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Bad Teachers, Bad Teaching, Bad Examples - Bad to the Bone

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Bad Teachers, Bad Teaching, Bad Examples—Bad to the Bone

I wrote last week, and I have written before, about great, inspirational teachers from my past. But what about the bad ones? My focus today is on the three worst teachers I had before college: one from elementary school, one from junior high, and one from high school. No names have been changed, because these past teachers are guilty, not innocent.

My fourth grade teacher was Miss Swertz, who got married over Christmas break and became Mrs. Starnes. No matter the name, she was a bad teacher. The fact that there was such a thing as a bad teacher was a revelation to me at that young age. My teachers in grades one through three were all excellent and inspirational. Miss Swertz broke that chain.

What made her so bad? The first thing I remember is her odor. She smelled strongly of perfume, cigarettes, and bad breath. The combination

was lethal, especially when she sidled up to my desk for individual reading time. I had to sit there and read to her as the smell coming off her almost suffocated me. I can only imagine the teacher's lounge back then in the 1960s, no doubt an acrid fog. Miss Swertz brought that aroma back to class with her.

She also looked like a witch, or so I thought. Her hair was poufed up in a towering bouffant, hair-sprayed to what looked like an impenetrable mass. She wore too much makeup, and her eyebrows had been plucked out, then penciled back in. She had a wicked way of looking at us as she berated us for our behavior. Some of the guys in class said she was going to be better after she got married in the middle of the year, but I saw no change. She was smelly, ugly, and mean. What a relief fifth grade was, when Mrs. Hatchcock restored my faith in the teaching profession.

Mr. Young taught eighth grade shop. That might be enough to say. The only thing worse to me than suffering through shop class in junior high school is the thought of teaching it. Mr. Young was short and round, with a red face and a fiery temper. He was bald on top, with red hair that he brushed up in a circle. So of course we called him "Bozo."

Bozo more often than not gave us some project to work on, then retreated to his office for the rest of the period. When he did come out to see what we were making, he would yell at people and throw their ceramic ashtrays or their leather key rings to the floor to show us how badly they were doing.

I remember one day in particular. It may have been the most humiliating day of my entire school career. My friend Andy Wright and I were looking at a tool catalog that was lying around. Kris Alling took it away from us and hid it. Mr. Young came out and angrily asked us

“Still, I am not ready to let them totally off the hook. There was much about them that was indeed bad. Some of my teachers should never have been teachers, and I hope they quit before they inflicted any more damage on impressionable young people. Even so, I have learned from them, learned what I did not want to be, just as I have learned what I wanted to be from my inspiring teachers. I suppose I am some combination of all of them. I only hope the good parts win out.”



Continued from page 1

where his catalog was. He knew that Andy and I had been looking at it. We told him we didn't have it anymore. (Kris Alling was a rat, but we would not rat him out, that being the code of eighth grade.)

Bozo called Andy and me to the front of the class. He took his paddle off the hook behind him, a thick slab of Plexiglas he had cut out, then drilled holes in to make it fly faster on a swing. He made me bend over, then he paddled me, repeatedly. “Paddled” is not the word. He beat me, hard, over and over. I had tears in my eyes, but I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry.

A few minutes later, the catalog appeared on his desk. He picked it up, looked at me and Andy, then walked back into his office without saying a word. Mr. Young is lucky that little Johnny did not tell Jake and Pat Bird about this incident. He would have died a swift death way back then.

Miss Brantley was my 12th grade English teacher. She was a large, ugly woman with a permanent sour look on her face. She hated her job almost as much as she hated her students. I took an immediate dislike to her, and the feeling was clearly

mutual. Most students found that it was best to just try to endure her, but my response to her was to fight back, to challenge her, to argue with her at every turn. I remember an argument over “The Ancient Mariner,” when I refused to accept the line “Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink,” since, as I argued, he could certainly drink the water, although it would not be good for him. We argued to the death, neither of us giving in. It is foolhardy to argue to the death with a teacher, especially a mean teacher. I earned a “D” in senior English. I disliked her so much that I was willing to punish myself over it. That is the lowest grade I ever received in my twelve years—me, the future English professor. Imagine!

I had bad teachers in college, too: professors who were bored with their subjects and their students, who bored us in turn; professors who never showed up for class; professors who mumbled; professors who were a chaos of disorganization; professors who “taught” by rote. But like my grade school days, the good ones outnumbered the bad ones. However, writing about my bad teachers has made

me realize something: perhaps I was as much to blame as they were. In the case of Miss Swertz and Miss Brantley, my dislike of them was perhaps more personal than it was pedagogical. Maybe I have had the same effect on some of my students. Maybe I have put off an odor that put some of them off. Maybe my looks and dress and demeanor made students dislike me. I have probably even been guilty, as Bozo was, of accusing students unfairly of some infraction (although I have certainly never administered corporal punishment). I have lost my temper more than once in class; while it seemed justified to me, it may have come off as arbitrary to some of my students.

Still, I am not ready to let them totally off the hook. There was much about them that was indeed bad. Some of my teachers should never have been teachers, and I hope they quit before they inflicted any more damage on impressionable young people. Even so, I have learned from them, learned what I did not want to be, just as I have learned what I wanted to be from my inspiring teachers. I suppose I am some combination of all of them. I only hope the good parts win out.

XXITE 2.0 ----- The Virtual Gathering Place for WU (The Reboot!)

Jo Koster and I invite you to join XXITE (Twenty-first Century Teaching Excellence)—or if you have already joined, to check it out again as it grows and develops. Maybe you have not been there in a long time—if not, you will see many changes in look and content. For example, XXITE now has groups dedicated to HMXP and CRTW, with

those of us who teach those courses sharing ideas and materials. Talk to Jo about setting up your own interest group. Jo is particularly interested in recruiting a few people to blog regularly about their teaching.

Jo set up this interactive site to give Winthrop faculty a virtual gathering space to share ideas about teaching and

technology. You'll find blogs and discussion forums on various topics—and we urge you to add your own ideas. Visit again at <http://wuxxite.ning.com/> Or email Jo Koster for an invitation to join: kosterj@winthrop.edu The TLC website also has links to navigate your way there or to join: <http://www2.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

A New Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The Teaching and Learning Center is offering a new service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me at (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

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People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

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- NEW POSTS ON THE RENOVATIONS**
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 22, 2012 at 2:05pm
- CORE VALUES**
Posted by [Mark Y. Herring](#) on June 5, 2012 at 9:41am
- PLAYING TO TYPE**
Posted by [Bibi C. Herring](#) on May 25, 2012 at 10:22am
- TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING IN THE CLASSROOM**
Posted by [Amanda Hiler](#) on March 15, 2012 at 12:11pm — [LUC](#)
- GONE WITH THE WIND...**
Posted by [Jo Koster](#) on March 6, 2012 at 10:33am — [2 Comments](#)

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NOTES

- DO COLLEGE PROFESSORS WORK HARD ENOUGH?**
Created by [Jo Koster](#) Mar 25, 2012 at 1:34pm. Last updated by [Jo Koster](#)
- WHO OWNS YOUR COURSE?**
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- STUDENT OWNERSHIP OF TABLETS INCREASES, PREFERENCE FOR GROWING**
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Thought for The Week

"There are two kinds of teachers: the kind that fill you with so much quail shot that you can't move, and the kind that just gives you a little prod behind and you jump to the skies."
--Robert Frost