

brazenness is courage rather than conceit? Who still believes that a bottomless need for approval leads to anything but a bottomless potential for cravenness? What kind of man publicly humiliates his child?

To have identified with such a person would unnerve anyone. But the problem for the male Smarties isn't that they identified with a flawed President, or even with a lousy excuse for a human being. Their problem is that they identified with a lousy excuse for a man. The vanity-based elitism and self-absorption they shared with Bill Clinton have yielded to a sense of mortification (which is countered at the moment with denial) at their slow discovery that Clinton is, first and always, the very last thing any self-respecting male wants to be: an empty vessel, a figure without honor. Character didn't matter if a man could do the job, remember? It turns out that character *is* the man and the man *is* the job.

A year ago, I thought I knew what I wanted. I wanted Bill Clinton to resign. Failing that, I wanted him removed from office. But he didn't, and he wasn't, and there is a reason for that: We are not finished with him yet; the test isn't over. My personal goal now is to find peace with the knowledge that the awfulness of a President whose televised image makes me want to sail a shoe at the TV is the very awfulness that is creating a most welcome backlash toward human wholesomeness. (Obvious source of insight and resolution: *Everything happens for a reason.*)

Unlike, say, William Bennett, I do not believe Americans are failing a moral challenge. I think we are processing the very unfamiliar experience of being led by a man with virtually no redeeming qualities. That processing is no small deal because the experience is no small event—and the whole business will just take as long as it takes.

We will know we are reaching the blessed end, however, when some Smartie—Jonathan Alter, maybe—stops writing flea-ridden articles about how impeachment was actually a political *positive* for Bill Clinton (“without Lewinsky, the president would have felt no urge to overhaul Social Security. . . . Thanks, girl!”) and gets a grip on his own urge to overhaul reality. I am waiting for the crest of the arc to get active with the hitching up of trousers and the clanking of *cajones* and the deep collective rumbling that real men can feel shame and

they don't make excuses for sissies who can't.

It could happen—it could. As Bill Clinton's presidency has proved, anything is possible. Well, anything with the exception of a change in Jonathan Alter. I think he's just too far gone. Some friend needs to take him aside and repeat, “It was a dog, Jonathan, a dog—d-o-g.”

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## EDUCATION

### Teaching the “Unteachable”

by Tim Roberts

On the last day of the school year, I sat at my desk. My students had not yet arrived, and I was considering making a decision that would affect the rest of my life.

The machinery that precipitated my dilemma had been set in motion a year earlier. Having recently earned a B.A. as an evening student, I was about to retire from the New York City Police Department, where I had been employed for the past 20 years as a member of the uniformed force. I planned to attend law school full-time, and subsequently pursue a career in law. But unexpected financial exigencies forced a change in plans. I needed a job.

The New York City Board of Education, facing a teacher shortage, had announced that it would temporarily waive education course requirements—to be fulfilled at a later time—for candidates who met all other eligibility criteria. I decided that, after I had fulfilled those requirements, I would enroll in law school as an evening student. I took the examination for a license to teach social studies in the secondary schools, and passed.

When I appeared at Board of Education headquarters for a teaching assignment, I was directed to the Bureau for the Socially Maladjusted and Emotionally Disturbed (BSMED). I would be teaching boys who, when frustrated, often react violently. For many of them, the

courts had issued PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision) petitions, attesting to the inability of parents, often single, to control their children. The BSMED day schools were all that stood between them and residential correctional institutions located in upstate New York. I was told that teachers' safety was ensured, for although many of the students belonged to street gangs and carried weapons, all were searched upon entering school grounds. Their common practice was to stash their weapons *en route* to school and to recover them after school was out.

As a police officer, I had interacted with many such boys and had been able to establish excellent rapport with this so-called “incorrigible” population. I accepted the appointment.

Preparing for my new career, and without the benefit of education courses, I relied upon A.S. Neill's *Summerhill*, which advocated a humanistic approach to teaching atypical children. I read that work at least a dozen times and memorized every innovative approach suggested.

