

Remembering My Teachers



An old forgotten journal presented itself. It begged to be read. Most entries were made during my senior year of high school, and many told of events forgotten over the years. Reading entries my young self wrote made me think of friends barely remembered. The writer was a teenager, and several pages told of the girls he would like to know but was too timid to approach.

Turning pages brought me to some of the poor souls that tried to teach and mold me into a decent human being. There were teachers whose memory brought a smile, and others brought frowns even after over fifty years.

Remembering Mr. T made me think of countless hours developing film and making prints in the darkroom. Along with photography, he taught math, physics, and chemistry. He was also the advisor for our ski club. Saturdays were often spent on the slopes of Spout Springs Ski Resort in the Blue Mountains. Mr.

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T also let us get away with things other teachers wouldn't. One day he saw a miniature brass cannon on my desk and asked if it really fired. The answer was affirmative, and he told me to prove it. We went to the door at the end of the hallway and loaded the weapon with black powder and a paper wad. The boom and cloud of smoke was an awesome way to start the class.

A group of us decided to ditch a pep assembly, thinking that doing math problems was an excellent excuse for not joining two hundred teens yelling and cheering for a game in which we had no interest. Mr. T was alright with that, but Mr. B entered the room through the back door (the two classrooms shared lab space, and Mr. B was the other science teacher). How he knew we were there and why he wasn't in the assembly himself, we didn't know, but he was unhappy. To make a bigger impression on us, he went back into his classroom and came through the main door with a clipboard, saying: "I need to get some names." After identifying each of us, he referred us to the Assistant Principal for a stern talking.

One of the subjects Mr. B taught was biology, and his teaching method was to sit behind an overhead projector with a long roll of clear plastic. He had written all the things he thought we should know and simply rolled his notes over the projector and read them to us. Some of us didn't do well with boredom—my own grades in his class were less than stellar. A few years later,

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while working on my degree in biology, the head of the department at the college Mr. B had attended was talking about how many high school biology programs were weak. All that needed to be said was my teacher's name. The professor laughed and said, "Oh, he was fine as long as you gave him a list of facts to memorize and repeat without having to think."

Late in my senior year, there was an opportunity to apply for the National 4-H Congress, an all-expense trip to Chicago, and a week in the Chicago Hilton. Having been active in 4-H for years, especially in photography, there was no reason not to apply. In addition to the forms and an essay, the 4-H Congress expected a portfolio. When the pictures were done, Mr. T sent me to the library to use the heat press to take the curl out of the prints. The librarian, Mr. R, told me it was too expensive to heat the press and sent me away. After moping back to class, Mr. T said, "Don't worry about it. I'll go down and press them for you later."

Another day, while studying, Mr. R threw me out of the library because my name wasn't on the list for study hall. It seemed the man didn't like teenagers and had perhaps chosen the wrong career.

Mrs. C was one of the English teachers and also taught drama. Perhaps that's an overstatement, and she would have taught drama if she had had more to work with. She helped us learn our

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lines and say them clearly, and we had a lot of fun, but if any of us made it to the stage, the news didn't reach me.

My first play was a farcical Western, the name of which has escaped me, but my character was Stinkweed, a cowboy outlaw who was less than bright. The details of the play are a blur, but we were allowed to carry guns; mine was a .45 Colt. It was unloaded, but no one else checked it, and the cartridge belt was full of live ammunition. It would seem to many as criminally careless, but we all knew how to handle firearms safely, and teenagers can be responsible.

In English class, Mrs. C assigned a book, *The Oxbow Incident*, which my best friend and I took with us when he invited me to go to his family's cabin for the weekend. When most people think of a cabin in the woods, they probably don't think of a rickety shack—one with a coffee can over the stove pipe and a couple of army bunks for sleeping. But we loved it and thought it would be a peaceful place to read the book, which was my earnest plan. Never a strong reader, the pages slowly turned. Too slow to suit me. After timing myself for a few pages and doing a bit of math, it was obvious there were not enough hours before the test for me to read the book. So, the book was closed, and we had a great weekend.

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Back at school, I said to Mrs. C, “That was really a great book. Do you have some notes I could read to help me understand it better?”

“I wouldn’t let most students have this, but I know you have read the book.”

Overwhelming guilt stabbed me through the heart but didn’t keep me from using the notes. I said to Rosy, a girl in the class who had undoubtedly had the book, “Rosy, do you want to get together to study for the test on the Ox-Bow Incident?”

