state of school buildings throughout the province. Apparently, many are in a serious state of disrepair and require some immediate fixing to prevent further decline. If my district is anything to go by, I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for it to happen. It would appear that our present government is intent on letting many of them deteriorate to the point of closing them down and, in turn, save a bundle of money. Not an unreasonable proposition in an era of declining enrollment.

Afterthought: Theories as to why problems occur usually only surface long after they've been fixed for the umpteenth time.

## My Thirteen Best Decisions–Part 2



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 the sense that it only represents my life to this point in time and is not to be seen as the final word. I hope to see more achievements up there before too long. Keep in mind that decisions are always two-sided so that there is one who thinks he or she is making a decision or choice based on free will while there is the other party who is agreeing to allow it to happen by not standing in the way. Here they are in the order of importance! Drum rolls anyone?

1. Deciding to quit smoking at twenty-five. I have enjoyed a healthy and prosperous life since.
2. Marrying Belle—she agreed to become my wife and, in so doing, became my exclusive organizer and handler through thick and thin.
3. Having two sons—my wife was as much a partner in this as I was.
4. Paying 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. Determining to turn around a lousy evaluation of my teaching performance—it could never have happened if certain of my colleagues had not had confidence in my teaching abilities.
6. Taking 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.
7. Pursuing a lawsuit on behalf of my wife's health—it would never have been doable if Belle had not agreed to it.
8. Running a personal best time in the Vancouver City Marathon—it would never have happened if a young lady had not hooked up with me in the last six miles and challenged me to go all out.
9. Turning down a principal's position at Spirit Lake—my dad (a retired administrator) advised me that accepting such a job was more of a career breaker than a career maker.

10. Retiring from basketball coaching in 1987—the transportation supervisor made it easy by yanking my bus license because of a serious accident incurred the previous year while transporting students. No more coaching meant more time to spend at home on weekends helping Belle raise the children.
11. Learning the fundamentals of the golf swing—a big thanks to all those who had their two bits worth of input.
12. Signing up and being accepted for a teacher exchange in Australia—somebody at the ministry-level had to see something beneficial in my being sent Down Under.
13. Keeping an extensive journal on my wife’s encounter with cancer. I became a better-informed person for accompanying her on the road to recovery.

I continue to add to this list of critical decisions. I hope and trust that I will never stop achieving until the day I die. Here is my second list of thirteen:

1. Deciding to retire to a warmer climate. The past year has been spent looking at condos in the Victoria area;
2. Getting rid of a good portion of a 6000-book library by donating it to the local library society;
3. Buying out the lease on our 2007 Toyota Corolla because it has less than 30,000 kms;
4. Forcing my mother to become more independent. She and her husband seem to be able to handle life on their own without anyone getting in the way;
5. Doing book reviews for Amazon. I have now reached a couple of significant plateaus after three and a half years;
6. Taking up running again. I am inspired by our older son, Peter, who did a high-altitude one in Denver recently at 3hrs. 35min;
7. Developing an interest in Par 3 golf courses because this is the level at which I want to enjoy this very special game;
8. Switching churches seven years ago. We are now fellowshipping with a group that has an expanded vision for God in the community;
9. Growing tomatoes in my greenhouse;
10. Developing a taste for Turkish Delight and Purdy’s chocolates;
11. Fostering a friendship with Jack and Jeanette. Both these kind folk have introduced us to the world of big game hunting in interesting and fascinating ways;
12. Taking up biking nearly thirty-five years ago;
13. Helping to write a book about my wife’s struggles with and triumphs over cancer.

Afterthought: Sometimes it is a healthy pursuit to tally up the blessings in your life just in case you didn’t see yourself as being successful.

## A Criminal in the Making or Waiting?



The most consistent finding of statistical inquiries has been that the severity of the juvenile court record is largely a function of the juvenile's prior record and seriousness of the offence committed.  
- Curt T. Griffiths et al., Criminal Justice in Canada

Gary's unfolding life as a young criminal was one of those continuing sagas that seemed to catch the attention of many of the locals in our locale during the sixties and seventies. It seemed that Gary's brothers' names would appear as house-hold names on the front page of the "Times" in direct reference to being apprehended for auto theft and house breaking. I remember my mother querying us one day if that was the same family that lived over by the school. Back then, it was just an innocent inquiry reflecting a citizen's right to know. No need to set up a Block Parents' group to run the offenders out of the area. From all accounts, while the list of criminal offences was as long as one's arm, the police were doing their duty in bringing this family to task.

My mother might have even expressed, at times, some sympathy for Gary's parents. While most of us knew whom Gary's brothers were in terms of their time spent in jail, very few of us knew Gary, the youngest brother. He was a shadowy character who attended school with us kids for a couple of years before disappearing from sight. He had that precocious look about him that put him on the same level as people who drove sleek cars, wore leather jackets and smoked. For all that, he was never seen as a troublemaker in class.

A couple of years later, when I was about to move to the high school, I was reading the local paper one Saturday and paying particular attention to the court-report section. Down in the left-hand corner of the front page was tucked a headline that read "Gary B. to face charges in adult court". Reading further, I learned that it was the same Gary who attended school with my brother and me. Back then, he might have been thirteen, now he was seventeen and facing charges on five different counts of house breaking and auto theft.

Gary committed a lot of juvenile offences when life was so much simpler: fewer drugs, less violence, stiffer sentences, and fewer deterrents. I sometimes wonder

what kind of young offender Gary likely would be if he were starting off on his apprenticeship in the twenty-first century.

Afterthought: A life of crime does not have to be taught.  
Some kids just have the natural capacity to go bad  
while attending school, so don't blame the system.

### A New Breed



Freud showed that every neurosis is founded on sex repression.  
I said, "I'll have a school in which there will be no sex repression."  
- A. S. Neill, A Radical Approach to Child Rearing

There is a student—let's call him "The Shadow" for the sake of argument—who registers for the fall session in late spring, attends a term, and is finally suspended to the board by Christmas for some major infraction. The irony in all this is that though The Shadow is well labeled as an 'at risk' student with all kinds of potential to 'screw up' and may be even given a name, very few on staff really get to know him in terms of his identity. The Shadow may have a simple or complex criminal record, but it is all conveniently concealed in order to protect his rights as a minor to attend school, be free from his past, and learn if he so desires.

This practice of including 'at-risk' students, while politically mandated, has a great potential for trouble. When information periodically leaks out that a 'troubled' youth is about to enroll, it creates the dilemma that public schools both tolerate a wide range of social behaviors while simultaneously trying to guarantee a safe learning environment. With this attitude generally comes a higher sense of insecurity and stress. Teachers have been assured that specially trained staff members are available for defusing explosive situations involving troubled students. Every at-risk student, like The Shadow, has a handler. All that has to be done is accept that the student in question—whatever he or she is—isn't really a problem because some properly trained person is supervising his every whereabouts.

An amusing incident happened that proves the weakness of this argument. I'm in the middle of an intensive lesson with the students on how to think laterally when setting up a mind-map on how to understand the concept of international cooperation in World War II. This class is held in an amphitheater so there is a front and back entrance. My desk is at the front where most of the students are situated. As I stood outside in the hall having a breather because the room gets very stuffy by early afternoon, The Shadow slipped into my half-full class, jumped over the seats, ran around the classroom, and out the back door before I returned to complete the lesson. All in the space of three minutes!

The point here is not that this act shouldn't have taken place in the school at all but that he got away with it. Granted, the unexpected happens periodically with goofy-type students doing silly things to get attention. They usually take responsibility for their actions and accept the consequences. In this case, when asked later why he did what he did, The Shadow replied that he wanted to visit a friend in the class and then take a short-cut to the other hallway as a way of not having to deal with me when I returned. His handler had apparently let him go for a short bathroom break when the incident happened.

I was told not to bother with The Shadow because he was in a special program, and the school administration was building a file to get him removed. That excuse proves to me that schools will never be able to handle impulsive and dangerous behavior in an open setting. Not enough immediate control and too delayed a reaction when the serious problems happen! In fact, no institution that operates on the democratic principle of 'inclusion' can. Schools are being asked to accept certain 'at-risk' students, like The Shadow, without the proper means to handle them.

One might counter by saying that there are very few alternative arrangements for an at-risk child in school who basically flies by the seat of his pants. When this student did what he did—mild in comparison to what others get up to—he had become briefly separated from his teacher aide support for about an hour or so, and thought he could wander the halls and disrupt other classes. Equipping these students with an aide or jailer is not the practical answer. Putting them in a regular class doesn't work because they don't relate to what is going on and, invariably, refuse to turn up or sit still. The real answer probably lies in cutting him loose in society to have other agencies help him through his social growing pains. Why stuff the school system with more students like The Shadow who have the potential to make life uneasy for others and rob the institution of some of its hard-earned successes as a desirable place to learn and socialize?

Afterthought: One of the greatest wastes of time in public education is running after students who don't want to be responsible for their actions. The alternative is to let them roam the hallways and cause havoc and mischief for others.

## The Power to Spend Other's Money



Capitalist societies start as sand piles and end up as girdered structures, which is a direct outcome of the accumulation of capital—pin factories? evolving over the course of time into industrial structures as large as small towns.  
- Robert Heilbroner, Twenty-first Century Capitalism

The teachers' union is like any other public-sector or government organization. It is very good at spending other people's money on things that seem to have little or no direct benefit to them. The money doled out for work-related benefits, workshops, courses, trips, extra staff, annual meetings, social causes, propaganda and salaries is not ordinary and has been growing at an exponential rate over the last couple of decades. Lest you get the impression that I didn't avail myself of any of these benefits and perks, you would be quite wrong. I figured it out recently that in the space of thirty-six years I have used close to twenty-five thousand dollars of special monies earmarked for professional development in the form of out-of-town pork chops.

To make my point, I share the following story. About eight years ago, I was involved in an internal dispute with another teacher on staff. It involved some concerns I had about his job as a non-enrolling teacher (a person who does not teach) on staff. It was my position that these kinds of teachers should start assuming some of the actual teaching load in the school. While I aired my concerns in the staff room, I made the 'fatal' mistake of also sharing it with a board member by showing him a staffing timetable that underscored my concern about some serious imbalances.

When the dust settled, I was accused of directly threatening another colleague's job: a violation of Section Eight of the Code of Ethics. While I tried to clarify my position that I was only intent on addressing a widespread concern of staff, this individual threatened me with all kinds of censures and investigations if I did not

publicly recant. It took a month of back-and-forth negotiations between the two parties—with the ‘help’ of the ever-ubiquitous union—before a format for mediation was agreed upon.

That’s where it got interesting. I was told it would entail a three-day process that would, hopefully, allow both sides to air their concerns and reach an amicable settlement. Keep in mind, I had already conceded that I had not been wise in publicly expressing my concerns and was prepared to tender a ‘letter of apology’. For the aggrieved members, they obviously saw the mediation process as the best opportunity to advance their situation and draw attention to their much-maligned plight as non-enrolling teachers. Politics mixed in with revenge pure and simple. The mediators came, held their meetings, conducted their investigation, drew up a plan for mediation, and left town only to return a couple of weeks later. I was later told, on good authority, the total expenses for this exercise was over five thousand dollars for time spent mediating, meals, travel, and accommodation.

The only satisfaction I got from the whole process was that it finally came to an end. The whole deal was cloaked in a veil of secrecy, and nobody outside the two parties even got to know what was finally resolved. What is farcical about this great outlay of money is that very few, if any, of the terms of the so-called agreement were ever carried through. It was simply a matter of the union talking loudly and carrying a very small stick. The exercise could have been done at the local level for a fraction of the cost with the results more effectively monitored into the bargain. At the end of the session, there was an understanding that was never publicized because it was considered too sensitive and could never be enforced.

In this case, the true power of the modern union is to spend its members’ dues on the pretext that it can enforce its mandate to discipline an errant member. If I had ultimately refused to cooperate with the mediation process, I could have had my name published in the union newsletter describing me as a member-in-bad-standing. I simply chose to participate as a way of getting ‘this monkey off my back’. In retrospect, I just didn’t realize it was going to cost so much!

Do I feel the same way about my initial concerns? Sure I do, but I would choose a different way to express them by not being so overt or confrontational. Much of what I stated back then is relevant today with all the talk about re-evaluating the need for having non-enrolling teachers. Don’t get me wrong! Non-enrolling teachers are very critical to the running of school programs but shouldn’t they be asked to bear some of the increased teaching load in regular classrooms? Otherwise, what does the concept of teaching actually mean if it has little or nothing to do with the classroom? A union should be the place to democratically

debate such issues, not autocratically shut them down because they are perceived to be divisive.