When I arrived for orientation at my assigned school, the principal informed me that I was to teach a class of 12 seventh-grade youths. All had been held back several times and thus were older than their counterparts in neighborhood schools. He told me that the goals of the program were to reverse socially unacceptable behavior, improve students' reading and math scores, and return students to regular school settings. When I inquired what was meant by “emotionally disturbed,” he responded that I was simply to report behavior of “an extremely bizarre nature” so that the Bureau of Child Guidance, the clinical arm of the program, could dispatch a psychiatrist, psychologist, or psychiatric social worker to evaluate the youngster in question.

When I met my pupils for the first time, I was completely unprepared for their size. Some of them stood almost six feet tall and looked like young adults. I could see, however, expressions of abject fear on their faces. Why, I wondered, should they be afraid of *me*? These were, after all, streetwise kids who didn't flinch readily. I determined to establish a climate in my classroom that was devoid of fear and stress and conducive to learning.

The first two weeks of teaching proved to be the most difficult work of my entire life. Whenever I turned my back, I received a barrage of chalk, erasers, and paper clips, accompanied by shouts of glee

and obscenities. The assistant principal invariably appeared at my door to quiet the class. How, I wondered, could I have been so stupid as to have thought that I was responsible for my students' fears?

I pleaded with the youngsters to give me a chance to help them. I pointed out that additional unacceptable behavior would lead to their removal from family and friends, but my words fell on deaf ears. The school administrators suggested that I detain my students after school for several days. I did, but to no avail.

My next step was to meet with other teachers, some of whom had been teaching socially maladjusted youths for many years. The advice I received floored me. One teacher suggested that I catch a culprit in the act, and "beat the crap out of him in front of the other students." Only then could I expect to earn the respect of my students, for this was the only language they understood. The other teachers nodded in agreement.

The very next morning, as I was escorting my class up to our classroom—an activity I dreaded, for it accentuated my inability to control my students—a fellow teacher whispered to me, "Watch Fred Barnes." The message did not register at once. To be sure, Fred was the tallest and the strongest in the class. He was also the most sullen, and students from other classes invariably lowered their eyes whenever he passed. But his behavior in our classroom did not appear to be different from that of the others. By the time the students were seated, however, the advice had taken hold.

After taking attendance, I approached the chalkboard at an angle that permitted me to see Fred's image reflected in a glass panel in the door. Almost immediately, I saw him point to students seated at the opposite side of the room, and a barrage ensued. This cleared up an important point. It was not their teacher my students feared, but Fred Barnes.

I summarily directed Fred to accompany me out of the room. Without the slightest hesitation, Fred swaggered out with me. I led the boy to the far end of the hall, well out of sight and hearing of the rest of the class. I then positioned him in a corner in order to block his escape and said angrily, "You're going to cut out all that garbage, or I'll make you wish you were never born. Do you understand me?"

Fred's first reaction was to glare back at me. As I waited for his reply, I soon detected a clenching of his fists. As he start-

ed to raise them, I employed a defensive tactic which I had been taught at the police academy and had used on many occasions. Fred Barnes was instantly on his way down to the floor like a sack of potatoes. When I repeated my question, he then replied, "Yeah . . . O.K."

As we walked back to the classroom, I was devastated. I had never condoned the use of corporal punishment, despite the fact that my colleagues did. For me, such reliance on physical force perpetuated the very syndrome that was playing havoc with my students' lives.

When we entered the classroom, the other pupils quickly determined which of us had gotten the better in the altercation. One didn't have to be a genius to do so: Fred's clothes were soiled, mine were not. I approached the chalkboard and, in bold strokes, wrote my name across the face of it. Then I announced that they were going to pretend that this precise moment marked the beginning of the school year. I spelled out the school's goals and then articulated some of my own. First and foremost, they would have to trust me and one another. They could feel free to express whatever they felt without fear of reprisal. For that purpose, I would set aside one 45-minute period each day. I expressed the hope that they would enjoy coming to school and that they could acquire the skills that would enable them to return to their neighborhood schools. Their fixed attention was gratifying indeed.

