

A Tale of the Yangtze: My First Classroom Teaching Experience

It was a warm October day in 1964. I was walking down the very halls my wife had trod ten years earlier in a junior high school not far from my house. I had never dreamed I would someday be a teacher. In fact, that was the furthest thing from my mind when I decided as an undergraduate to major in philosophy.

My job experience up to that point had been irregular: six months storing furs in a department store vault. Boring. I needed the money. Next I tried selling encyclopedias. I was a dynamite salesman. But my conscience bothered me when I seduced impoverished people into buying books they didn't need and couldn't afford. So, to the chagrin of my manager, I quit. I worked for my next three college summers as a camp counselor. The pay was awful. But it was real fun. And it required no more skills than I had managed to develop growing up as the eldest of nine children.

After I graduated with a degree in philosophy, my new wife and I entered the Peace Corps, only to be drummed out after twelve weeks for insubordination, as it were. It seemed I had a problem understanding questions. When I was asked what I thought of such and such and so and so I gave an answer instead of mumbling something to the effect of how great everything was. Refusing an offer of an assistant directorship in Washington, I instead accepted "deselection." We were given plane tickets home.

I needed a job. I was about to accept one with a trucking company when someone suggested that with my skills in mathematics I could find a teaching job easily. So it came to be that I, accompanied by a vice principal, was approaching my first classroom with not a little anxiety. I wasn't worried that I could be entertaining. I was

worried whether I could teach mathematics constrained in ways that I never was as a camp counselor. School is not summer camp.

I recalled my own junior high school days. They were filled with confusion about what teachers expected, anxiety about the gangs that seemed to act with impunity within the school, and scarcely controllable adolescent urges that controlled my actions as much as any rational thought or pangs of conscience. I asked the vice principal how many different classes I would be teaching. He replied that I would teach only one class, all day, in the same room. A piece of cake!

I thought this was strange for junior high school. To the obvious discomfort of the vice principal, I asked what was wrong with the teacher I was replacing. "His mother's sick or something," he mumbled in reply. We arrived at the classroom. The students were all seated neatly in rows, quietly waiting. So far, not bad.

"Class," said the vice principal, "this is Mr. Rosie."

"Rozycki," I said.

"Yes, Mr. Rosie," repeated the vice principal. "He's going to be your teacher for the day. I know you will all be on your best behavior so he can help you to learn what you have to learn."

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The class sat perfectly still, not moving an eye off me. I took this to be a good sign. "Just remember," said the VP, "no one is allowed to leave the room during the class period." I thought this to be a strange rule: why, even in my rowdy junior high school we could get a pass to go to the bathroom.

The vice president then added quite casually, "Oh, by the way, Mr. Rosie, if you should need my assistance just call me on this phone here by the door."

The vice principal started walking toward the door. "Remember," he said, "if you have to use a lavatory, do it between periods. No one"—he stared at me long and hard—"is to leave this room during the class period." He then added quite casually, "Oh, by the way, Mr. Rosie, if you should need my assistance just call me on this phone here by the door."

I was left alone with the class. On the desk were lesson plans. They gave me directions about what to say to the students, and what to write on the board. I told the students to get their books out and open them to a certain page. I thought, *What a breeze! This will be the easiest money I've ever earned.* I turned to write lessons on the board.

It was like the tapping one hears when hail begins to fall at the onset of a summer storm. Tap, tap, then roar. It seemed as if everything not nailed down in the room that could be held in the hand, or even two hands, came flying in my direction. A large dictionary smashed against the board to my left. Stunned, although untouched, I turned. The students were sitting there as if nothing had happened. Not a smirk, not a snicker. No betrayal of guilt or complicity. I had the unshakable feeling that I had been had.

I looked around. Keeping my cool, as I had learned to do when I was trying to survive junior high school, I waited for the next event. "Hey, teach, I gotta piss." I worked at not being offended, although the thought crossed my mind that not even the most barbaric of my classmates would have addressed our teachers with such a statement. One asked to go to the bathroom. One did not use four-letter words in front of a teacher unless a deliberate insult—and consequent suspension—was intended.

But I had minored in anthropology in college. Perhaps a cultural difference was at work here. I responded calmly, "You all heard Mr. Buzzy—the VP—say that no one was to leave the room during the class period." (Buzzy wasn't his name but it was close and better than saying Fuzzy or Wuzzy—I did not want to provoke any outbursts at this point.)

"I'm telling you, teach. I gotta piss."