Afterthought: There is an irrefutable law about human nature.  
The more money people have, the more ways they'll find to spend it.  
There is a term for that and it isn't high principle.

### The Anatomy of Violence!



Jupp held the knife by the tip of the blade, letting it joggle idly up and down; it was a long, tapering bread knife, obviously razor-sharp. With a sudden flick of the wrist he tossed the knife into the air.  
- Heinrich Boll, "The Man with the Knives"

This story comes with both a comical and serious side. Up until the early eighties there was little sign of real violence in the local high school. You know, the kind that you hear about in the inner city schools that involves guns, knives, and drugs. Of course, we had the occasional schoolyard fights and brawls, incidents of bullying and random acts of vandalism but nothing that schools weren't accustomed to handling. It wasn't uncommon for at least one window a month get busted but nothing bigger than that.

However, one day that all changed. It was at noon and a number of teachers were quietly having lunch in the staffroom when the call came through from the outer office. There was an altercation in the main foyer outside the office door. Because our administrators weren't around at lunch time, the male staff responded. Up jumped my friend, Jim, the lanky chem. Teacher, and a couple of other enforcer types who went out into the hallway to break it up. What met them was an unbelievable scene of potential danger. The traditional circle of students had formed around the two combatants, and a couple of students could be heard yelling at one of them to put down the knife before he injured somebody.

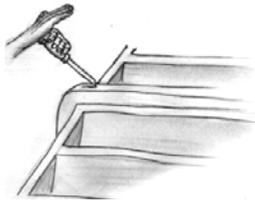
Apparently, Robbie, one of the students in the incident, had recently been the target of a fair bit of razzing from another student. On this occasion he snapped. Before anyone thought to intervene he went and picked up a rather blunt-looking kitchen knife from the Foods Room. Upon returning to the scene, he proceeded to attack his tormentor while the halls were packed with students. Talk about high drama! It didn't take too long to subdue Robbie simply because he was more show

than anything. It was interesting afterwards to get the various versions of the story from students and teachers who had witnessed the disturbing scene. The best one came from Jim—the manufacturer of many urban legends himself. He chose to see it as a heroic opportunity to disarm a knife-wielding fiend with a series of clever and disabling martial art moves.

To show you how things have changed; while Robbie received the customary five-day suspension for fighting back then – a knife notwithstanding – today he would likely have been expelled permanently from school because of the ‘zero-tolerance’ policy towards any kind of violence. Or would he? In the news today was a story of an eleven-year-old girl suspended from school for portraying her teacher as a stick person with an arrow through her head. Apparently, the girl was considered to be issuing death threats against her teacher for failing her on a spelling test. In this case the parents lobbied hard enough to take the board to court to get their daughter re-instated.

Afterthought: The harder the crime the softer the time.

### A Reality Check



Most children, from about five-years-old to about eight,  
Show considerable imagination of a pictorial kind if  
they are encouraged but otherwise left free.  
- Bertrand Russell, Education and the Social Order

There are comical moments that only get funnier in the retelling of the story. This particular one happened in my second year of teaching and involved a real hoser of a student named Peter. This rather wretched character was known as one very troubled youth who was suspected of drug dealing before the trade had even made its way into the schools in the mid-seventies. Remember, this was the time when the unsettling influences of the drug culture were more the exception than the rule. The Le Dain Commission Report had just been released and was circulating through Canadian society promoting the need to decriminalize marijuana and other less harmful drugs. Most teachers could identify the occasional ‘pot-head’ in class

only because his or her behavior was so blatantly obvious: inattentive, washed out and hung-over with a distinct permanent buzzed look. However, Glenn was one of those suspected druggies because his behavior was often a cut above or below the usual: dissociative, irrational, erratic, inattentive, ‘high’, dysfunctional, and throw in AD-HD for good measure. I often thought from his weird reactions that he had to be on some hallucinogens like magic mushrooms, growing in any number of places in the BC northwest. Thus, Glenn was a student who proved to be a real handful in any classroom setting, not least of all mine. I learned later that he had the rare distinction of being the only student known to have been strapped three times in one day in his primary school days.

There had been rumors flying around the school all morning on this particular day in early October 1976. There had been sightings of cops in the halls during class time, and the talk was about a large drug bust in the works. Nobody seemed to care that, once again, the fall colors were out in the valley in all their brilliance and Thanksgiving was just around the corner. Something else had caught their attention. School officials, the police and one lonely-looking Glenn could be seen standing at the far end of the building about to perform the fateful locker check based on a couple of tips that had come their way earlier that morning. As Peter opened it, there in the bottom of the locker was a large plastic bag full of what looked like marijuana. When asked if it was his, Glenn nodded, and then to everyone’s surprise claimed that he was a major dealer in the school. Choosing to be rather skeptical about these claims, the principal asked the officers in attendance to check out the substance. Not to anyone’s surprise but Glenn’s, the police declared, after a few seconds of looking at the stuff, that it was certainly homegrown something-or-other but it wasn’t marijuana; quite likely alfalfa or freshly mowed hay. At that point, Glenn started to bluster that it was the real thing and that there was no way he would stiff any of his customers.

Over the next number of years, Glenn graduated to using and selling heavier drugs like cocaine and methamphetamines and, eventually, becoming a big-time addict and dealer. He told me later, when he became a close friend—after some serious rehabilitation – that things had been so bad in his past that any money he made went to feeding his addiction. I think Glenn was so hyperactive from birth that doing drugs was really only second nature to him. He was always ‘wired’ or high-strung to begin with, so illicit drugs became the means to reach new highs.

To show how things eventually turned around in his life, he used some of his carpentry skills and completed a very fine bookcase for me several years ago. When he told me how many hours of painstaking work he put into the project—I marveled at his ability to concentrate, knowing his problems with focusing in the

past. His only reply was that he had originally lost himself in the project to the point of time becoming irrelevant. Consequently, he had underestimated his costs for labor and materials. However, he seemed to be confident enough in his workmanship to ask us if we would mind paying a little extra above the quoted price to cover his costs. The man had exceeded our wishes by producing a truly beautiful piece of work for our living room. I agreed, knowing full well that the Glenn standing before me was not the same one I knew years before in connection with some caper involving the selling of alfalfa. Here was a man selling me real value. About a decade later, I happened to be watching a David Suzuki “Nature of Things” program one night on how the highly potent marijuana of today can cause young people to develop a dangerous psychosis leading to irreversible schizophrenia. Immediately, my thoughts turned to Glenn as possibly being one of those vulnerable ones in what many now consider a simple harmless pastime.

Afterthought: There comes a time in most of our lives when we stop believing a lie and start facing up to reality.

### The Sirens Call!



And will any say when my bell of quittance is head in the gloom,  
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in its outrollings,  
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell's boom,  
“He hears it not now, but used to notice such things”?  
- Thomas Hardy, “Afterwards” (1917)

Students can be wickedly cruel, especially when it comes to playing on other people’s weaknesses. How do I know? I was there once myself as I sought to take advantage of a teacher not always on top of his game. For example, knowing that teachers might have any one of the following shortcomings—a foul temper, a lisp, a tendency to nod off, a lack of discipline, or a hearing impairment—makes them the inevitable target for some heartless jokes.

A particular one sticks out in my mind as the perfect example of such a caper. Ron taught Socials to a group of low-end Grade Nine students in the same school that I started my teaching career. He was extremely deaf in one ear and always asking his students to repeat themselves. One day, he came to this class sporting a new, state-of-the-art hearing aid. He told us in the staffroom earlier that morning that he

hadn't even had time to read the instructions, it was that new. His fatal decision was to announce to the class that he was in the process of fine-tuning it and might require the class's cooperation to help him figure out the adjustments. Good idea, Ron, if you have the perfect group of learners helping you. No miscreants, no jokers and above all else, no subversives, and maybe, just maybe, you might succeed in capitalizing on the good will out there.

Well, that turned out to be the biggest invitation to mischief since the first teacher ever said, "What do you want to do today, class?" As I learned later, to nobody's surprise, two of Ron's students conspired to destroy his remaining hearing for good. As Teacher Ron began explaining to the class how this device worked and why he needed their help to adjust it, the two students, Allan and John, with the help of the class, settled on the two-front approach to dealing with Ron's request. John snuck out the back door of the classroom with the idea of coming in the front minutes later after Ron had adjusted the hearing aid. Allan then began moving his lips in a mock conversation with Bob while the rest of the class kept very quiet. The result of this pantomime would cause Ron—the owner of brand-new hearing aid—to do some serious adjusting with the volume dial. At that critical moment, John would come in through the front door and walk up beside him and talk loudly in his ear. The plan worked so well that even Ron was impressed. He told me later that he had such an incurable headache for days after that he decided to abandon the hearing device altogether. This is one of those remarkable stories that illustrates how students can actually work together to effectively modify their teacher's behavior. Mind you, it would never have happened if Ron hadn't made himself so vulnerable and there hadn't been two clowns to mastermind the scheme. That was over thirty-five years ago, and Ron has long since left the teaching profession, retrained as a camp cook, and then retired. I saw him the other day downtown, and I could swear he wasn't wearing a hearing aid. But maybe again, he was wearing one of those invisible implants. If so, I wasn't in the mood to ask.

Afterthought: Never even remotely hint to others what they don't need to know. It is called keeping a secret.

## The Mad Librarian–Part 2



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. S 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 through and through a 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 to go with it. His only way of contending with students was to show his madness or strangeness through weird glares and 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. When he stared at a student through his rather over-sized very round framed, black spectacles, 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 in a nasty and sour voice that used the most idiotic 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 being fired from his librarian's position at the high school.

Looking back on those years when he ruled the school library like it was his exclusive domain – shooing students out for the least behavioral provocation as if he enjoyed hating them– a lot of things make sense. This old crackpot lacked the ability to relate to others in an area that is most conducive to forming intellectual bonding: 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 about all those people the good ‘doctor’ may have potentially turned off from reading books because he couldn’t nurture his students’ needs. Think of all those people who, in their confusion, continue to mistake a library for a bar or pub. Nowadays, libraries have become gathering spots for informal confabs where anything but reading is accomplished. In fact, school libraries, on the whole, have become glorified study halls where individuals can go to get help from their buddies in preparation for the big test. Proper library etiquette has long disappeared as something else has rushed in to take their place and redefine its function. Maybe Dr. S wasn’t so crazy after all when he tried to chase the maddening throngs from the inner sanctums of learning. I think that this sea change in the managing of modern libraries is something that is being visited on us because we have lost the respect for a good read. Many of us are not able to cordon off a time and space to read and consider the big ideas of life. Our lives, on the whole, have been divided into a series of conveniently short durations where we meet, greet, compete, excrete, secrete, deplete and replete all in a twenty-four hour cycle, with little chance to reflect what we are actually accomplishing. Madness eventually comes to those who lose track of why and when they do what they do.

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

## Buddy–Part 2



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, Buddy would be considered 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, resulting in a metal plate in his head. 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 seen as a retarded youth with very few prospects after he quit school.

The kids saw him as an oddity or a freak who 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 everyone to see. On the last day of school, when everyone 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 papers with virtually nothing in them. There was a good chance that either Buddy never truly understood what the intended purpose of a notebook was in the first place, or never worked in class.

If the latter is true, then it is quite likely that Buddy was day-dreaming 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 many more identifiable Buddies in the school system today than forty years ago. All kinds of learning disabilities walk through school doors every day because of our increasing capacity to identify and label them. Before too long, the system has slotted them into a program to meet their learning needs, whatever they might be, and coddled them until they reached school-leaving age. A number of students have come my way and, to no-one's surprise but their parents, have turned out amazingly well. One comes to mind in the person of Kenny who came to me as a terribly neglected fifteen-year-old with a reading level at Grade 2 and an IQ reflecting some other serious learning problems. There was no support coming

from home and Kenny's chances of making it in the world were minimal. Over the three years Kenny was with me, my assistant and I introduced him to the responsible grown-up world of job training. For the first time in Kenny's life, something clicked. By the time he left us, he had a working vocabulary of over five hundred words, the ability to fill out a job application, and hold down a job in the shipping department of a big retail store. While he still had a little bit of that feral look about him, Kenny was out in the real world getting paid for doing an honest day's work. Unlike Buddy, every effort was being made – social workers, teachers, and employers – to make him feel useful in society, other than being a clown in a classroom. If Buddy were going through the system today, he would quite likely stay around to graduate on a special program in a subject probably near and dear to his heart: servicing small engines.