I determined that most of my students lived in deprivation and uncertainty. I made my classroom as attractive as I could with plants and posters. I promoted a sense of security by establishing a structured environment. Every morning upon their arrival, I would have my students read aloud the list of activities that had been planned for the day and the time allotted for each activity. They were always aware of where they were and what was expected of them.

It soon became clear that the use of regular textbooks was anathema to my students, for it reminded them of past failures. Consequently, I prepared my own materials. Students' names always appeared in reading and math lessons, and often their experiences were central to the activity being studied.

I needed help running off the materials. When I asked for volunteers, every student raised his hand, although it meant coming to school early. I chose Fred Barnes because the boy had been

feeling low. Following that eventful altercation, word had spread that "Mr. Roberts, the new teacher, is one mean son-of-a-b----. He knocked Fred Barnes on his a--." The selection of Fred was my way of restoring some measure of dignity to the boy's shattered image. The expressions on the faces of the rest of the class showed that they understood.

Students' desks were arranged in a semi-circle in order to promote socialization, and the change proved effective, particularly during rap sessions. The format had to be altered during reading and math sessions because of the students' varying degree of competency. After discussing the problem, the students themselves suggested that several levels in math and reading be established. After several months of implementing that practice, I did not discern a single expression of resentment from any student. Academic improvement occurred almost from the outset, and in some cases it was phenomenal. And with their improvement in deportment, I identified several youngsters who might be able to return to their neighborhood schools the next year.

I spent many hours preparing materials that would sustain my students' interest. For example, for a group social studies lesson dealing with transportation, I distributed copies of *My Weekly Reader*. I had removed all references identifying the material as being on a fourth-grade level. The lead story dealt with the introduction of a fast-speed underground conveyor belt that expedited the movement of mail from the General Post Office to local branches throughout New York City. I then passed around a letter I had recently received from a friend in Los Angeles. After reading it to my students, I asked how they thought the letter had been delivered. One student stated that a mail carrier had taken it from the box where it had been posted and had personally delivered it to the building where I lived. The boy had no conception that Los Angeles was 3,000 miles away. Another student believed that a mail carrier from Los Angeles had used his "Jeep" to deliver the letter. I asked for a show of hands from those who had sent or received mail in the past. Not a single hand was raised. I also learned that, except for coming and going to school, none of them had ventured more than a quarter of a mile from home. I decided to do something about this. I obtained permission to take my class to the borough General Post Office.

At the post office, I distributed money for the students to buy stamps. Back in the classroom, I directed them to write letters to one another about satisfying experiences and to mail them on their way home. Several days later, each student read aloud the letter he had received. I then re-distributed the copies of *My Weekly Reader* and resumed the topic. The boys' interest in the subject was appreciably heightened.

Abraham Maslow, the psychologist and educator, coined the term "peak experience" to denote an unforgettable event. Such occurrences could be positive as well as negative. A "peak experience" that had elements of both occurred on the last school day before the Christmas vacation. I had planned a party for my class. Several days earlier, one student had asked me for my shirt size, and I emphatically responded that teachers were not permitted to accept gifts. The students looked at each other in dismay. On the morning of the party, they all arrived with crudely wrapped packages which they placed on my desk. Curiosity took hold, and I unwrapped the largest of them. I did a double-take when I beheld a popular brand of television receiver, the uncanceled price tag from a major department store still attached to it. I did not bother to unwrap the rest of the gifts, returning them all to the students. But I could not find it in my heart to lecture them on the evils of larceny.

