

Wagon Training

on the road to becoming a teacher

When I was a kid, my family had a big wood-panelled station wagon that we'd use for our annual three-day drive from Albany, New York, to various parts of Florida. For us kids, our progress in life was measured by the seat we earned in the station wagon. Least desirable was sitting on "the Hump," that section in the middle of the back seat just behind the gear box. Typically, my parents relegated my younger sister to this position and offered the positive spin that in the event of an accident, my brother and I would protect her by absorbing any side impact and resultant bodily damage. Most desirable, of course, was "the Way-Back," that seatbelt-free zone where the luggage was kept and where an especially height-deprived child could stretch out on a long trip.

Over the 16 years I've spent in education, I've learned that to a great degree, progress as a teacher comes from riding the Frustration Wagon. This could probably be said of any job: lawyer, welder, professional wrestler. But all of my working life has been spent in schools, so I only know the Scholastic Wagon of Frustration.

I remember clearly when I, as a teacher, first climbed on board: sitting in my tiny apartment on Massachusetts Avenue, eating Kraft macaroni and cheese, waiting for my Dungeons and Dragons computer game (probably Eye of the Beholder from the Forgotten Realms series) to load up. The phone rang.

"Mr. McColl? This is Mrs. Connolly. Sean's mother? Do you mind if we talk for a few minutes?"

I didn't if we did, and after some preliminary interrogative parrying we arrived at the thrust of her particular line of inquiry:

"So, Mr. McColl, what should we be doing at home for Sean as parents?"

Yep. Twenty-one years old, first-year teacher, fresh out of college, being asked what sounded an awful lot like a parenting question. Had she wanted to know about preparing ramen noodles or defeating a small force of drow elves with your cleric injured, I could have been the guy. Sadly, I had decidedly fewer suggestions for constructive interaction between teens and their parents.

Anyway, surely Mrs. Connolly knew better than I did? Surely. My involuntary honesty response wanted very badly to kick in, and it was all I could do to keep from blurting out a litany of my unworthiness: that I balanced my checkbook by crossing out the number I had written in and replacing it with the one the bank sent to me each month, that I had begun the irresponsible accumulation of credit card debt, that until only a few months ago I had been known to attend fraternity parties and that I had declined to participate in my school's retirement program because it seemed like a waste of money that could be better spent on stereo components and book clubs.

The situation frustrated me. My knee-jerk frustration stemmed from the fact that my mac and cheese had begun to congeal and that Colm, Fingers and the rest were waiting for me to take them into the town of Myth Drannor. But I later recognized this was just pettiness. At that point, I decided I was frustrated because nobody had ever told me I'd have to advise parents when I started teaching. But that was rubbish as well: the truth was I was frustrated by my own ignorance. I didn't have an answer for Mrs. Connolly, simple as that.

Now ensconced on the Hump of the Frustration Wagon, I needed to find some way to make myself more comfortable. I needed the answers for all the future Mrs. Connollys I would encounter. But where to find them? Faced with this dilemma, I asked myself the question I always ask in times of crisis: what would Columbo do?

Columbo regularly enters situations about which he knows nothing, and regularly has to find answers to difficult questions. His primary tool? Attention to detail.

So I tried attending to more details. I noticed Sam's exquisite turn of phrase in his *Crucible* essay, wherein he described John Proctor as being "mercenary beneath his sanctimonious veneer" (since then, I have been known to employ this phrase in conversation from time to time). I revelled in John's marvellously succinct retelling of the critical moment in Crichton's *Andromeda Strain*: "Dr. Burton's greatest mistake came when he failed to autopsy the anticoagulated rats." When Percy faced ridicule after being defeated by a girl in a wrestling match, I spent time picking the experience apart with him and using it as the basis for a chapel talk. And I shared with Willis' parents the moment when he, meek and awkward as ever, walked into the Grade 4 classroom to whoops and applause after his celebrated portrayal as Shaggy from Scooby-Doo in the Lower School lampoon. I also noticed grammatical errors in compositions, inaccuracies in recounting literature, spelling mistakes, and more. And slowly, I learned about my students and about students in general, and I found myself able to intelligently talk to parents about what they might do with their children at home.