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.

## When People Lie?



'Telling the truth', therefore, is not solely a matter of moral character;  
it is also a matter of correct appreciation of real situations  
and of serious reflection upon them.

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Ethics

When Bob, an old colleague, told me years ago that he thought school principals were some of the greatest liars on the job, I wasn't sure where he was coming from. My limited experience told me that everyone, including teachers, on the face of this planet distort the truth to gain an advantage at sometime during the course of a given day. Big deal! It is no surprise that those in authority do it with greater regularity as a way of squaring the circumstances to meet certain managerial assumptions. This practice often involves a convenient lapse of memory or a twisting of the facts resulting in an inscrutable fabrication of reality. Understandably, lying of this sort is due, in part, to administrators having to implement increasingly unpopular educational policies. This situation usually happens when both teachers and the board office have unreasonable expectations

as to how the school should operate. Lying, or the art of stretching the truth, is just another weapon 'middle management' has to protect its rather vulnerable position in the system of trying to be all things to all people. I believe I told Bob that once we know the reason behind the lie, then it, as a strategy, becomes harmless.

Several years later, my experience towards administrative dishonesty took a sudden and unexpected turn. It was 1993, and I decided to write an article for a national magazine, attacking the follies of the BC government's Year 2000 initiative to reform education. My principal, at the time, was one of those politically adept weathervanes who support anything that is popular but not necessarily educationally sound. I wrote the article, had it published, and soon after got an invitation to visit with him in his office. Initially, I naively thought it would be for a frank and open discussion on the problems of developing a student-centered learning environment in public schools. That hope proved to be unfounded.

As I walked into his oddly-arranged office (a small desk in the corner and a big round table in the middle surrounded by two sofas) I spied a copy of my article sitting on a shelf inside the door. He asked me to sit down but, before I did, I asked if this visit had anything to do with the article. Without blinking an eye or blushing, he assured me that it had to do with my teaching performance in class, and he was about to do an evaluation on me; lie number one. He handed me a letter to that effect and advised me to get ready for some evaluative visits the following week. With a lump in my throat, I asked him again if this had anything to do with the article that he had sitting on the shelf, plain to be seen. No, was his response: lie number two. As I hurriedly read through the letter, he hastened to add that someone had given it to him earlier that morning but had not read it yet: lie number three.

This last comment was his third lie in the space of two minutes, and it started to give me an unwelcome insight into the man's character that showed why he was good at lying. On all three untruths, he looked me straight in the eye and seemed confident that my line of questioning would go nowhere. In his own fatuous way, he was trying to show his superintendent that he was snuffing out a potentially embarrassing situation: a teacher expressing his views contrary to board policy. At the same time, he wanted to convince me that he was proceeding to provide a fair evaluation of my teaching when, actually, he was intent on punishing and, eventually, destroying me. Liars are like that. Their need to control a critical situation supersedes their need to tell the truth. Yes, I was due an evaluation, and the special education program I was responsible for wasn't going very well because of a general lack of direction and support from the administration in the

first place. After three years in a high-maintenance program, where each student had to have their own personal educational plan, I was slowly losing patience with the kids, parents and principal.

Any thought of a fair process went out the window because, in his mind, if such a reality were allowed to exist, it, too, would allow the likes of lowly old me to use the truth to my advantage. When I recognized this devious and destructive game of his, I countered with mine: pretend that I was interested in participating in the evaluation even though I knew I wasn't ready on such short notice. Over the next few months, as the principal dragged out his evaluation, he cockily admitted to my face, from time to time, that he was hoping to hire new teachers who subscribed to the letter and spirit of the Year 2000 program. The inference here was that if I were a new teacher, he wouldn't be hiring me.

Every time I went to look for help on how to improve my teaching performance, he would purposely stress my weaknesses but never offer any concrete solutions. On any given day, it could be bad planning, poor discipline, or insensitivity. He knew that I was struggling with this program and had requested, after six years, for a transfer back to teaching regular academic courses. Each of the earlier times I tried to make the move, he vetoed it with the explanation that there was no one else to fill the position. This time, as he was actually writing up this unfavorable report on my teaching performance, I asked him again for a transfer but he told me, unequivocally, that there was no way he was going to reassign a person like me until I received a 'good' report. End of discussion! That meant possibly languishing in the special education program until a third consecutive bad report got me fired.

Minutes before he issued the report on my teaching performance, he even gave me some books to read on how to become a better teacher along with a plan for rehabilitation over the following year before the next review. None of the recommendations in the plan even applied to the difficulties encountered in the program: namely, practical guidance and support for dealing with difficult students. Items such as attending a summer conference, getting assistance from certain resource teachers, and reading a large list of irrelevant books on educational theory were his way of piling it on. He then told me to read the actual report in his office, initial it, and expect a copy within twenty-four hours. I skimmed through it quickly and immediately saw the weakness in his strategy come out repeatedly. He had purposely taken the liberty of creating a monster out of me by accentuating some failings in my teaching performance without offering viable ways in which to address them. I had so damaged his ego as a so-called leader in education that he

had sworn revenge to the point of using a bad report to force me out of the classroom.

I spared no effort in getting that message out to all my colleagues, including Bob, that this man was personally attacking me—through a phony teaching report – for my views on Year 2000. Over the following five months, my ‘bad’ teaching report was withdrawn because it failed to recognize due process in not consulting with me after each class visit and providing written recommendations on how to improve my teaching techniques.

Many years later, I still marvel both at how easy it is for people in authority to lie when their egos are at stake and, at the same time, how difficult it is to conceal it when other people get to hear about it. There is a twist to this story. A year later, I woke up one morning to hear our provincial premier announce that the Year 2000 program was proving to be too controversial and was now being shelved in favor of returning to the status quo. That day, at school, this principal could be heard saying to various groups of teachers in the staffroom that the idea of student-centered learning was fatally flawed from its inception and that it was good to get back to normal classroom teaching. So that’s what it was all about in the first place!

Afterthought: Never let a liar figure he’s got the best of you. He’s actually begging to be exposed so he can start telling the truth.

### A Genuinely Different Character!



Jake went over to the triple-arched window and sat on the edge of the desk.

In the courtyard below sat a greenish bronze figure of a man.

In the distance were two devil’s horns of the incongruous-looking

Wolfson building. Her eye caught the reading list taped to the

Window pane, and the matching pile of Penguin Classics.

- Philip Kerr, [A Philosophical Investigation](#)

Every so often a goofy-looking, odd-ball of a character enters my class, unassumingly slips into an empty seat at the back of the room hoping not to be noticed and proceeds to act out in the most peculiar ways. His strategy was to

switch between moments of fitful glaring at those around him to moments of staccato laughter that seemed to be triggered by anything I seemed to say to the class. I notice this kind of behavior because I am told that my general demeanor over the years initially startles people: a loud and deep voice; a proven ability to make controversial remarks; and a knack for contorting my face to draw a startled reaction. I suppose it takes one to know one. Jeremy was one of those different students who might very well be classified as “marching to a different drummer.” He seemed to expend only enough effort to pass the course and never appeared to be bothered that he didn’t do better.

Throughout the term, I discovered how truly unique this student was by how other students viewed him, how little work he seemed to be accomplishing at his seat, and what energies he had available for activities outside the classroom. My first impressions of this strange looking teenager was that he was lazy, unmotivated, on drugs, seeking attention and rebellious. Other students in the class regarded him as a clown who could only be expected to say the unexpected. One day, it finally dawned on me that very few teachers and adults in Jeremy’s life had ever taken the time to discover who he was and what he had to offer the rest of humanity. We had probably all chosen to dismiss him rather than take the time to understand him.

To distract him away from his self-indulgent role as class clown and jester, I took him aside one day and suggested that I needed him to move to the middle of the class. No more hanging out in the shadows of some far-distant corner of the room. He needed to be where I could see him and maintain eye contact. He looked at me doubtfully for a moment and then replied that he had always felt most comfortable at the back of the room where people could choose to accept or ignore his outbursts as part of a game. I countered by saying that maybe it was time for him to come in from the ‘cold’ and start performing as something more than a one-dimensional wannabe comic. I pointed out the benefits of him being in closer contact with students in terms of getting them to appreciate his wit. It took a couple of weeks to ease Jeremy into that situation where he felt comfortable to abandon his seat at the back and move up to become intellectually and socially involved with the rest of the class.

The adjustment wasn’t easy but the transformation was amazing. In the ensuing months, he went from being a cynic to being an intellectual dynamo in the class. His controversial remarks and his taunting of other students gradually ceased because now he was part of the mainstream of the class. No safe place to hide. It was no longer the class pitted against him, which had been the model for most of his school life. All his comments were now directed at the topics at hand: famine in Ethiopia; testing of American nuclear weapons on Canadian soil, the Quebec

Referendum; and native land claims. I saw his work pick up considerably because he had finally found someone who took an interest in including him in a bigger scope of intellectual development. Jeremy needed a forum where he could effectively present and validate his ideas. His sense of humor – a tool that he had previously used in a defensive and zany fashion –now became a real asset for loosening up the class for discussions and debates. He had a wide range of informed opinions on how policy and practice needed to work together for the greater good of society.

Jeremy, the former outcast and cynic, now became one of my favorite facilitators in starting debates and discussions. All I had to impress on him was the ability to come to a discussion with a good command of the facts and have a desire to listen as well as to talk. To do this I started him off in small-group discussions, where he became quickly accepted as a person with a very credible point of view on local politics. I even got to discover that the young man had an incredible grasp of issues that related to the world of sports.

When he graduated the following year, he phoned one day to say that he had just signed on with a junior team to play as a forward– a position he wasn't very familiar with. How typical of Jeremy! He was always willing to try something new, even if it meant making himself vulnerable. I go back to that day in the first week of an earlier term when I personally coaxed him to moving to a new seat. He knew then that he didn't have to comply with my request but chose to do so anyway because he took it as a sign that he was about to be accepted and understood.

Since then, I've intentionally set out to bring more cynical outsiders and lurkers like Jeremy in from the cold. We teachers tend to deny many of our marginal students the genuine opportunity to get involved in one of the most invigorating exercises available–the intellectual testing out of one's ideas. That is what school ideally should be all about: challenging kids to move out of their safety zone and take on new initiatives.

Afterthought: Certain people need a little finishing in order to look like something.

## Classical Music and Humor Make a Difference



I will sing and make music with all my soul.  
- Psalm 108:1

For a number of years I searched for alternative ways to get the most effective work out of my classes. Raising or moderating my voice to fit the circumstances didn't seem to do the trick because students usually learn—like other humans – to adjust their own hearing to tune-out mode. Frustratingly, I discovered that I was telling certain students a number of times a period to get back to work, with diminishing effect. This approach often led to doling out detentions, phoning parents, and scolding the students after class. Not good methods for building strong classroom rapport with one's students in order to get them to learn.

Then, it came to me one year while I was teaching in a portable classroom away from the main building. Why not loosen up and start providing some controlled or canned entertainment and music for changing the atmospherics of the room, which were lousy for starters. This building was quickly falling apart from dry rot, termite invasions, and old age. I hasten to add that what I was about to do was neither politically correct nor proven to be educationally sound. I didn't run it by the principal which, in itself, is never a guarantee for success. What started out as simply playing classical tapes and CDs (compact discs) to the classes while they worked eventually became a major personal undertaking to understand the music we were listening to. There were no compromises in the form of alternative kinds of music. I wasn't about to ask for suggestions from the class in this pre-MP3 era unless their suggestions fell into one of three categories: classical, folk and jazz. I needed to play something soft that might control their feverish minds.

My belief was—and still is—that a lot of their restlessness during class time came from another part of the school where listening to 'alpha' music over Walkmans and Discmans was allowed. If I could counter this mood by playing Bach, Handel, Purcell, and Scarlatti, I might be able to alter their work habits and thinking patterns. There was some initial opposition to the idea of having to listen to 'corny adult' music that was so far removed from the modern beats of AC, DC and Ozzie Osborne. I persisted, however, and got the results. Within a couple of months, students started leaving their portable sound systems at home and became more focused on their work. That led me to feel more confident in the classroom

management routines. Students who had been previously underachieving started to work and get results. This prompted me to look at instituting a weekly reward of ten minutes of Leno's 'Headlines' or the 'Mr. Bean' series for classes who stayed on task throughout the week. Now, I was not only addressing their need for acquiring effective learning skills but also raising their sense of humor in the classroom. Above all else, it was my duty to make sure that this kind of diversion continued to be moderated so that the students would never lose sight of the real reason for being there.