In mid-June, another "peak experience" had purely negative consequences for me. I had planned a field trip for my class. We were going to take the Hudson River Day Line boat trip around Manhattan Island, and I was prepared to acquaint them with historical points of interest. Permission slips from parents were forthcoming in short order, except in one case. David Lopez had to be prodDED several times before his materialized.

When the day of the field trip arrived, all students except David were in bright and early. The class started to leave without him, when he was spotted sauntering toward the school. I ran up the steps and notified the school secretary that David had arrived. Then we were off.

We took public transportation to 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue and walked west toward the Hudson River. At Tenth Avenue, I took a body count, and discovered that David Lopez was missing. Another student divulged that David had bolted, running into a tenement a few yards back. With only a nod to Fred

Barnes, I conveyed the message that he was to supervise the class. Then I took off like a shot after David. I found the boy cowering behind a third-floor stairwell, his body curled in embryonic fashion. When David saw me, he covered his head to ward off the blows that he was certain would follow. Instead, I reached down and cradled the boy in my arms. He burst into tears and blurted out that he had never been on a boat; he was "scared to death." I consoled him and promised not to leave his side. I hugged him, and David responded in kind.

The trip was a huge success . . . for the students. Before it was over, David, in the company of several of his classmates, was prancing about, a smile of satisfaction on his face. For me, however, the image of sheer terror on the face of David Lopez kept returning. Even after having worked with David and the others for almost an entire school year, I had not succeeded in dislodging the fear of physical abuse that plagued these kids. Especially ironic was the fact that David was one of the students I had recommended for a return to his neighborhood school because of the progress he had made.

Moments after my students arrived on this last day of the school year, the bell rang, signaling that the assembly session was about to begin. I escorted my class to its place in the assembly hall, where the entire student body and faculty had already arrived.

The students sang, visiting dignitaries spoke, and then the principal rose to make some announcements. He congratulated the graduating class, most of whom would go on to a special high school under the jurisdiction of BSMED. Then he read the names of those students who had earned the privilege of returning to their neighborhood schools. The few I had recommended were among them. Then there occurred an additional "peak experience" for me. The principal held up a commendation card and announced, "This is for Mr. Roberts and his students. In the last three months, not a single absence has occurred from that class. Congratulations."

My class rose and began to chant in unison, "Mr. Roberts . . . Mr. Roberts . . . Mr. Roberts." Then other classes rose and followed suit. Finally, the teaching staff did the same.

After my students left to begin their summer vacation, I reached into my coat pocket and removed a letter that I had written the previous evening. It was a re-

quest for transfer out of BSMED.

Even as I tore it into shreds, I was not certain I had made the right decision. Perhaps I was deluding myself that my presence really made a difference in the lives of those frightened youngsters.

*Tim Roberts is the author of Law Enforcement, Inc. This article is factual; however, in order to preserve student confidentiality, all names, including the author's, have been changed, and references to dates and places have been purposely blurred.*

## Getting With the Program

by Jeff Minick

Suppose that you are one of five owners of a professional football team, which has just come off a losing season. You and the other disgruntled owners have gathered at a conference table to discuss plans for the next year. The five of you toss around ideas for improvement—a bigger stadium, new uniforms, more strategic game plans, better coaches, more coaches, different pre-game specials, more enthusiastic cheerleaders. Inexplicably, neither you nor the other owners ever blame the players for the losing season. No one holds them accountable, criticizes their devotion to the game, or makes them individually responsible for their level of play. The players never enter the picture.

Would you count on a winning team coming out of such a discussion?

This ludicrous situation is analogous to the intense debate that is repeated every fall across our country, arriving with the "back to school" specials in the newspapers. The topic of this debate is the condition of our public schools; the conference table is the news media; the participants are politicians, administrators, teachers, parents, and news reporters. Year after year, the litany of lamentations around this table is the same. If only we had new school buildings. If only we had more computers. If only we had better books. If only we had better teachers or more teachers. If only we paid our teachers more. If only we had some or all of these things, the argument goes, then our crisis in education would end.

What is not publicly addressed, what