“Sure,” she replied. “Come to my house tomorrow after school.”

We discussed all the details of the book. Well, she discussed it while I agreed with her and nodded my head. By the end of our study session, she had no idea my copy of the book had remained unopened. After the test, her grade was lower than mine.

Mrs. C wasn’t awesome just because she was a little bit gullible. She was just a sweet lady who loved students. There’s still a twang of guilt at the thought of that shenanigan.

Mr. M taught Social Studies and was less than stimulating. After taking his class as a junior, it took years for me to realize history could be interesting. For one term that year, there was a student teacher, but the other history class lucked out, and we had Mr. M. One day, the student teacher came to our class and gave a

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lecture. The very word sounded boring, but he leaned against the teacher's desk and started telling us stories of what had happened. We were spellbound. He spoke for the entire class and left us wanting more. The next day we had Mr. M. He was even more boring than before.

For my senior year, Mr. M taught contemporary problems, an apt title because it was certainly one of my modern problems. He assigned a two-page essay on the United Nations due the following day. After spending some time in the library and making sure my notes would be enough, it was time to go home. That evening, my essay didn't fill two pages, and Mr. M was not going to accept anything less. This was long before the Internet, the school was closed, and the city library was locked up as well. Robert Service's book, *Ballads of a Red Cross Man*, was filled with the horror of war. Maybe there was something in it to fill out my essay. Choosing *My Foe*, a touching and thought-provoking poem that begins with: "A Belgian Priest-Soldier Speaks." It goes on to describe unprovoked hand-to-hand combat, after which the victor sees it as nothing but murder. Making a case for the need of the United Nations based on this description of the horrors of war, I completed the essay. The teacher was not impressed.

Mr. M may have been boring—well, was boring—but he had a heart. As we were nearing graduation, the only two requirements

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that stood in my way were English (which was in the bag) and Modern Problems. Six unexcused absences meant a failing grade.

“Mr. M, how many absences do I have?”

“Too many.”

“But, how many?”

He opened his attendance book and started counting: “One, two, three, four—he turned the page—five, six, seven.”

My face fell, and my stomach churned.

He looked at me and said, “I can excuse a couple of those, but don’t miss any more.”

Some teachers were ogres, but not him.

The wood shop was the kingdom ruled by Mr. H. Our high school only had two hundred students, but we had a shop that would have been the envy of any school in the state. We not only had a complete shop, but we could also work in metal. We had a metal lathe, a milling machine, a foundry—the origin of the cannon we shot during math class—and a welding station. There were fiberglass hunting bows made in the shop and even an electric guitar. If we wanted to learn pottery, there was a potter’s wheel as well as slip molds for ceramics. Mr. H had designed and created the shop piece by piece. His philosophy was: “If a

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student wants to make something, I'll show him how. If I don't know how, we will learn together, and then we'll teach others.”

Of all the students in the shop, only two of us had permission to use any tool or machine without supervision or even permission. Mr. H told us one day that one of his frustrations was spending four years training us to use anything in the shop and then having to watch us graduate.

In the Spring of my senior year, Mr. H had to be gone, and didn't trust the substitute teacher to run things. The substitute didn't know the shop or the students, so he had me excused from all my classes to help the substitute. It went well for a while, but someone was melting brass in the foundry in the fourth period, and another student threw in a handful of aluminum. The temperature was just over 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and when they added the flux to burn off the impurities, the molten metal spewed over the top of the crucible and ran all over the floor at two thousand degrees! Students were jumping out of the way of the molten metal, and a layer of smoke covered the entire ceiling of the shop.

During the sixth period, a student was playing with matches. A heavy canvas curtain separated the foundry from the welder, and this person thought it was great fun to light matches, blow them out, and hold the glowing matchstick against the cloth to make

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little holes. Apparently, he walked away thinking his fun was over, but the canvas was still smoldering, and before anyone noticed, there was a two-foot hole.

My head hurt by the end of the day, and my admiration for Mr. H had grown exponentially.

Some teachers were ordinary, a few were mean and nasty, but some were great. The same held true in college and beyond. All these people made a mark, and each one shaped me in small ways. Looking back, it wasn't the subjects they taught that were important. We can learn most things from a book or in our modern-world library: the Internet. The most important thing we learn from teachers is how to get along with people because people—living human beings—are deeper and more important than the classes they teach.