The tangible result was that more students began to develop a stronger sense of being able to rise above the daily grind. Learning was becoming something more than just seatwork. This atmospheric experience put students in touch with options like being able to listen, think, and laugh. Over the years, I have perfected the model to include a wider range of appropriate music that includes choral, folk, religious, and modern instrumentals – all with the same purpose of controlling the learning environment for the benefit of the students. That decision, back then, has been currently vindicated by studies that show that the playing of classical music, at an acceptable level, is conducive for effective retention and processing of knowledge. The school has also instituted a 'no-Walkman or Discman' policy in the classroom, so I truly have a captive audience for a daily twenty minute concert while they work, three times a week.

The results are plain to see; students who are focused on the task at hand and producing good quality work into the bargain. Research shows soft and gentle music quite possibly contributes to better connected synapses with a payoff in a better work space. In fact, many of my colleagues have now ventured into this world of playing music at key times in the classroom routine. Also, some students get downright cranky now if I forget to put it on as we move into the work session of the class.

Afterthought: Students need to hear other voices in the classroom other than their own and the teacher's.

## Mr. Point-of-Order



Privileged Questions are such as, on account of their importance, take precedence of all other questions whatever, and on account of this very privilege they are undebatable, excepting when they are relating to the rights of the assembly or its members . . . . .

- Robert's Rules of Order

He was one of those admirable people who had the ability to survive regardless of the adversity; while the death of a loved one, demotion from a high-paying job in the district and a constant campaign of harassment from those in charge would have finished off most of us long before retirement, Wes lasted right through to the last day of his career. It was his ability to hit back in a most annoying fashion that served notice that nobody could get the better of him. He had the last word on most issues in his little world. When lesser mortals would likely have run to the union to lay a grievance, Wes usually retorted with convoluted arguments that only served to frustrate his opponents more. At the end of his career, Wes appeared as unruffled in the unorthodox ways as when he started teaching over thirty years before. He handled students, colleagues, or parents. It was as if he were—in a defiant, scolding fashion—telling people there was nothing they could do to him that he hadn't already faced and overcome. He might appear at times to be incompetent in his classroom, muddled in how he explained himself, and even rude in his treatment of colleagues who threatened to get under his skin. But believe me, Wes was a man in complete control of his faculties. Those who chose to see and treat him as an angry man missed the point altogether. It was all an act—a gruff exterior—meant to keep at bay those who wished him harm.

I think his secret was that he baffled the average person with his ability to tangle them with technicalities and mindless arguments. If he were attacked for being incompetent, he would retaliate by asking them questions that got to the heart of the matter: counter a question with another question. Wes always had the habit of drawing attention to the way he could engage kids in his class by humor and cajolery. At any time, in a class discussion, Wes was famous for pinning a student down with a trivial remark or off-the-cuff question that would serve to focus them on him. Once this was accomplished, he then moved the student to a problem on the board by changing the tone of his voice.

For an orthodox teacher, this might mean a lot of potentially wasted time in socially interacting with the students in the classroom. However, lots of students

tolerated his light-hearted teasing and banter because of their entertaining values. While it often wasted great amounts of time when it came to formal learning, Wes had the students on side. Some parents feared it because they suspected that this former ‘discredited’ principal wasn’t ‘properly’ teaching their children in respect to the requirements of the school curriculum. There seemed to be so much extra-curricular going on in his classes that didn’t resemble learning. It seemed that the various school principals and board officials loathed his carping presence and went out of their way to malign him so hoping to keep his dangerous cockiness in check. His response to that tactic was to move from teaching assignment to assignment until he eventually found one that accepted his teaching style. This finally happened at his last stop at the local high school, where there are a lot of mavericks like himself on staff who didn’t always think inside the box, myself included. Wes had finally come home!

I remember Wes most of all for the times he would turn up at union or staff meetings just to exercise his right to be heard. He could be counted on to stand up at any time and bark out a request, “Mr. Chairman, point-of-order.” Quite often, his inquiry was irksomely irrelevant and would cause many of his colleagues to cringe in embarrassment at the thought of Wes holding up a meeting just to make another feeble attempt at grandstanding.

Only later did some of us appreciate what Wes was all about. When he stood up to be recognized by the ‘floor’, he was, in fact, getting back at a system that must have wished that he would just shut up and disappear. All those hard feelings vanished in his last couple of years when his colleagues finally woke up to the fact that he had vanquished his foes by putting them in their place. By stifling the process of meaningless debate even further through the imposition of inane and tedious questions, Wes was making a point. I’m sure many of us stopped attending any kind of meeting, thanks, in no small part, to his endless point-of-order questions; Wes, in his own little private wars, helped many of us appreciate how utterly unimportant meetings can actually be to one’s chances of surviving in the system.

I remain truly indebted to the likes of Wes for showing me how to outlast my opponents. His secret was to be persistently obnoxious (a gnat) and charming (a saint) at the same time so that his opposition—those who wanted him fired—could never effectively trip him up. In other words, always turn up prepared to do the job you were hired to do and, meanwhile, find creative and flakey ways in which to undermine the system for the shabby way it has treated you in the first place. Now that takes a lot of courage, ingenuity and will power to perfect that plan but, if you succeed, you leave the world a better place for all that. Yours will be the

satisfaction that those in authority won't try their stunts on the next unsuspecting person struggling to make a living.

Afterthought: Unnecessary meetings are the height of despair and insecurity. If you have to attend one, you'll begin to appreciate the very big need for comic relief.

### How Not to Handle an ADHD Child!



Bring up a child in the way he should go and he will not depart from it.  
- Proverb

In my university training—seven long years—I became very acquainted with theory on the identification of the Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder in young teens. There was, disappointedly, very little on how to handle its many and varied manifestations in a classroom setting. These are children who show and are unable control excess amounts of energy in their bodies at any time of the day. For the first three years in the special education program, I was fortunate enough not to have to deal with an ADHD child who was not taking medication such as Ritalin.

My luck ran out in the fourth year when I received three ADHD teens in my special education program within the span of a month. None of them took medication to control the disorder. These students were classified as having moderate to severe attention deficit disorder with a very strong element of hyperactivity. Their varying degree of restlessness prevented them from staying-on-task with any seatwork. In other parts of the school—where these students would be included in elective courses—extra supervision was required to make sure they didn't come to any grief. Keeping these students in line was half-way manageable if the teacher kept everything routine structured, well supervised, and in small bites.

The problem arose when I had to teach basic English to all three of them at the same time, within the confines of a small resource room and without the help of a teacher aide. She was elsewhere in the school helping our other better-adjusted students become included in a regular class. Having them cooped up in a tiny study

room to do work was not an ideal situation even for a 'normal' student. The routine of trying to get them to work as a group was virtually impossible. It reminded me of a gigantic hammer and pop-up game, where one figure could be 'knocked' down on the board only to have another one pop up somewhere else. I no sooner had one working quietly away than another would start to act up. The consequences for misbehaving were an array of punishments that were, invariably, hard to enforce because of a very ineffective and limited support from the school's administration and counseling staff. A time-out area didn't work because it required supervision that wasn't available. Limiting their privileges only made them angrier and more sullen. Sending them for a visit with the principal usually came back to haunt me when he criticized me for not having an acceptable system of discipline in place. Making them stand in the corner only drew fire from certain non-enrolling staff as being cruel and unusual. Raising one's voice to get their attention only unnerved or excited them all the more.

The one solution that would have worked was if the parents of these individual ADHD children had put them on Ritalin at an early age. Their rationale for not doing so amounted to the belief that their children would eventually grow out of ADHD and that my job was to teach them coping skills to handle the mood swings in the present. When I finally got transferred from the program back to the regular classroom, I still only knew how not to treat these unfortunate children of uncaring parents. One student, in particular, left school after four hellish years in the program and tried to get work in the community. He was very unsuccessful because he continued to carry with him a lot of the scars of years of being unable to concentrate on his studies and develop good interpersonal relations.

Since leaving the program, I have kept in touch with my successors, and everyone, to a person, is still unable to help the ADHD victim. The research literature on the subject continues to tell us what the problem looks like but fails to prescribe any sure methods of controlling it other than medication. I have taught teenagers in the regular curriculum who have been classified as severe ADHD but have the symptoms well under control because their parents started them on Ritalin at an early age so that they didn't fall behind in their studies. Other parents have fiddled around with alternative treatments with limited success, and the results have been tragic.

Afterthought: The ADHD problem is very real; the greater problem is that, as teachers, we don't know how to really manage it.

## Short-listed



Hope lies eternal in the human breast.

- Alexander Pope

There was a time in my life when I longed to be a school principal. During my first ten years of teaching, several administrators told me that I had the talent and the drive to make it in this field, and it would only be a matter of time before my potential was realized. During one particular year, I put out a number of feelers for a promotion to administration in the area. I had just completed a post-graduate degree and was eager to begin using it.

One day in May, I got a phone call from a school district up north, asking me to come for an interview the next day for a vice-principal's position at its only high school. I was part of an elite group of candidates called the "short list". I knew a little bit about the area from a number of basketball trips I had made with my teams to the town over the years. Pristine and isolated wilderness far removed from any sizeable towns or cities and in the middle of a large tract of land claimed by the native people might be the best description of this place. The roads in and out were gravel, with long stretches of washboard in places, which made a normal drive of two hours seem endless. The last thirty miles meandered through some of the most eye-popping terrain in the form of lava beds from an eruption over two hundred years ago. My family and I started out really early the next day from home and arrived at our destination around noon—the car coated in dust, the tail-pipe rattling, a couple of stone bruises on the windshield, and its occupants sweaty and weary from a bone-jarring ride.

I can well understand what my wife was thinking about on the journey up! What's this husband of mine got us in to now? Not another one of his hare-brained ventures in pursuit of dreams! I remember telling her that I had to start somewhere if I wanted to be eventually successful as an administrator. We turned up at the school board office half-an-hour before the interview that was to take place in the boardroom. The board officials put on a buffet lunch for each of the candidate's family and then took them on a tour of the area while the interview was being held. Since I was one of four candidates for this job, I was allotted three-quarters of an hour to respond to questions about how I would help run a supposedly unique, one-of-a-kind high school catering to a totally native population.

Remember, I did not have any practical knowledge other than being a department head at my school for the previous four years. Questions came fast and furious for close to an hour and I felt, that at best, I had mustered some feeble replies that only highlighted my total lack of real experience at this level. I thought I had done an effective preparation of my philosophy of education, administrative goals, and concept and ideal of discipline on the drive up but, the truth be known, the rough ride up that morning had probably addled my brain and destroyed my ability to concentrate. Halfway through the interview, the line of questioning turned to matters concerning how I would fit into the native culture as an outsider. I stumbled through those questions with the growing sense that I wasn't meant for this job. I was the standard first-timer or rookie who gets included in the mix just to make things interesting: a kind of shill that makes the other candidates look good when it comes to the final selection.

All I could offer was an array of graduate school theories that, for all I knew, were no longer current. I offered a vision of a school that would be tightly and efficiently run when what the board was probably looking for was a more relaxed, laissez-faire approach that would recognize that the natives were, in effect, in charge of their own school. There wasn't one question I was on side with during that session. Even the questions of setting up a timetable seemed to reflect my rigidity as an educator. When I finally got into the school to take a look around, I met a staff that was divided along white and native lines.

The former desired a stricter operating of the school, while the latter looked for more accommodating of students in terms of cultural aspects in the curriculum. I had always known that this was a very unstable district when it came to retaining its staff from one year to the next.

When I finally met up with my wife at the end of the tour, I saw, by the glum expression on her face, that she didn't relish this as the place to call home for the next couple of years of our lives. We just had to admit that while some people could easily make the adjustment to this rustic environment and foreign culture, we didn't quite have the temperament to make that leap of faith. A couple of days later, I received a foregone conclusion by telephone call indicating that I had, unfortunately or fortunately depending on how you look at it, not qualified for the imminent position of vice-principal in that school. Honestly, if I had fluked out and got the job, I might have had to decline simply because I could not see my family living in that setting for too long before hankering to move on to less remote settings. But that is all very academic because I didn't get the job! Even the fact that I got short-listed became the butt of numerous good-natured staff room

ribbing for years after. With all my lofty ambitions to move up in the profession, I didn't even have what it took to make it in a native village.

