

HOW INCREDIBLY STUPID

By Ian Brown

My first full-time teaching job was at Laval Catholic High School. From downtown Montréal, it took forever to get there – ten stops on the Métro to Henri Bourassa and then a bus all the way to Centre 2000. I had no idea what to expect. On arrival, I asked where I could find the Special Ed. Department. “Oh, you mean the zoo,” came the reply. “If the animals give you a rough time, send them to the Principal.” It turned out that this self-assured advice came from a colleague. Hmm ...

My students were in their early teens. There were a couple of francophone Québécois, although the majority were from Italian immigrant families. From the start, I picked up on the rebellious attitude of the two home-grown boys. No surprise. Why their parents had had enrolled them in an anglophone school in the first place was beyond me. After all, this was 1978. Two years earlier, René Lévesque had been elected Premier on a platform of separatism. Francophone nationalism was at a fever pitch.

In some ways I'd come to the right place. Like them I was also a misfit. As an ex English Public Schoolboy, I had rejected the class system of privilege and emigrated to Canada in 1972 – as a born again socialist. My political attitude had been hardened by a year at The London School of Economics, followed by several years of menial, low-paying jobs. I had chosen to have an in-depth experience of 'the other side'. I finally realized I was going nowhere. I had tried to become fluent in French and failed. I had tried grass-roots organizing and had come to the conclusion that as an uprooted and alienated individual myself, I had no place in trying to represent local communities. I had played in a blues band and got tired of smoky rooms and going to bed at 2 a.m. - or later. At the age of 26, I decided to become an educator.

My practicum, whilst at McGill, had been at The Alternative High School in Park Extension. The students were from liberal, middle-class WASP and Jewish families. The environment there was a different kind of 'zoo' – a post-sixties attempt to be 'student-centred'. Although well meant, it had resulted in a kind of chaos, in which the students were revelling in a sense of entitlement while at the same time desperately needing direction from their intimidated teachers.

After my own experiences at an authoritarian boarding school, I was all for reform. At Laval, I had decided that I wanted my class to be student-centred, but *not* student-run. That said, one of the first things I told my class was that classroom discipline would *not* involve threats of being sent to see the Principal. I was determined to gain my students' trust. However, given my lack of teaching experience, I knew that I was in for a rough ride.

Sure enough, during the first two months, I was tested constantly by students, curious to see what they could get away with. However, I persevered and gradually I gained respect and trust. There was one student in particular, who seemed to like me and how I taught. His name was George and his parents were immigrants from Argentina.

It didn't take long to conclude that George was the biggest misfit of us all. He was the only student from South America. He was the only student with Spanish as his mother tongue. He was skinny, gawky, and by today's terminology 'a nerd'. Conversely, the other boys were, in one way or another, trying to emulate macho

role models such as Al Pacino ('The Godfather' 1972) or Sylvester Stallone ('Rocky' – 1976). George was teased unmercifully and when he rallied in verbal self-defence, the teasing turned to bullying.

It wasn't just that George was seen as physically frail. He was, by anyone's account, 'weird'. George would constantly and fearlessly proclaim his one exclusive interest, this being anything and everything to do with space exploration. Within this field, his knowledge of facts and figures was astonishing. For example, the Viking and Voyager spacecraft were launched in the 1970's. George could tell you that the Titan missile had a diameter of 3.05 metres, a length of 31.30 metres and a launch weight of 149,700 kilograms. The distance from the earth to the moon? Easy – 384,400 kms. And so on. Meanwhile, George had been assessed as 'retarded'. In fact, George was autistic and like others with that condition, was brilliant – albeit in a finely focused area.

Most of the students in my Special Ed class were illiterate in English. In George's case, I figured that I should be able to teach the core skills of reading and writing through the prism of George's interest in space exploration. I remembered one episode of 'Welcome Back Kotter' in which the teacher sees one of his students looking at a Batman comic while he is discussing 'Macbeth'. Rather than reprimanding him, the teacher says "ah yes, Batman ... one of my favorites too actually, not so different from Shakespeare's characters ... you know, the good guys, Macbeth and Batman ... versus the bad guys, Macduff and The Joker." Within a few weeks, the student was hooked on reading Shakespeare. At school, my own desire to learn had almost been bludgeoned to death. Now I was on a quest. I was fascinated by the craft of teaching. Out of all the options, how best to facilitate learning - of any kind, for anyone?

After a while, I decided that another strategy for teaching George was to engage his playfulness. George *loved* impersonating Howard Cosell, the announcer at televised space rocket launches. I was good at impersonations in general and when George heard my impersonation of Ringo Starr, or Sylvester the cat, or especially Queen Elizabeth, he would start laughing hysterically. So ... I got him (George / Howard Cosell) to participate in improvised taped interviews with me (Ian / Queen E, / Ringo, etc.). I would then use a transcript of the recording as a means of helping him with reading and writing.

Over the course of that year, George and I became buddies. I hesitate to say that my teaching methods with George were a great success but overall, there was improvement. The bullying ceased and George became accepted for who he was. I was looking forward to building on the foundation that had been built with him in the year to follow.

However, it was not to be. Two things happened that put paid to any such hopes. First of all, I was informed that due to the recession and necessary cutbacks, I would not be rehired. Secondly, shortly before the end of the semester, George asked me if he could come to visit me. I agreed, not knowing if there was anything in particular George wanted to see me about other than saying goodbye. In fact, I was in for a shock. It turned out to be a different sort of goodbye – not so much for my departure but for his. In an emotional state, with tears in his eyes, George informed me that his father had decided that what George needed most was strict discipline - to 'lick him into shape'. So George's father had enrolled George in a Military Academy in Argentina. How incredibly stupid! From one zoo to another.

George was inconsolable and I was devastated. There was nothing that could be done. We hugged and George left. I never saw him again.