At the time, I taught Grade 8 English, including grammar. And it must be said, I was the grammar sensei. Grammar-Wan Kenobi. MC Grammar. Grammar Moses.

Once a year, I'd give a test on the parts of speech. One section of the test involved students reading sentences and deciding the function of the italicized nouns or pronouns. One sentence I was particularly fond of using was, "I will write *you* soon."

No doubt you recognized this as the one example in English usage of the employment of an indirect object (you) without a corresponding direct object (a letter, implied). Well, despite my extraordinary teaching skills and unmatched Rasputin-like charisma, each year a head-achingly large number of my students would raise their hands to ask,

"Mr. McColl, is there a word missing from Question 17?"

Not only would someone ask this during the test, but minutes later someone else (a slower worker) would ask it again. And then a third and fourth student would ask it further along. The more discreet students would walk tentatively up to my desk to ask me in whispers.

Eventually, I had enough. One year, I rewrote the test to include this line in the directions:

"**And no, there is not a word missing from Question 17.**"

Yes, in bold.

Administering the test to my third-period English students, I had them all focus intently upon me before looking at their tests, and I ordered them, deeply, deliberately and ominously, "DO NOT BEGIN THE TEST UNTIL YOU HAVE READ ALL THE DIRECTIONS." I made them recite this instruction back to me.

Nevertheless, about 20 minutes in, Mike Svetska raised his hand. "Mike," I said, "did you read the directions?"

"Yes," he answered hurriedly. "In number–"

"Mike," I said, "I don't think you've read the directions."

"Yeah, I did. But in number–"

"Mike, I want you to read the directions again. Right now. Every word. Beginning to end. And if you still have a question, I will answer it."

And I watched Mike put his head down and begin scanning the instructions. When he reached my instruction about Number 17, I saw a convulsive shiver rattle his body from head to foot. Following this, he began to giggle – not a happy giggle, but rather the giggle of a man who has just crept up to the edge of hysteria and is wondering whether he should jump in.

This incident set me to thinking: did Mike's manic response really mean he had learned a lesson about following directions, or did I simply solidify his belief in the paranormal? I hadn't become a teacher for the cosmetic responses of students on tests or their temporary performances in class presentations: I wanted to know that my teaching had fundamentally changed my students. I wanted to know that my teaching had affected who they were and how they viewed the world. And I felt in my bones that if

Illustrated by Bea

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I could work out a way to know these things, I'd successfully climb into the Window Seat of the Frustration Wagon.

Eighteen months passed before I had my shot. Working in an all-boys school, I had grown accustomed to the testosterone-fuelled resistance I faced on any occasion during which I asked the boys to explore their "softer" emotions or their "feminine sides." They merely tolerated our discussions of masculine love and friendship in Becket. No one signed up for my after-school knitting activity.

And so it was one spring that I found myself attempting to subvert their very traditional readings of *Lord of the Flies*. Homecoming Day had arrived, and all of my students understood the necessity of humoring their teachers as they awaited the day's main event: the annual lacrosse grudge match against our greatest rivals.

Golding titled Chapter Four of his novel, "Painted Faces and Long Hair." Seeking to provoke my students, I asked them why they thought he might have done so.

Their bored response: "It's when the kids paint their faces to look like savages, and they've been on the island for a while so their hair is getting really long."

Yes, but why focus on those two details? Why not call the chapter, "Dirty, Smelly and Running Around in Their Underwear," all of which are other descriptive details that arise in the chapter?

Their answers were safe and predictable and discussed the characters' primitive behavior, the symbolism of color in the book, and so on. I asked them what sort of people, typically, have long hair and paint their faces. After several minutes of blank stares and leading questions, someone tentatively whispered, "Girls?"