Every so often I see a reference on the staff room bulletin board for an administrative job posting in this native village, and my mind immediately goes back to that day twenty years ago when I applied for such a post and didn't make it. Honestly, it was all part of a bigger learning curve, and I don't regret being involved in it.

Afterthought: It is amazing what one is willing to pay to climb the ladder of professional success, only to discover that it is not all that it is cracked up to be.

### A Sweaty and Smelly Student—Part 2!



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 forever looked as someone who had just stepped out of the shower and hadn't dried himself. Streaming with rivulets of sweat and exuding the perpetual damp look were Bob's physical trademarks. As part of the Grade Eight Physical Education program, we were all required to shower after class but Bob—with his crummy and wet appearance—always 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 and improve on it. Another possibility was that he resented cleanliness as a mark of decency simply 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.

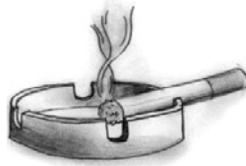
The two noticeable features of Bob's unwashed lifestyle were smell and general squalor. The accumulation of all these many sweat baths made Bob a very smelly person and his locker a very foul receptacle of unwashed gym strip. Unremarkably, I don't remember any adult taking Bob aside during the course of the school year and ordering him to change his ways. Adults just didn't care! 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 facial complexion was already breaking down in ugly runny sores and a mess of nasty blackheads. The simple and solemn truth of the matter was that this boy had no hygiene, and nobody was prepared to step in 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. I have been told that very few athletes or P.E. students use the showers after a workout because they have to rush off to the next class. I checked the other day and discovered that the shower heads in a number of the stalls had been removed. Bob would have loved that. What I did find interesting in our modern school setting is a heavy reliance of the male student population on some high-powered deodorants and colognes. This Z generation is leading the way in popularizing some new-fangled ways in which to attract the chicks without showering after a workout. One, the majority of young people, unlike Bob of former times, don't normally break a sweat after a brief exertion so why step into a shower when they can simply douse their armpits with the latest pheromone-loaded anti-perspirant spray! Two, based on the piles of smelly gym strip that accumulate in the lost & found every year, a typical modern student may have found a way to avoid having to haul the stuff home to get wash. Why not drop off the said articles of clothing at the big box in front of the office so that others can experience the joy of wearing them too. Because of the malodor, it is quite likely they'll be there for the owner when he or she needs them next time, or maybe something newer and a bit cleaner. Now why didn't Bob think about that back then, instead of wearing the same old brown, deeply-stained polyester shirt day in and day out to the point that it had literally adhered to the surface of his back.

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!

## The Smokers' Club



So at all quays and crossroads: who can tell  
These places of decisions and farewell  
To what dishonor all adventure leads.  
- W. H. Auden, The Quest

Notice the title is in the past tense. Just in case you think this story is a good-news one, think again. What I'm about to relate is a kind of epitaph to teachers who killed themselves from incessant smoking. The average healthy male public school teacher is rumored to live about ten years after retirement. On the other hand, the average male or female teacher who smokes probably doesn't make it too far into retirement before they succumb to cancer, stroke or dementia. It is just one of the many hazards of the job that catch up with you eventually. I have also known a number of very fine teachers who have chain-smoked their way into oblivion even before retirement. Safe to say, if numbers are anything to go by, this group of committed smokers has greatly declined in the last decade, more to do with healthy lifestyle choices than attrition. It is obviously not a very healthy habit/addiction to have if one wants to enjoy a very productive career in the classroom.

Numerous negative features usually singled out a teacher as an ardent smoker. There was a pack of 'smokes' in the breast pocket, yellow fingers, bad breath, stained teeth, stinky clothes, the standard cigarette face, the harsh cough, and an ashtray close by. If I were anyone to go by in my late student and early teaching days, this group never really had a lot of drive in their lives. The highlight of our day was to get to the smoke room—an adjunct off the staff room—and have a puff or two with like-minded people. Over the years, that sorry little band of perhaps seven or eight teachers began to shrink. Some, like me, quit smoking because of a serious lifestyle change (I got married). Others died from cancer-related complications shortly before or after retirement. Still others clung tenaciously to their habit for a while as a clean-air policy came to rule in the school and forced them outside and off school property.

Twenty-seven years later—what with the price of cigarettes at an all-time high and the health risks being well publicized—there are no smokers on staff and very few in our district. This phenomenon might easily be attributed to the gradual fading away of old habits with the acceptance of healthier lifestyles. While this might be true, I would like to think it was just a case of the educator finally waking up to the

perils of poisoning his body. When I stopped smoking in my third year of teaching, a number of interesting and beneficial things happened. There was extra money for more important things; my health and energy became revitalized; my taste for food improved; my nervous tendencies such as biting my nails disappeared; my sleep increased, and I was ready to take on a relationship which later led to parenthood.

If I had chosen not to make that decision in 1977, I am not sure I would be here today, sharing my thoughts on this odious topic. A recent study out of Harvard shows that cigarette smoke and various chemicals rob the brain of its ability to process information. To confirm this, I have rarely encountered a high-achieving student who smokes.

Afterthought: Smoking is one of those vices teachers can ill-afford if they hope to survive on the job.

## Memories of an Old Typewriter–Part 2



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](#)

What is the power or force of an old Underwood or Royal typewriter in the memory of a student from the pre-computer/word processing era? Enormous, when one considers the incredible impact this technological and mechanical wonder has had over the years. Can any of us remember watching a secretary back in the fifties, sixties and seventies? Every piece of documentation from letters to registrations to final and term exams had to be meticulously typed on stencils to be then run off on a duplicating machine. Mistakes would be carefully touched up with correcting fluid after the job was done. The noise these machines made 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 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 myself 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 a returned carriage 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 over time. 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, believe it or not! I never got over forty words a minute in drills, but I was able to, eventually, 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 out the old typewriter again 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. Recently, I made an interesting decision concerning this old clunker of a machine. I decided to give it away to anyone who might want it for basic typing purposes. We were in the process of moving house and needed to downsize in a hurry. All the basic reminders of our past had to go. It still did the job, though hardly in the same fashion of the modern keyboard. After approaching many different parties with the free offer, a young student took me up on it. He explained his need for a typewriter as a desire to own and operate a piece of ‘ancient’ technology that everyone else had given up on. My old friend Howard still religiously types his weekly letters-to-the-editor on an old Remington portable that he picked up years ago when he moved into the valley. I’ve introduced him to the modern, ergonomic keyboard on numerous occasions, but each time he gives up in frustration because he finds it hard to relate to the tension of the keys.

Afterthought: There is not much one can do but change when society decides to dispense with old technology.

## A Phony at Heart



But George Bernard Shaw must always exempt himself from any universal law which he inadvertently pronounces, so he adds: “This finding of one’s place may be very puzzling by the fact that there is no place in ordinary society for extraordinary individuals.”  
- Erik Erickson, Identity: Youth and Crisis

Darin’s area of teaching expertise was physical education, and his delivery style was having students learn through participation. His favorite games for his students were flag football in the fall and spring and European handball in the winter. To break up the routine, an occasional long road run would be included. His usual plan was to get the students to take a ball out on the field, divide into two teams, and then play for the duration of the period, with no teacher in sight. Another activity was to send the students on five-mile runs and come behind them in his van to check on their progress from time-to-time. It is not difficult to understand why many of his students found it hard to stay on task.

The same idea applied to his other academic classes. Get them going on seatwork and disappear to the staff room for coffee and a chat or read the newspaper, all the while assuming that everything was working smoothly. The Law program I inherited from him in 1978 was in shambles. Whenever Darin did not want to hold class, he would simply send the students down to court to watch a trial while he holed up somewhere in the school building with a cup of coffee, out of sight and mind.

When I happened to meet the man in the bar after school, I got the clear impression that he had an act he wanted to wow me with: the cool and sophisticated professional who was in control of his job and his private life. The problem was that his claims just didn’t add up. I knew Darin—a pot-bellied, out-of-shape parody of physical strength—was a con at heart. He had a smooth turn-of-phrase and brought his own personalized cue-stick to play pool on the coin operated tables at the local pub. His life, as I saw it, was one endless and shameless effort at self-promotion by getting others to buy into his easy and slick manner. The problem was that there wasn’t any substance to this narcissistic act. His so-called resume of successes—few of which I can remember—basically reflected lies upon lies. He was always telling stories—more like yarns—that put him in unlikely places, accomplishing impossible feats, and earning unwarranted praise. Darin had that

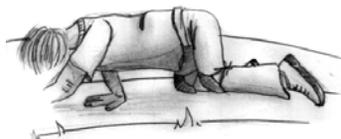
larger-than-life bravado that could either get him onto some B movie set as an extra or selling used cars, but certainly not teaching. The kids had called his number long before I did and were using his classes as an easy way to skip school.

Darin left town for good a few years later. His life had, finally, become so consumed with marital difficulties and an ongoing school board investigation that he headed south to the big lights of Vancouver. He had had enough. His story was that his third wife—who had been recently estranged from him—had located his whereabouts and was coming after him for alimony. I rather think it was a case of the board finally catching him doing something unprofessional and giving him the option to do the honorable thing: resign!

Darin is rumored to be selling glass windows out of the back of his car somewhere in the big city for a company called Echo Glass and hanging out at the racetrack. There is one story about the man's sense of occasion that remains to be told and comes with a certain degree of verification. A couple of my colleagues visited him in his new urban digs and discovered yet another side to the man's ability to score at will with older women. He would walk down a couple of blocks of Granville during an evening out and ask any woman he met if she would like to go out on a date with him. Talk about cold contacting. Statistically, Darin usually hit the jackpot by the tenth one.

Afterthought: You can fool some of the people some of the time,  
but you can rarely if ever fool all the people all of the time.  
- Abraham Lincoln

### An Attempt at the Guinness Book of Records



The journey of a thousand miles starts with one step.  
- an old Indian saying

The late twentieth century, among many things, was a time when people seemed to try harder than ever to get into the record books. Guinness was so besieged by goofy record attempts coming out of the seventies that it now releases an annual record book publishing all the new accomplishments to date. One such feat was up

for a challenge in 1977 at the first school I taught in: the greatest distance a person can crawl on a gravel surface with one brief five minute stop every hour.

Two students—Nigel and Scott—contacted the Guinness people in Canada to determine what the world record was for this particular feat. The answer was ten miles in the space of nine-and-half-hours. Their ambitious plan was to break that record as well as set another one for doubles. To make it a truly successful outcome, Nigel and Scott went into serious training a couple of months in advance. It was not unusual to find them on some by-road chugging up a huge hill with weight packs strapped to their calves. If I am not mistaken, the challenge also became a fund-raising event to support the local Nordic ski team. On the day of the big event, the students were allowed out to watch the first couple of laps. I could tell right from the start that this was not going to be an easy task. With burlap sacks tied to their knees, they moved along for a few hours in a painfully inch-meal fashion. As the afternoon wore on, with the sun now high in the sky, the crowds began to thin out to just a scattering of friends and curious onlookers. Seven hours came and went and the distance reached was seven miles.

Then around four thirty in the afternoon, the pair took a brief stop in their crawl to talk to their coaches. For a couple of minutes, there seemed to be a lot of intensive conversation going on, and then both Nigel and Scott stood up and walked to the infield—something apparently not sanctioned by the Guinness people. A hush fell over the people as word began to circulate: the guys were giving up because they would not be able to exceed the forty-six laps within the set time. The weariness etched on their faces said it all. Theirs had been a dream that far exceeded their physical capacity to realize it. A week later, the record of ten miles was broken by some religious mystic in the Indian city of Madras.

The one consolation Nigel and Scott had after it was all over was that, in true Hemingway fashion of the boxer in the ring, no one but themselves would ever be able to understand the agony and ecstasy of the experience. Both students went on to be something in life: Nigel, as a member of the Junior Canadian cross-country ski team and Scott, as a successful guide outfitter, who, unfortunately, died in a plane crash a few years back. Funny enough, very few of their peers would look at this challenge as anything more than a teenage flirt with the record book. As their teacher, I took it to mean a lot more: marks of endurance, grit, courage, and adventure.

Afterthought: Our family motto is “We attempt great things.”  
The truth of the matter is that it will usually take a lifetime to achieve them.

