

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

those at the conference table ignore, is the notion that upper-level students—the actual players in the game—should be held accountable for their education.

For the past year, I have taught Latin at Tuscola High School in Waynesville, North Carolina. My previous experience in teaching included a year as a college instructor, several years as an instructor in adult basic education at a nearby prison, and ten years homeschooling my own children as well as tutoring other homeschooling students. Teaching high school offered a new challenge, the chance to discover if I was up to the mark in that regard. Having heard, like all Americans, about disrespect and violence in the schools, I was also somewhat apprehensive about teaching, but I was certain that my enthusiasm for Roman history and Latin would prove infectious.

As the year progressed, I quickly discovered that my apprehensions were misplaced. My students were bright and likable; my biggest discipline problem was talking in class. But what did distress me was an attitude common to nearly all my students, an attitude that, for lack of a better term, I can only describe as “deep apathy,” an apathy that went to the bone. Throughout the year, I rarely saw real enthusiasm for Latin or for any other academic subject. “Boring” was a word I heard a hundred times a day. “This sucks”—applied to everything having to do with school, Latin, lunch, gym class—was the favorite expression of even my best students.

In my war against this apathy, I did win some skirmishes. My students memorized Latin dicta designed to inspire the spirit, maxims such as *Excelsior!* (“Higher!”)—which I made sure my students understood was New York’s state motto, rather than a reference to drugs or alcohol) or *Ad astra per aspera* (“To the stars through difficulties,” referring, of course, to heavenly, rather than Hollywood, bodies). Frequently, when informed by my students that they were bored or that school sucked, I reminded them that they were sitting in a pleasant classroom, reading books and taking notes, whereas many of their contemporaries around the world spent their daylight hours working in a rice paddy up to their knees in water-buffalo waste. One student—a vivacious and outspoken young lady—who told me that Latin was boring seemed taken aback when I replied that her boredom was her problem, that given the limitations of time and the demands of the

school system, I was doing my best to get some Latin into her head. Judging by the expression on her face, I’m not sure that the thought had ever before occurred to this student that the world did not exist solely for her entertainment.

In November, I gave my first-year classes a ten-minute lecture titled “This sucks,” explaining initially that these words once had a definite sexual meaning. When they protested—“Oh, no, Mr. Minick, we don’t use it like that”—my students gave me the opening I wanted. I told them that the original meaning was at least preferable to their own usage, which seemed so filled with contempt and secondhand cynicism. Using “this sucks” as their guiding light, I explained, they were going through high school as if wearing a ball and chain on one foot.

This attitude of deep indifference clearly affected performance. For many of these students, a 50-minute class devoted to real drill, study, and learning seemed beyond their capability. Most of my students wanted an A or B, so long as they didn’t have to do any work to earn it; some seemed to feel that their teachers could somehow tip them over and pour knowledge into their ears. Each day—literally—there were students who asked if we could watch a video instead of studying, who asked if we could build models of the Coliseum, who asked if the class could go outside or to the library, who asked if they could “work with” their neighbor on the lesson. Reflecting this disinterest in school was an inability to complete homework assignments, to spend a few minutes in the evening with the lesson. Waynesville is a small town in the Smoky Mountains, and often students whom I had seen working in the grocery stores, playing soccer, or riding skateboards were the very ones who would tell me the following day in class that they didn’t have time to do their homework.

This past year, Harold Stevenson, a psychologist from the University of Michigan, completed a study of American and East Asian students, including Chinese and Japanese. When asked, “What is the most important thing you can do to improve your academic achievement?” the Asians overwhelmingly thought that hard work was the key to success. On the other hand, students and parents from the United States rated the quality of teaching as the most important factor in learning. Stevenson also found that Westerners, especially Ameri-

cans, were satisfied with their children’s progress, whereas Orientals reported high levels of dissatisfaction. Speaking before the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Stevenson stated that “the East Asian students assumed responsibility for their own progress while the rest let others take responsibility for their performance.”

Doubtless there are numerous factors which have helped foster this lack of personal initiative in some of our teenagers. Television, used like a drug in so many households, encourages a lazy, non-engaged learning style. Our obsession with leisure and sport rather than with learning and hard work sets a poor example for our young people. Our need to blame our mistakes on others—the abundance of lawsuits in the United States is the most glaring example of this tendency—likewise gives our young people the idea that they can blame others when they fail. Our nation’s 20-year love affair with a false concept of self-esteem—trophies all around, “I Am Special” church programs, the ridiculous doting of parents—has lowered standards. Finally, our school systems, by creating the idea that “we will educate your children,” must also bear some fault for the educational passivity of our teenagers.

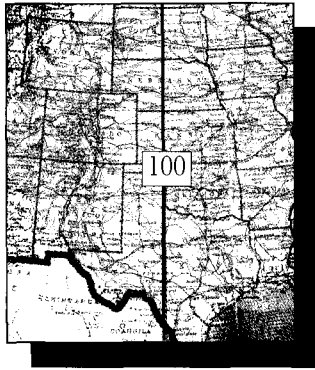
But these relatively new variables in the education equation, creations of the last 30 years, are obstacles to be overcome, not to be used as excuses. Among the old people who live in my town, there is an expression—“get yourself an education.” Those few students today who take responsibility for their schooling, who work hard, who are aggressive in their learning, deserve our applause. To the great bulk of students who are coasting through school or still waiting for a miracle from the system, I would say: It’s time to wake up. It’s time to “get real.” It’s time to stop working until ten every evening to pay for a car and use your evenings instead for your studies. It’s time to give to learning the same effort you give to basketball or television. It’s time to apply yourself, preferably to the nearest chair, crack open a book, and begin that great adventure which is not your right but your privilege.