"You may go to the bathroom at the end of the period," I said.

"If you don't let me go now, I'm gonna come right up there and piss right in your wastebasket."

Long before I had learned the only reasonable response to a bluff. I heard myself saying, "Be my guest!" A second rule of poker is this: don't call the bluff if they're not bluffing. I can imagine how entertaining the look on my face must have been to the class as Billy—let us call him—stood up, unzipped his pants, and slowly sauntered up the aisle toward the wastebasket giving ample demonstration of his gender.

When I was a junior high school student, a mere ten years earlier, I had seen gang beatings, vandalism, weapons, extortion, even another student's hand deliberately run into a bandsaw—but not when teachers were around. I could not believe what I was seeing now. Billy urinated into the wastebasket—quarts, it seemed. He finished and turned back to his seat. It was an old wastebasket. It leaked. The floor tilted toward the back of the room. "Yellow River, Yellow River," chanted the class with choral precision. The stream meandered along the floorboards toward the back wall. "Yellow River, Yellow River, build a boat. Build a boat."

I was vaguely aware that a bookcase was falling to my right. Several desks inverted themselves. A pencil bounced off my chest and then another book whistled past my ear. Then, I remembered . . . the phone.

I could hear Mr. Fuzzy-Wuzzy's voice, "Oh, by the way, Mr. Rosie, if you should need my assistance just call me on this phone here by the door." I sauntered to the phone, deliberately weighing my need for assistance against avoiding the appearance of panic, and picked up the receiver.

There was no cord. There was no cord! It was obviously out of order, as any idiot could see from ten feet away. Another bookcase fell amidst shrieks of hilarity and jubilation. I went next door and grabbed the phone off the hook as thunder

and lightning came through the walls from my room.

“May I speak with Mr. Buzzy,” I implored.

“Mr. Who? Oh, you mean the VP. He’s out somewhere. Call back in thirty minutes.” I went back to my room. All the bookcases were horizontal. The stench—on that warm October day—made my eyes water, or at least I hoped it was the stench. Except for the flood plain, the floor was covered with debris. An occasional paper boat testified to untapped student potential. The quiet, attentive students who had been there when I first entered the room were nowhere to be seen. Instead, standing or sitting in their chairs, grinning, were these hooting, laughing, cursing brats, looking at me as if I were some insect from another planet.

Then, suddenly, the hooting stopped. There was silence. We contemplated each other. In the distance, we heard the sound of footsteps. They came closer and closer. The students regained their serious demeanor. They picked up their desks and moved their chairs behind them and sat down and pretended, each of them, to be looking at a book or writing on paper just as Mr. Buzzy walked in the door.

He walked slowly in and around the classroom. He said not a word and, carefully stepping over the famous tributary, made his way up to my desk, to which I had earlier unconsciously retreated—no doubt in some delusion that a teacher’s desk represented a mighty fortress, a citadel of learning, a pulpit of authority.

“Come outside with me,” said Mr. Buzzy. Circumnavigating alluvial remnants, we exited the room. Mr. Buzzy left the door open a crack. Not a whisper escaped from the classroom.

“You have a problem,” said Mr. Buzzy. I nodded my head in affirmation.

Suddenly, the hooting stopped. There was silence. We contemplated each other. In the distance, we heard the sound of footsteps.

“Do you understand what your problem is?” I did not. I waited, curious, almost with eager anticipation for words of wisdom to fall from the lips of this experienced educator, a man easily twenty years my senior, so much wiser, I imagined, I hoped.

Then it came. The answer. The insight. The revelation. The profundity. “Your problem,” intoned Mr. Buzzy, “is that you are . . . immature.”

I was twenty-one; he, about fifty. I could accept that from him. I nodded in accord. And waited for the explanation, the clarification, the directive, the assistance, the support.

He turned on his heel and left.

The bell rang. The students ran off. I went home despite the school secretary’s warning me that if I left in the middle of the day I would never, ever, ever get a teaching job anywhere, ever again.

I ended up teaching in a different school the very next day, having a very different, enjoyable experience. And yet, I remained perplexed for years about Mr. Buzzy’s behavior. How could he, or anyone, think that what he was doing was helping me?

What I have learned, and if you are a classroom teacher with experience, you have learned this also, is that Mr. Buzzy’s behavior was not an anomaly, but a symptom. It occurs wherever and whenever—as it does so often in our schools—expectations outstrip resources, hope overcomes experience, and wishful thinking overwhelms wisdom.