## Sex in the Handicap Bathroom



Calvin looked up. She was standing there in the doorway,  
holding the bead strings open. The lantern behind her,  
just that feeble light, shone through what could  
only have been a very thin dress.  
- Paul Theroux, Jungle Lovers

This story is every bit repulsive but still demands to be told. The two main characters, Steve and Dianne, were Grade Ten students who had taken a fancy to each other. You know the routine: heavy necking, gumming and petting, which took place very often at each other's lockers during class time. Both were very low academic students who attended school more for the social than academic end of things. They are the ones who quickly become known as those who sleep around. They are the couples that carry on in openly flaunting ways with their intimate feelings, oblivious to whoever may be watching them. Their whole life is reduced to responding to their hormonal urges and primal instincts.

In the past, school policy has always been to intervene in those situations by separating the couple and pointing out the inappropriateness of such behavior as to where it might lead. In the new permissive era, such a policy has changed. It is no longer deemed a teacher's responsibility to try and straighten out teens of the opposite sex who are totally obsessed with each other's bodies. This incident that finally brought everything to a head took place one Friday afternoon in the handicap washroom, just down from my classroom. Steve and Dianne must have reached a point in their relationship that day when they couldn't resist each other anymore. They had agreed to rendezvous at the washroom for an assignation during classes when nobody would see them slip in. While nobody apparently saw them arrive, their cover was certainly blown by the incredible noise they made in the process. Students passing by in the hallway heard the lovemaking and immediately reported it to the vice-principal who came and checked it out.

There is nothing like being caught flagrante delicto in, of all places, the handicap washroom. Word got around the school very quickly; Steve was suspended from school indefinitely, and Dianne moved to another school shortly thereafter. One might think that was the end to this embarrassing moment of being caught with one's pants down. But no, this story has an interesting and positive follow through.

About a year later, as I was driving home for lunch one day, I happened to see Diane pushing a pram up one of the streets in the town with Steve devotedly walking beside her. My only reasonable conclusion about this unusual scene was that Steve and Diane were truly devoted to each other. He had put the incident of gutter sex behind him and, like a lot of us males, had elevated his life to the nobler calling of responsible parenting. Just recently, a young twenty-year-old lady successfully sued a Calgary private school for wrongfully accusing her of having sex in a school bathroom. It seems the judge ruled in her favor because she wasn't given an opportunity to defend her actions.

Afterthought: Self-control is such a hard thing for some to learn, especially in a social setting where the temptations are very real:  
a vacant handicap washroom.

### A Nasty Story



Shankaracharya Hill, overlooking the Dal Lake, is one of the beauty spots of Srinagar. It has to be climbed with care, for large areas of its lower slopes are used as latrines by Indian tourists.

- V. S. Naipaul, An Area of Darkness

I reserve a few lines for this cautionary tale because, though its subject matter concerns the distasteful handling and disposing of human waste, it has something to teach us about handling personal relationships. It is not my intention to talk about scatology or coprology per se but to use this unpleasant story to illustrate a point: a laissez-faire approach to classroom teaching quite often leads to irresponsible and irrational learning. Kate was a senior English teacher who related to her students on the level of implicit rather than earned trust. This meant that rule enforcement in the classroom was abandoned in favor of assuming everyone knew the rules and wouldn't think of breaking them. It was unthinkable that anyone would even deign to take advantage of another person. It wasn't that her classes were ever out of control; they were just different in the sense that an air of casual expectation prevailed. The honor system prevailed when it came to matters of respecting each other's property.

Like me, she kept her filing cabinet unlocked because students needed access to their work. Classroom doors were always left unlocked. After all, she was a big advocate of an open learning environment, so why do anything to inhibit it. There was nothing too terribly odd with her teaching style because that was all the rage back then. It was the era of experimentation with learning, where style was more important than substance. Kate encouraged open and untrammelled dialogue with her students. Whatever was on their minds, she wanted to hear from them as long as it enlightened their understanding of life. Above all else, relate positively to your students and you could become a successful teacher! However, what was going bad for Kate this time was her rapidly deteriorating health compounded by her inability to keep up with the workload of her classes. While a dedicated teacher, she was also a heavy smoker in her forties who just didn't have the energy to do the job the way a younger person could. One morning, at the outset of her Senior English class, she went to the filing cabinet to remove a worksheet for her class. To her horror, there sitting on a piece of paper at the back of the drawer was a fairly large-sized, anonymous-looking human turd staring back at her.

She was so astonished by this sight that she was reported to have screamed, gone white and then slowly turned to one of the students and asked her to get the principal immediately. As best I can recall, the principal strode into the classroom, removed the offending object, and then proceeded to console a visibly shaken Kate before quieting the class which, by this time, was in a mild uproar. There might have been some sort of investigation as to the instigators of this crazy prank at the office level but, since it was near end of Kate's career and the school year, it probably didn't go anywhere.

In all my teaching years, I have never encountered anything as disgusting and demeaning as this. While my sympathies are totally with Kate, I still have that nagging feeling in the back of my mind that this event was the direct result of sending the wrong message to students. Some deviant mistook the call for free expression as license to hurt and destroy others. Perhaps, the culprit didn't know that he or she was crossing the line of decency because it had been long erased from their thinking. Kate died a few years later, but I will always remember her for that one incident where her passion for working with young minds came back to bite her. The lesson for me was that I should never trust the little devils any further than I could see them, meaning that I had to secure the classroom against all kinds of potential mischief if I didn't want to find crap in my filing cabinet.

Afterthought: When it comes to dealing with hazardous waste material,  
The classroom is the last place one would expect to find it.

## Parents Lying for their Children



Trust, trust in the world, because this human being exists—that  
is the inward achievement of the relation in education.  
- Martin Buber, Between Man and Man

Nowadays, there isn't much that some parents won't do to cover up for their children if something goes wrong at school. I have encountered some occasions where parents will do the unethical on behalf of their children and then proceed to proclaim their right to make judicious decisions on their behalf. I understand the feeling. As a parent myself, I have sometimes been tempted to lie on behalf of our children in relation to school only to stop short because I realize that it might seriously compromise my professional ethics.

There are four key areas in which this happens and each has its own set of stories. In the first one, the parent will actually do the assignment for the child and have him pass it off as his own. The giveaway on this is that the teacher knows that the student in question is incapable of providing such sophisticated answers. The best way to get around this kind of lie is to hang a tough test on the student to see how much they really know. In the second one, there are parents who will actually put a whole science or history project together for their son or daughter and pass off their role as one of consulting. This problem raises itself at science fairs more than any other place and is usually resolved by creating a new category of 'adults' in the competition.

A third opportunity to lie on behalf of one's children comes when a student skips a class, and the parent phones in to the school to excuse him in order to preserve his/her right to make up a test next day. This lie or line generally comes from overly protective parents who have never quite accepted the fact that their child is only trying to avoid inevitable failure. A fourth type of situation occurs when the parents threaten to sue the school board because they believe their son or daughter was unjustly accused of being impaired while on school property, even when the evidence clearly supports such a finding. Few of these legal challenges make it to court because of their frivolous nature. The facts get out and the complaint is withdrawn.

Homework, class projects, attendance, behavior at school functions, school regulations and essay writing are all areas that are being sorely tested by some

parents who would rather believe their children than uphold the authority of the school system. Each time the system is tested in terms of its right to enforce a standard of honesty means one more body blow to the integrity of the system. I presently send home a lot of tests to be completed under parental supervision because of the increasing problem with absenteeism. To protect the system and shift the weight of responsibility to the parents, I require one of their signatures at the bottom of the paper attesting to the honesty of their son or daughter. At least, if the public school system eventually falls apart under the weight of dishonesty, I will have done my part to stave off the evil day. The public school system has insidiously changed over the years to the point that some parents have the audacity to ask for work to be sent home for their truant children. Test cheating is now giving way to test avoiding and deferring. At this rate, tests could become obsolete in the next decade. Oh, by the way, the new euphemism for lying is ‘stretching the truth to fit the circumstances’ but even using that is politically risky in the day of overwrought emotions.

Afterthought: Living in a pressure-filled society causes people to take shortcuts which, in turn, cause them to lie about their failing to do it right in the first place.

### Inside a Principal’s Office!



When it came to preparing his speeches, which he composed himself, he would withdraw into his room and would work deep into the night several evenings running, occupying three secretaries taking dictation straight into the typewriter before carefully correcting the drafts.

- Ian Kershaw, Hitler 1889-1936

While I’ve been in a number of principals’ offices in my time, I do not pretend to be an authority on what constitutes a proper working space for the AO (Administrative Officer) of a school. They come in all shapes and sizes, styles and motifs with a certain commonality about them all. They tend to reflect the person who occupies them. It all depends on what kind of AO you’re dealing with as to what kind of office they keep: a pompous type might have the walls covered or lined with diplomas, photos, and artwork while an authoritative person might have the most ornate-looking desk set and paper weight to wow the onlooker. As the

person in charge of the whole running of the school, tradition has granted him or her a space or room that they can call their own; a command centre from which flows all kinds of communiqués, memos, directives, newsletters, letters, reports and verbal decisions. My personal experiences suggest that little has changed over the years. For starters, it usually contains a door, a window, a desk, chairs, a couple of filing cabinets, a couch, a desk-top or laptop computer, a phone, a bookcase, a couple of diplomas on a wall, a painting or two and a swivel chair for the person behind the desk. Extras might include two flag standards in front or beside the desk, a round table, some student art posted along the back wall, native art along the near wall, carpet, and perhaps a stereo system within reach of the desk. The desk itself may be made out of solid mahogany, mahogany veneer, oak, oak veneer, yellow pine, etc. It may be accompanied by a crushed velvet cushioned high-back chair with all kinds of control levers or just a simple synthetic, simulated leather-covered one with a low back and arm rests. There is always some imposing object or article in the room that defines ownership, occupancy or residency.

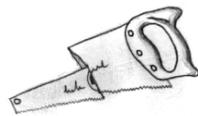
Before windows appeared in the door to a principal's office—because of the growing potential for ethical issues—a closed door usually signified a meeting in progress or normal occupant absent! On the other hand, an open door usually meant the principal was around and available for consultation if he wasn't preoccupied with something more pressing. Nowadays, some traditional principals still allow their teaching staff to step across the threshold of the door to initiate a conversation at any time. Others of a more secretive persuasion might request the teacher or employee to go through a secretary for an appointment, while others choose to communicate mainly by memo and are rarely sited in their office at times convenient to the teacher for a variety of reasons. Gone are the days when a simple invitation to the principal's office meant pending doom.

The essence of a modern principal's daily life is meetings upon meetings with a wide assortment of people: some productive, some unproductive, some controversial, or some friendly. His office is the favorite place of encounter to discuss business and iron out problems. Such roles are undoubtedly stressful ones and require a very skilful person to manage time effectively so that everything gets done. A personal office space seems to be the only remaining spot in a school where a principal can assert his authority in terms of dictating the terms of engagement and controlling the agenda. As my late father once said, "The moment you resign the job, the space and all the 'power' that goes with it evaporates". Here are some things I try to do when I walk into a principal's office: never sit down and get comfortable; always have the door open, if possible, for good ventilation; have a point for being there so that the meeting doesn't become aimless chatter; never

appear to be staring at the walls because that might be sending the wrong message about your likes and dislikes; state your case as quickly as possible, and ask for a decision realizing that this person is usually very busy; avoid altercations because that only leaves bad memories; watch how your friendly or not-so friendly AO gives off body language; and never ask for another meeting soon after the first one because he might think you're trying to control him and that is bad.

Afterthought: The moment one walks into an office and closes the door, the secret is out. It's usually the other person who is in charge.

## Succeeding Where Others Fail—Part 2



'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

I will always admire my dad for the excellent workmanship he put into his furniture. Here was a man who had trained to be a cabinet-maker and had ended up teaching school and being an administrator. 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- and radial-arm saw to work on their special projects. My drafting design was littered with red marks indicating that right from the beginning my concept was doomed. Any cuts I got to make 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 underachiever, and desperately looking for a solution before the deadline. I remember the day my dad—the big 'bad' vice-principal—asked me how the project was coming along and would it be ready for the big day. I guess he

knew from conversations he had with his colleague, the woodwork teacher, that it was a lost cause.

I told him that I didn't want to talk about it, and I was 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 I didn't know I was signed up for the course in the first place, except that a certain someone wanted to make a 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 fitting were practically his doing. By the end of the hour, the project was virtually 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 my home for the next fifteen years. It became a symbol of an artifact that came about because of someone's determination to finish what was 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 gift was passed on to my older brother while I was left to do something else. It is, however, curious how this loss plays out later in one's life. I have not given up in my search to acquire the hard skills I spurned in my callow youth.