My next suggestion, that Golding wants to show that only when isolated from the conventional role-playing of society can boys truly explore all aspects of their identity – even and perhaps especially their feminine side – met with derisive laughter and aggressive disbelief. Undaunted in my quest to build my fortress of literary interpretation, I pointed out other examples of male-female roles played out on the island. I saw their defenses crumbling: they couldn't argue with the evidence.

But they could distance themselves from it: "Anyway, Mr. McColl, this is a stupid story. This wouldn't really happen."

How could they say that? They couldn't know how they'd behave if they were left on an island away from adults.

Now came the challenge: "So you're saying you think if we were left on an island for a couple months, we'd take off our clothes, paint our faces, roast a pig over a fire and dance around it chanting, 'KILL THE PIG. SPILL ITS BLOOD'?"

Well, when you put it that way, I suppose I couldn't say that exactly, no.

Later that afternoon, I tidied up my classroom as the bell rang for the end of the school day. My classroom windows looked down onto the school courtyard, and I could see mobs of fanatical boys spilling into the open space. It was a beautiful warm sunny day, and the high-school boys coordinated the local fan base. Many of the students, already overheated from minutes of screaming and running around, stood shirtlessly about, awaiting their turn at the stations where older boys would apply blue and white face paint. Other upperclassmen enlisted the help of younger boys in the construction of a bonfire inside a stone wall specially created for the purpose. Atop the pyre a bear (mascot of the rival team) was placed.

Moments later I watched as they ignited the fire, cheered the burning bear and danced, half-naked and repeating, "KILL THE BEARS! KILL THE BEARS!"

I gaped, desperate to use the moment somehow but ultimately powerless.

Just then, from a distant door on the far side of the courtyard, Joe, one of my students, emerged. He already had his face painted half blue, half white. He carried a lacrosse stick. Seeing me in my open window, he smiled and waved, and I waved back. Joe then blitzed forward to join the frenzied mob.

And then he stopped. And he looked at the frenzied mob, as though with new eyes.

And then he looked at me. And then at the mob again.

Eventually, sheepishly, he wandered over to join the rest of the boys, but it was clear that his heart was no longer in it.

There it was: something I'd taught in class had affected the behavior of a student and his outlook on the world. I felt that this warranted my moving into a Window Seat.

The trouble was, I immediately found myself facing the next level of professional frustration: fine, my teaching affected Joe one afternoon. But did it really become a part of him? Would it last?

In other words, the Window Seat wasn't good enough. I had my eye on the Way-Back.

I spent another four years desperately trying to climb over that back seat. I taught different grades and different subjects in different schools to different students. I used progressive assessment strategies; I trialed new cooperative learning techniques; I experimented with variable grading practices. I paid all kinds of attention to all kinds of things.

Bupkus. Window Seat City.

Eventually, I left the classroom to try riding the Administrative Wagon of Frustration for a while. I spent idle moments running through the names of colleagues who had probably found their way into the Way-Back of Teaching; I even met a few who I imagined rode in the coveted position of Shotgun. Always I wanted to corner them and demand to know their secrets. But, as Columbo teaches us, no one can give us the answers to the questions of our own lives. We must find our own answers in our own way.

A few days ago I bumped into a student I'd taught in Grade 7 who was heading into his final semester of college. We decided to go out for a beer to catch up. Our conversation veered wildly: Alfred Hitchcock, Plato's *Symposium*, "The Simpsons," ASL, getting a job, the other students in my Grade 7 homeroom.

"I remember when you told us about yourself on the first day," Francis said. "You said you had a tendency to go off on tangents."

How very matter-of-fact of me.

"Yeah. None of us knew what a tangent was. So you drew a picture on the board of a circle with a line coming out of it at the edge." His finger traced the diagram on the pub table. "That's still how I remember what a tangent is whenever it comes up in a math class or a conversation or whatever."

You'd think it would have been anti-climactic to find myself in the Way-Back after I'd stopped teaching. But you'd be wrong. In fact, even now I'm trying to work out a way to call Shotgun.



open mind