It’s time, in short, to get yourself an education.

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The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.



Every Man for Himself

El Paso del Norte . . . the Jornada del Muerto . . . Tiguex . . . Santa Fe: The trip that for Don Juan de Oñate was a weeks-long ordeal up the Rio Grande on the Camino Real in 1598 for me is an hour-and-20-minute flight, including 20 minutes on the ground at Tiguex (better known today as Albuquerque, New Mexico). The Franklin Mountains . . . Sierra Uvas . . . Cooke's Peak away to the west . . . the Black Range . . . the Magdalena Mountains (under the wing, the high park with the observatory at one end where Jim Rauen and I scouted for elk sign a few years ago) . . . Ladron Peak, concealing, according to legend, a quantity of thieves' gold beneath its sun-blackened folds and wrinkles . . . next, the descent into Albuquerque, step by broad step down a lurching, invisible staircase. There is just enough time for a trip back to the restroom to rub at the coffee stains in my lap with a paper towel before we're airborne again, bucking the westerly winds on climb-out as the plane makes a right turn and resumes following the river north. For miles—five? ten? twenty? it's hard to tell from up here—the Albuquerque of 2010, 2020 is platted westward toward Mt. Taylor, sacred to the Navajo Indians, 70 miles away beyond the Canoncito and Laguna Reservations: dry scratch marks on the burnt and arid desert, vast geometrical petroglyphs whose enigmatic meaning is—what? Catastrophe, I suppose, recalling the Phoenix city fathers—mothers, too—reported to have a similar grid planned as far west as the Colorado River to meet Los Angeles pushing east. I won't be around by then, of course, having gone north instead. The Jemez Mountains . . . Los Alamos, crawling with Chinese spies and sleepy American security men on coffee break . . . snowfields below now, patchy at first, then coming together and spreading north into the San Juan Mountains pushing south from Colorado . . . San Antonio Mountain, the Conejos River and the high San Juans where Dick McIlhenny, Keith Hawkins, and I nearly bagged the Sasquatch last August—ap-

pearing now, in May, like something from the last Ice Age, snowed in for the next ten or twelve thousand years. After a mere three or four generations in the air, humanity is almost totally blasé about the view from 30,000 feet. My fellow passengers sleep, drink Diet Coke, scan fat paperback novels into their motherboarded brains—except one, a Native American gentleman with his nose pressed against the window as if he might actually be seeing the world—*his* world—for the first time. The plane scrapes above Pike's Peak (elev. 14,110), clearing it by only 15,000 feet or so, and soon after is on approach to Denver International Airport on a northeasterly heading.

Viewed from 12,000 feet (or otherwise), the western hub city of Denver scarcely inspires a son of the Old West to stand in his plane seat and yell, "Yippee-yay-OHI!" Built on a few dozen piles of whitened buffalo bones after the Civil War, Denver knew its heyday in the Cowtown period, the old town buried completely now beneath the glittering superstructure begun during the energy boom of the 1970's and early 80's and completed by the Colorado-or-Bust! migration of well-to-do Caliphoneyans arriving since then. Today, Denver from the air appears like a vast insect spawn on the face of the prairie, its myriad suburbs and developments laid out in an endlessly repetitive honeycomb pattern—a home for termites, perhaps, or for ants. Raised in the Dantesque environment of Littleton, Colorado, I too might go berserk (though I wouldn't waste my ammunition on teenage girls). While the "lesson of Littleton" is a complicated one, the fundamental message is that modern America has become unlivable. (Another is that white American males have no future in America and are begin-

ning to recognize the fact, but that's another story.)

Faulkner thought the American soil cursed by slavery. As if slavery were the worst thing ever to occur on the North American continent, including the destruction of the Indian peoples, however savage and cruel they might have been. Not to mention quite a number of non-human indigenous species, including the passenger pigeon and the buffalo. In her fine book *The Buffalo Hunters*, Mari Sandoz describes the virtual extinction by white hunters of the bison herds on the Great Plains—millions and millions of animals—over a period of a little less than a decade, beginning in 1876 (a year before the "reconstruction" of the defeated South ended). What happened to the Indians and the buffalo—intimately related in their mutual destruction, as they had been in their aboriginal existence—was not an accidental chapter in American history, but a preview of the modern empire emerging. The colonists arriving in America during the nearly two centuries before the creation of the United States were a different breed from the *immigrants* who came *after* 1789: the first group more settled (and settling), educated, and pious, concerned with transplanting civilization to the New World; the second rootless and rapacious, exploitive, materialist, and individualistic, interested in escaping Western civilization rather than in recreating it a hemisphere away. The colonists, being civilized people, carried civilization with them; the immigrants, less civilized, brought chaos. The colonists sought remote places in which to worship their God undisturbed; the immigrants hoped to "get ahead," "make something of themselves," exercise their precious "equality" against everyone, especially their betters. From approximately the beginning of the 19th century forward, the immigrants debarking at Boston, New York, and Philadelphia consisted largely of the European peasantry and proletariat; men and women who, whether from the country or the city, had never owned or controlled land—indeed, any natural resources at all. Released into the vast American hin-