This past year I have taken on two projects to redo some pieces of old furniture that I intend to keep as I move into retirement: one is a teak coffee table all the way from Trinidad and the other is a cherry dining room set, both in need of serious refinishing. After about twenty hours of applying Circa 1885 stripper, painstakingly sanding and finishing with Tung oil, both articles of furniture look like new. Gone are the scrapes, chips and water marks, and the finish is a brilliantly transformed look. Such are the rewards awaiting people who choose to work with wood.

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

## Stepping in for a Teacher–Part 2



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 you might turn your perspective 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 week-end had been a colossal washout for me 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 70 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 to get 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 by 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 almost automaton-like 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 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 close calls.

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 your coach and teacher to

catch up on some much needed sleep was like Hobson's choice: not a very attractive proposition. Just the other day, I was on the phone to Chris conveying my condolences at the sudden and tragic loss of his wife. At that moment, I found it tremendously hard to step into his life and offer him anything other than kind regards.

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

### A Sex Scandal



By the same token we don't waste our time in teaching the unteachable. The fixed education represented by a diploma is a bit of conspicuous waste which has no place in Walden Two. We don't attach an economic or honorific value to education. It has its own value or none at all.

- B. F. Skinner, Walden Two

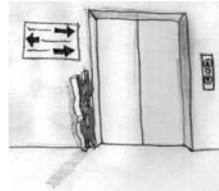
To allay any concerns, this is not some hot and spicy affair that I'm about to recount. Believe me, it all started out very innocently with a teacher making a very quick judgment call as to what kind of material to include in her sex education class for that day. It just so happened that the worksheet she chose included references to common street language that young people might use in having sex. It definitely came with an advisory not to use without parental consent. Whether the teacher chose to disregard those recommendations or whether it was a simple oversight, the harm was done.

Copies of one of the worksheets went home and all hell broke loose. There were groups formed, public meetings held, petitions asking for the teacher's firing, students pulled out of school, national news coverage, and political careers made out of this little incident that could have been easily dealt with by a simple apology and retraction. When the circus atmosphere finally subsided, one teacher had left, two ethics charges had been laid, one parent was about to become a school trustee, and the town had had its fifteen minutes in the spotlight with national news coverage.

Meanwhile, the district has instituted its own official sex education program to address such concerns as teenage pregnancy and healthy relations.

Afterthought: What a school district needs to help redefine itself is another sex scandal! The result is usually more programs and counselors.

## Commodity Trading



Of what use is money in the hand of a fool,  
Since he has no desire to get wisdom.  
- Proverbs 17:16

In 1993, I signed up for a Ken Robert's course on commodity trading. My friend, Chuck, had recommended the course as a great starting point for getting involved in the world of commodity trading. At the time, I didn't really need the money but was looking for something that would improve my somewhat poor grasp of financial investments. If I could educate myself on the finer points of becoming a daytime trader, I could possibly reap big profits, retire early and never have to work again. Such were the dreams swirling around in my big head as I considered my future on Easy Street. The apparent answer was to learn how to execute the buying and selling contracts and options in any number of commodities (the basic building blocks of any economy) from the comfort of my living room. Not much to it if you didn't become reckless at the wrong time and get wiped out in one fell-swoop.

I took the course which amounted to doing some practice exercises, writing some self-administered tests, followed up by extensive paper trading before making the big plunge. The literature seemed to repetitively read the charts and identify key formations such as double tops, retracements, and peaks that could signify ideal moments to enter or exit. My wife agreed to allow me \$3000 for trading purposes, and I found a brokerage firm in Southern California that would act as my key link to the big markets. What I didn't know at the time was that I was about to enter the shady and murky world of trading with the big boys—the commercial institutions known as hedge funds. Added to which, I had very little up-to-date information

that would clue me in as to the big picture. I was supposed to receive updated information in the form of newsletters and tabloids that would give me the best insights possible into the seductive vagaries of a volatile market.

I should have known, by the very presence of a small-print disclaimer that ‘profits can never be guaranteed’ appearing on the bottom of all literature, that commodity trading was not for the faint of heart. I simply chose to ignore it because I had the overwhelming confidence that I would be able to make money on the merits of reading technical charts and understanding market fundamentals. Over the next three years, I hung in there and followed some intriguing trends in things like orange juice, gold, wheat and soya bean contracts. My problem was that I never really stepped out and did the big trade that would leave me seriously exposed if it failed. I chose to stay in the area of options rather than buying contracts because I thought it would give me better protection over the long haul. The fear of having a contract for something like cattle, hogs, or wheat go in reverse scared the living day lights out of me. If it expired before I had a chance to sell, I could very well be left holding them in storage.

At the end of the experiment, I had lost a lot of my initial investment because I could never pick up on a trend and follow through to its end. The information, in the form of the Ridder Group newspaper, which I was receiving was usually a couple of days to a week old, and often hard to figure out. With the weight of this information and the scale of investment operations I was up against, I didn’t stand a chance. Big companies were trading in huge contracts that were hedged against failing by their ability to invest in calls or puts to offset any unforeseen losses. My puny investments were only more fresh meat for the big boys to feed off. Out of this foray into the biggest crapshoot in the market, I was, however, able to develop a number of lessons for an economics unit that I was teaching in one of my courses at school. One of the learning objectives was to know about investment opportunities in terms of being prepared to make and lose money.

What did I learn out of this whole situation? For starters, have a practical reason for investing such as needing money to build up an existing business. I didn’t and, consequently, lost my investment. Then, one must have a system in place and learn to trust it regardless of its caprices. I didn’t and was constantly switching tracks when it looked like the markets were turning against me. Consequently, I lost. Finally, an investor needs to have a reliable source of information that confirms what he already knows. There is no sense in basing one’s knowledge on what others think if one hasn’t done a fair bit of thinking on the subject himself. I hadn’t and so was always reacting to news as it happened and letting it govern my thinking. For three thousand dollars and two and a half years in the marketplace, I

got a very interesting and sometimes unkind introduction to the high-stakes world of commodity trading.

Since we have retired to the safer ground of conventional instruments like GICs and RRSPs, I have not heard of too many of my local acquaintances staying in. This comes as no surprise because the market has been virtually taken over by multi-national corporations who make sure their purchases and investments are secured, even if it means swallowing up the little guy. Many of these big players buy on volume, causing the price of options to be artificially high in the first place, and then purchase counter-positions that make it impossible for the little guy to determine trends. What a lesson to teach young people! Stay away from playing with the bid investors unless you have the best combination of money sense and good luck working for you. Those who can move quickly, informatively and with purpose are the ones who succeed at taking profit.

Afterthought: What gives any investor the right to think he or she has a special inside track on the secrets of the market?

## School Annuals



Our author has clearly got hold of the ideas of the idea of helping memory by arousing emotional affects through these striking and unusual images, beautiful or hideous, comic or obscene.

- Frances A. Yates, [The Art of Memory](#)

I have yearbooks scattered around the house that serve as graphic reminders of my distant and more recent connections to public education. I have never ceased to be amazed at how much people—including myself—are willing to pay for preserving a memory of a year in the public school system, even when the end-product might be full of errors and cost an exorbitant amount. As of 2010, the price for what is virtually a collection of school photos capturing students and staff in various poses has climbed to around sixty dollars. From a publication that was once black and white, everything now is rendered in ‘high-quality’ color, with special supplements for graduates and DVD formats for those who want to share the school experience with friends on the big screen.

How important is a yearbook to the understanding and appreciation of the human race down the road? Here's a case in point. Just recently, a school principal in the Vancouver Island region took the decisive action of cutting out a particular student's picture and critical comments about her from all this year's batch. Hardly over the top you might say if the comments were offensive, but the howls of parental outrage were so strong that the woman had to back down and order a completely new set of unexpurgated annuals. Mess with a student's right to own one and you might be inviting a retaliatory jihad of sorts.

Failure to purchase the pictorial treasury of that special year is almost as big an omission as failing to make it onto the graduation list. Packed into the glosses of this book are friendships, humor, achievements, autographs, quotations and, most importantly, a sense of spirit that distinguishes that year from every other year in our lives. Rarely have I found an annual lying around unclaimed or discarded. They usually become that security blanket or companion that accompanies one through the ups and down of the next year. After all, it is, in effect, one of the twelve years in a child's education bound up in its seventy pages of pictures, ads, and artwork.

A yearbook is supposed to put a year in perspective by building a bridge to the next year and beyond. What an interesting sentiment when you consider that most of its content, outside a couple of references to trips, is contained to the four walls of the school! Since more than half the relationships represented on its pages will not likely endure to the next year, what are we actually preserving other than memories? I would like to see a feature that allows the owner to see a computer enhancement of what the transitory friends look like years later. Now, if that were technologically possible, the instructive, as opposed to the sentimental, value of a yearbook would soar. Gone would be the romantic fallacy that we preserve our past so that we can make an easier transition to the future. Historical continuity comes as a result of comparing the then with the now and hearing the story that explains the transition or journey. To that end, having a yearbook is only one small piece of the puzzle.

Afterthought: Hopefully, the study of history instructs us on how to draw lessons from the past to govern our future welfare.  
Last time I checked, we weren't doing very well.

## A Close Call



Close only counts in horse-shoes,  
hand-grenades and last-minute decisions.  
- variation on a popular saying

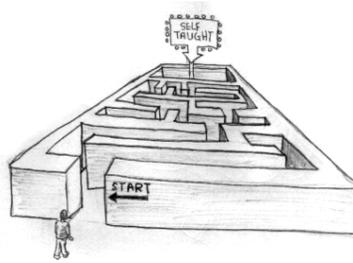
This is just another one of those stories that has a real weird twist to it. I was at that stage where I was still hankering to be a principal and suddenly lucked out with an offer of one at Spirit Lake away up north. The setting was a Métis community that was a hundred miles off the beaten track with lots of social and economic problems. My job was to take over a three-room school while living in the community and trying to be effectively integrated in all aspects of social life. Nobody had written a manual on how to accomplish this mandate effectively, because they had not stayed long enough to realize success. About the time I had received the job offer, my parents had come up for a short visit, and Belle was pregnant with our second child.

I remember going for a hike with my dad and discussing the pros and cons with him as to whether I should accept the position or not. His advice was simple: if I couldn't see my wife and children happy in Spirit Lake, then I shouldn't accept the posting. Two days later, I phoned the superintendent in Alberta and declined the offer. Later that fall, I was putting a current events package together for my classes when I heard the news that four teens from Spirit Lake had killed themselves by consuming duplicating fluid. To this day, I can't imagine how that tragic event might have reshaped my professional life if I had accepted the posting to Spirit Lake.

I firmly believe that much of our lives are indirectly affected by 'what-if' scenarios. We are allowed to ponder these possibilities after the fact in terms of reminding us that we are always responsible for making good choices in terms of planning our futures. From time to time, we will undoubtedly get ambushed by the unforeseen.

Afterthought: A deal is hardly a deal if you have to give up a lot of personal gains to get it. Then it becomes a gamble.

## Year 2000



‘I will rebuild,’ he said. ‘Not only that. I will expand. Expand. The logic of the situation demands expansion. Schools up and down the country, with staff conservatively dressed, and properly qualified, sworn to preserve standards. A mighty network of schools.....’  
- Barry Unsworth, The Big Day

For a whole decade leading up to 2000, public school teachers in B.C. were being pressed into supporting a new educational initiative to reform how students were taught. As the new millennium was still six years away, teachers like myself were attending more workshops than ever to get prepared for the big shift to student-centered learning. The Johnston School group from the US Midwest was touring around various districts with the message that the Copernican learning system had arrived and was only waiting to be implemented by those who saw the light. The concept was so radical and vague that it didn’t even have a plan for delivery. That was to emerge from the various school districts across the province. The whole process of realizing educational reform became almost surreal: a “build it and they will come” mentality prevailed at the Ministry of Education. I remember writing an article for BC Report that suggested that there would never be enough money to construct a ‘quixotic’ notion such as Year 2000 because it was so open-ended and frightfully strange in its vision. A virtual black hole waiting to be filled!

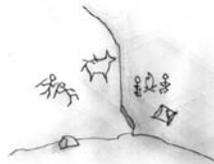
About the mid-1990’s, the government woke up to the cold reality that the bureaucracy had sold them a bill of goods. It quickly cancelled the initiative and returned a saner approach called the status quo. My recollections of those heady days were a mélange of excitement, fear, loathing, and curiosity. On numerous occasions, I was told by administrators that I was getting in the way of progress by questioning the tenets of educational reform. It seemed like everybody was waiting for this juggernaut of an idea to become reality, though nobody knew how or why. One of my colleagues compared this barmy idea to having a high-jumping competition with no bar. Undoubtedly, educational authorities were concerned that too many of the low-end students were showing up as statistical failures in annual reports and needed to be encouraged to graduate. In short, Year 2000 was called the bold public vision accompanied by a flawed design. As a footnote, its main

architect—a man whose name will forever elude me even with the help of Google—tragically died from a brain tumor in the middle of the start-up process.

