

Back In the Classroom

By Chuck Guilford

As a child, I never dreamed of being a teacher. I never even speculated that I might become one. That's not to say I had any aversion to such a career, just that compared to playing professional baseball, writing best-selling novels, or even working at the corner gas station, teaching didn't look very attractive.

I mean, did you ever see kids collect bubble gum cards with pictures of teachers on them? Would Mrs. Briggs, my long suffering geometry teacher, ever see her lesson on the Pythagorean theorem made into a major motion picture starring Natalie Wood and Kirk Douglas? What teacher could install dual quads and a three-quarter cam in a '57 Chevy, then open the soft drink machine and pass out free root beers and orange sodas to a gawking crowd of 15-year-old boys?

Fred Anderson could do that, but he wasn't a teacher. He was a mechanic. Bruce Springsteen would have written a song about Fred if he'd seen him grab rubber in second as he squealed out of the Maverick Drive-In onto Woodward Avenue, vanishing into the night through a cloud of thin blue smoke, leaving behind only the brief smell of burnt rubber.

Springsteen claims to have learned more from a three-minute record than he ever learned in school. I think I know what he means. Certainly, at 16, I would have said that I learned more from Woodward Avenue than I ever learned from a teacher.

In the world of Woodward Avenue, teachers did not exist. They had their own world--the world of school, a kind of self-contained, separate reality. Though I understood even then that teachers left school at the end of the day and went home like other people, some to wives or husbands, others, even more remarkably, to children, I almost never saw my teachers "off the grounds."

If I did bump into a teacher, say at Quarton Market or the Dairy Queen, I would immediately revert to my school behavior--no more laughing or talking, watch the grammar, try to look interested but avoid all eye contact. Once the encounter was over, I felt like a cloud had passed. My mood grew warm and light. I might peel the paper from a fresh toothpick, slip that sharp wooden stick between my lips, and savor its minty taste as I shredded the pointy tip between my incisors. Teachers liked toothpicks even less than they liked chewing gum or short pants. Chewing gum was linked to tooth decay and other unspecified evils. Shorts took our minds off their studies and focused them on the human anatomy. Toothpicks, I supposed, were considered dangerous. "That thing could put someone's eye out! Suppose you fell down with it in your mouth. It could go right through your tongue. You'd better leave it with me. I'll keep it here in my desk with my collection of combs, nail files and Juicy Fruit gum."

Relishing my freedom, I'd hum a few bars of my favorite Chuck Berry song.

*Back in the classroom, open the books.
Even the teacher don't know how mean she looks.*

What I loved more than anything else about those lines, even more than their riddling irony, was their bold and beautiful ungrammaticality. They were so un-school, so gloriously superior to the whole drab institution. Chuck Berry reminded me of Huck Finn. I liked their attitudes.

I learned about Chuck Berry from Robin Seymour, a disc jockey on WKMJ in Detroit. I learned about Huck Finn from Mrs. Kinnison. She liked Huck, too. I could tell, and that sort of puzzled me, what with Huck being like he was, somewhat less than a model student. Mrs. Kinnison was supposed to like Tom Sawyer's well-behaved brother, Sid. In spite of that, Huck and Jim and I headed down the Mississippi along with Mrs. Kinnison and about 20 other kids.

Together, we slit a pig's throat and spread its blood around Pap's cabin. We entered the big frame house that floated downriver, the one with the mysterious corpse that spooked Jim so. We listened as Jim told about how he hit his daughter 'Lizabeth one time for not shutting the door, then realized she had just gone deaf.

Mrs. Kinnison--Mrs. K, I had come to call her--had a way of making us feel right there in the novel, trying to figure out what made the characters act the way they did. Why did Huck treat Jim like a child when Jim was the adult? Was this a sign of prejudice? How could that be? Huck and Jim were friends. Huck wasn't prejudiced. "Why don't we look up 'prejudice'?" she might say.

This might lead to a broader discussion of conscious and unconscious prejudice and a debate on whether racial tension could be a good thing if it eventually led to increased awareness of social injustice. Such debates were spirited, sometimes intensely emotional, and feeling my adrenalin flow, I joined in eagerly, often taking a stand less on the basis of personal conviction than on the chance of teasing out new thoughts and further discussion.

"How," I might wonder aloud, "can anyone in this class even claim to like Huck at all? He's a liar, a hypocrite, a coward and a social misfit. He's not even very smart, yet-everyone talks about him like he was the all-American boy. Heck, Mrs. K would have kicked him out of class the first week." Of course I didn't believe that last part. Mrs. K was no mean teacher.

"Well, Huck," I imagine her saying, "if you think getting civilized means having your spirit broken and becoming a mindless conformist, you're sadly mistaken. Quite the contrary, it was the Persians, whom the Greeks called 'Barbarians,' who were the prisoners of their own fear and ignorance. But in Athens, individuality flourished. Study Aristophanes, Huck. Read Plato."

"This Socrates guy," Huck might say a week later, "Tom says they killed him just fer speakin' his mind. Now if that ain't the civilized way!" Huck would think he had scored a point, but Mrs. K. would know she had him hooked.

Just as I was getting hooked, and not just on *Huckleberry Finn* or Betty Kinnison. I still wanted to write books, but not just best-sellers. I wanted to write like Mark Twain or Charles Dickens or Albert Camus or J. D. Salinger. My books would change people's lives, shape the future of the planet. People would get lost in them for weeks at a time and emerge wiser, stronger, more fulfilled. I also wanted to read . . . something. I wasn't sure what. I needed guidance and direction--teachers: more than high school could offer. And I needed people to discuss and debate with--college students and then graduate students.

I still need these things, which may explain why 40 years later I'm still in school. Now, though, after years as a student, I walk to the front of the room, step behind the lectern and sort through my notes, watching a last few reluctant learners claim seats in the room's far corners.

I've obviously become a teacher, but this becoming seems to have happened gradually and almost unconsciously as I moved from student to teaching assistant to faculty member. Even now, I eagerly shift roles as I ask students to explain how their writing influences their thinking, or ask them to teach me what Wordsworth means in "Tintern Abbey" when he speaks of "something far more deeply interfused/Whose dwelling is light of setting suns." "More deeply infused" than what? Why is "suns" plural?--I want to know.

It's because I realize more and more how much I still have to learn, even in areas that are my specialties, that I continue asking and answering questions. And it's because I see this same hunger in so many of my students that I want to offer them my help and support. Being a university professor permits me to do these things, which I enjoy immensely and believe to be worthwhile, though I no longer have hopes of seeing my picture on a bubble gum card, and my achievements with automobile engines over the years have seldom gone beyond jumping dead batteries.

Though I do still write--poetry, essays, fiction--my dreams of fame have been tempered by a sobering recognition of what I can reasonably hope to accomplish. Still, each year I find growing satisfaction in teaching, in the thought that I may be as helpful to some of my students as Mrs. Kinnison, and so many others, have been to me.