The Year 2000 concept of radical reform will go down in history as one of those gigantic failures in social engineering. It was an idea that students could eventually be retooled to be independent learners. Teachers would turn into glorified tutors and facilitators whilst students learned to find their own way to truth and self-awareness. What lunacy!

Afterthought: The Greeks have a word for it: 'hubris'.

## The Study of History



Just as from the infinite ocean of facts the historian selects those which are significant for his purpose, so from the multiplicity of sequences of cause and effect he extracts those, and only those, which are historically significant; and the standard of historical significance is his ability to fit them into a pattern of rational explanation...

- E.H. Carr, What is History?

History is one of the most exciting disciplines to study in school. If taught by a person who has a consuming passion for it, it can become the means of opening young minds as to how to possibly view the future in relation to the past. On the other hand, if taught by a person who has no abiding interest or training in its great principles, history becomes as uninteresting as reading the repair manual for a fridge or dishwasher in your spare time. Besides the big ideologies such as nationalism, capitalism, communism and democracy that serve as the overarching support for modern society, the study of history provides a remarkable cast of unique characters to live them out in a constant stream of interconnected events found in a diversity of physical landscapes. If you are not a big idea person, then there is lots of fodder to chew on in those other fields of historical pursuit. Rare is the person who has the visionary grasp of all things historical, where places, events, and ideas come together to produce a sense of the importance, whether it be local, national or global.

To be honest, I never enjoyed the former kind of teacher until I got to university and began to learn under some truly great scholars who loved their subject matter. During my high school years, I had to endure teachers who read to class from the textbook, didn't know what they were talking about half the time, assigned endless reams of questions, and gave two or three tests per term to demonstrate that they were in control. I didn't begin to appreciate "big-picture" history ideas in terms of trends until I started reading extensively and looking for meaning through understanding other people's interpretations of people and events.

Today, I want my students to understand that they have, in their possession, one of the critical tools for understanding the passage of time: historical analysis which can be applied to many different situations around them, even their own stories.

Afterthought: The modern man may be guilty of turning his back on the lessons of history because they're too complex to understand in all their interconnections.

### A Moment of Truth



Buy the truth and do not sell it.  
- Proverbs 23:23

One can often take a lifetime to get confirmation of something that is always suspected but never able to be proved. One such case involved my Grade One principal, Mr. Chase. He always impressed me as vicious, mean and downright rough with kids. He was known to throw his weight around to impress others that he was in control. He thought nothing of picking up any slightly misbehaving male student by the scruff of the neck and pinning him against the wall or hauling him to the office. You just did not cross him in any way or you could expect very severe consequences. I was one of his victims when he walked into the classroom one day at lunchtime, while the teacher was out, called me up to the front and proceeded to administer a harsh spanking for no apparent reason than to intimidate the class. Perhaps I had been chewing my food with my mouth open or talking a little louder than usual. The strap was another of his means by which to keep students in line.

He told me later in life that he had been forced to strap over a hundred sixty students that particular year. The year afterwards, when I moved to another district, the numbers amazingly dropped to under a hundred. The extraordinary thing about it all was that he would do it all over again if given half a chance. The children needed disciplining, and he was God's chosen disciplinarian for doing it. He wasn't a pleasant man to start with so he had nothing to lose if he chose to physically abuse students. He told me in a private conversation that he had learned the value of strapping children from growing up in a home where his hard-nosed Italian immigrant of a father beat him regularly. Oh, yes, there was that one occasion when he caught me leaving the school building with my hat on. He came up to me, promptly ripped it off my head and proceeded to throw it down the stairwell while laughing at me. He justified his brutality by claiming that it usually took only one drastic encounter with a recalcitrant student to correct their behavior. If that was the case, why did the Flack kids get the strap eight times that year for, of all things, smoking off the school grounds?

About thirty-five years later, a relative of mine had just attended a church function where this man's sister was in attendance. Sitting at the next table, she couldn't help but overhear this woman loudly defending her brother's prowess as an elementary principal from the old school of discipline when the strap was king. He had to be tough on kids because that was his only way of maintaining order. The principal before him had let things get out of hand, and it was his duty to crack the whip. It was a bad school which needed a heavy hand in order to become an effective place to learn. Upon reflection years later, I must conclude that Mr. Chase was truly a very one-dimensional man in a very complex field of public service! It is amazing he lasted so long as a principal. When I later took time to check with others of his colleagues in the district when I began teaching, they had some choice words for his tyrannical ways. By 1973, the provincial Ministry of Education had officially banned corporal punishment and Mr. Chase's reign of terror was over.

I just heard the other day, via the grapevine, that Mr. Chase has contracted prostate cancer and is going through extensive treatment. Though I never had much time for him, I have truly forgiven him for all his nasty ways and wish him a speedy recovery. Maybe the first school I attended back then was a virtual hell hole and needed the heavy hand of a sadistic Mr. Chase to keep everyone in line, but did it need to be done in such an indiscriminate manner as to leave a lasting impression on an impressionable mind like mine? Oh, I can hear you saying, "Get over it, Malcomson, because there are so many beautiful things happening out there that are passing you by unless you move on."

Afterthought: When you become good at disciplining, you may become exclusively effective at punishing people.

## A Note of Triumph–Part 2



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, I have realized a degree of victory over a series of difficulties that have plagued me over the years: indecision, impatience, impulsivity, anger, and a need for revenge. I have found viable answers for every one of them so why not take some time to celebrate with the last story.

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 by the fact that I ran up to thirty 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 that lingering doubt that I wouldn't finish and that I would fall victim once again to the psychological wall—the point at which inexperienced runners power out. An amazing thing happened this time that illustrates the point that working or, in this case, running in tandem with someone 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 came across a young lady who was struggling 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 all the way to the finish line six miles away. Something interesting kicked in 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 or chide me to exceed my potential as a long-distance runner. All that training was stored-up energy that needed to be transformed into superhuman action. Just that one brief moment of encounter right 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 after and never to run another marathon.

In retrospect, training for a marathon proved to be the biggest project in personal readjustment I had ever undertaken to that point in time. Weight came off big time, training schedules were honored through thick and thin, and planning was done so that I was able to work my way through three nagging injuries.

This past year, our oldest son Peter ran in the high-altitude marathon at Denver, Colorado. After an extensive training period, he came in around 3hrs. 35 minutes; quite a feat when one considers the obstacle he faced the year previous. Peter had just contracted colon cancer and was getting back on his feet. This race was proof that he has found his stride and is prepared to train to run in the Boston Marathon sometime in the near future.

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

### The Return of Black Betty



The original cycle of stories called “Black Betty” started over fifty years ago. It was meant to serve as a reminder of what a typical baby boomer went through being educated in the public school system. My age group, on the whole, was a rebellious and awkward one that took great delight in standing up to authority at every step of the way. We learned by experience just as much as by formal book learning. Maybe we were just naturally responding to our parents’ inexplicable arbitrariness in the manner of force meeting force, often benign but on the rare

occasion downright nasty. Mine was the school of hard knocks personified in the lessons we were expected to learn out of a forced respect for authority. After receiving my education the hard way, I decided to go into teaching to make sure the students of succeeding generations did not experience the same adversity I endured.

While I occasionally faced what I often thought were nasty, miserable, evil and unreasonable people bent on making life miserable for me, it was my hope that I would be able to show a kinder and gentler side to my students as I helped them on the way to higher learning. The Lancastrian use of the strap or black betty which had become that hated symbol of corporal authority during my era has, thankfully, been abolished long ago. This sequel, “The Return of Black Betty” , has been written as a follow-through to determine where public education has gone over the last half-century as it continues to modernize.

By the very title of this epilogue, the reader should realize that the symbolic might of Black Betty, as much as we wish, has not gone away. Both the weapon and the person are still around our school halls in unreasonably, larger-than-life form. While the horrid Elizabeth Black and that fascist Principal Chase have gone to their rewards, students now have to contend with something infinitely more threatening: being controlled by adult influences outside the walls of the school. In a conversation I had with Chase later in life, he claimed, and possibly rightly so, that he only beat children because he was preparing them to handle the bigger challenges of life: resisting temptation, being honest, complying with rules, putting others before oneself, respecting authority, and becoming an effective citizen. So when we finally banish Chase and his miserable kind to the ash pile of history, are we any better off for what replaces his kind of severe upbringing?

From my experiences over the last thirty-six years, I am not sure. We may have traded in one rigid and archaic set of operating values for another more liberating and gentler one, only to discover that nothing much has changed except the means by which to enforce the daily schoolroom grind. Students still smoke, imbibe, fornicate, lie, cheat, challenge authority, gossip, bully, swear, and procrastinate as they endeavor to formally learn about the big wide world with all its many possibilities. Freedom has now become the big brass ring that everyone of the new generation seeks after because the baby boomers like me led the way decades ago. I keep thinking there was a defining moment back then when I entered primary school at T. E. Bell that signaled the beginning to what I eventually ended up becoming: a freed-up, restless individual looking for new dragons to slay.

I leave my readers with one more story to chew over that probably best sums up my whole life experience as a student and teacher, and haunts me to this day as I finally leave a school system that I have spent over fifty-five years in. Yes, the incident indirectly involves the spirit of Betty as it alludes to that terrible first year I spent under the baleful eye of Miss Elizabeth Black. Teddy, Gordy, Donald and I had been caught crossing into forbidden territory adjacent to the school grounds. The area in question was the local cemetery which was not completely fenced in along that stretch. Students could still get in if someone helped to lift the barb-wire strand so one's clothes did not get caught or torn. We had been told not to go in there on any occasion, even for our soccer ball. On this one occasion, it might well have been me who spied one such object lying over in no-man's land and impulsively called on my buddies to help rescue it. Needless to say, Black just so happened to be looking out the window from her top-floor perch and caught us as we started to make our break for freedom. Four of us got caught in that little operation: two for actually going through the fence, the other two for looking on and not going to tell the teacher. Our subsequent punishment was very unique to say the least. Black offered us a deal that she obviously thought was fair and reasonable: take the strap or spend four lunch hours holed up in her classroom. Needless to say, we all took the latter because none of us had yet tested the power of the former. She got us on the fear factor. Years later, my dad related a story to me about his school days in Ireland. Old Master James made the same option available to his pupils: four whacks on the hands with a cane or two hours after school doing lines. Dad claims he always took the pain for long-term gain approach.

On the third day of the sentence, something strange happened. Black told us to put our heads down on the desk and go to sleep. There was to be no talking and, to make her point, she shut off the lights, closed the door and left for the staffroom. With the blinds partially drawn and it being an overcast day outside, the room was almost blacked out. In the space of a couple of minutes the room filled up with chatter as each of us tried to make voice contact with the other because we were sitting in the four corners of the room. That went on for a couple of minutes until the door suddenly opened, the light went on and there stood Black glaring down at us with a wrathful look. As best as I can figure, she had not gone to the staffroom as we had initially thought but stood outside the door that was slightly ajar and caught us flagrante. She started her line of questioning by asking us in the sternest of voices who was talking.

This is where it gets really surreal: either I didn't hear her properly or I intentionally omitted to tell the truth because I was the only one who didn't put up his hand. That query quickly led into her next statement which absolutely floored

me. She proceeded to praise me for my honesty and obedience and excused me from serving the rest of my detention. I can still hear the protests of the other three as I left the room to enjoy my new-found freedom. To make matters worse for them, all three of them got an extra two lunch hours and failed the grade at the end of the year. I know in my mind that Elizabeth Black knew full well that I was as guilty as the rest but, for some perverse and manipulative reason, she let me off the hook that day. All I can say is that she used her power as an adult to corrupt my values as a child in a way that continues to play out in modern society in many other adult-children relations. Her control over me was a case of do as 'I say' rather than 'do as I should do'. What she did that day as a tactic is called divide and conquer. Perhaps she thought she won my respect by letting me off the hook, but all she did was alienate me more. Forever afterwards, I never associated with those guys in the playground because they didn't want to have anything to do with me. I had betrayed them and thus disqualified myself as their friend. I almost wished I had taken the strap when it was first offered.