

## ***Case Study 2001***

### **Walk like a man**

The adventures of a loudmouthed young lady in a private boys' college.

#### **Disclaimer:**

The following account is subjective. Of course it's subjective. Hopelessly so. Life is subjective. The beauty and wonder of the wide world is this irredeemable, pig-headed tendency to gloriously vainglorious human subjectivity. Well, that's what I reckon.

The worst thing is the little acts of sabotage. When he's annoyed at me, my cooperating teacher likes to sit and think of ways to... to what? Put me in place? I'm teaching a class, he's angry, he stamps in and out, glowering. Really angry. I am teaching here, so I don't have time to work it out, duck for cover. He commandeers the teacher's chair and the blackboard. I was using them. Too late. I realise I have somehow annoyed him today, now he is reclaiming his territory. In my lesson. I get up from the chair and forget about using the board. Am I meant to allow for his tantrums in my lesson plan? Which column does that go under? How can one be so sensitive to one's own feelings, yet totally miss the fact that others also have feelings? I think you have to practise. I spend my prac swallowing outrage. What else can I do? I think he resents me because he can't successfully patronise me. Although he's working on it. What can I do? The things that come from your head are so unlovely, yet everywhere I look, there you are demanding respect, sulking it's withheld. From day one, I count the days.

My first ever lesson coincided with my supervisor's first visit. I was scared. The lesson was horrible. It was Year 7, last period. I'd aimed my lesson at about university tutorial group discussion level. Oops. Don't ever try to spur Year 7's into an abstract, intellectual, or even intelligible discourse at 3:05 pm. After the truly horrible class, after they stampeded out, my supervisor gave me some notes she'd written. As she looked at me my eyes filled with teachers. She said, "It's just the emotion, is it?" and left. She had to go somewhere else, which is fair enough. Mr Coop also left, for some more dubious reason. Welcome to the teaching fraternity.

We are in the staffroom. I am marking VAPDs. A teacher jokes, "That's the first time those books have been marked all year." (laughter). My cooperating teacher says, "Yeah, I'm gonna get her to do all my backlog of marking!" (laughter) "Yeah", he says, in a little while, continuing the joke past its timely death, "Yeah, I'm going to get her to do about 20 years worth of marking!" He is laughing, I am no longer laughing. The others subtly watch for my reaction. I say quietly, reasonably, "I don't think so". There is a moment of silence and he says to me, loudly, red in the face, quite suddenly angry, "What kind of grade do you want?" There is silence. I laugh carelessly, I say "It's a pass/fail degree." He replies, very quietly, "Exactly".

I was supervising six boys from someone else's class, which I probably shouldn't have been doing, but I was setting up equipment in the room. With only six it was too quiet, I put a radio on. Eventually, I became conned into helping the boys with their work, and I was forgetting about my room rep. Mr Coop arrived, rather late in the day. He yelled very loudly "Who put this radio on?" and I replied more calmly than I felt, "Me, is that OK?" He didn't answer. He ripped the plug out of the socket, picked up the machine, and stormed off. As one of the students observed to me, "Obviously not". How embarrassing. Here I am carefully editing my words and actions to put him at his ease. I am acting as unlike myself as is concomitant with remaining sane. To fit in, to acclimatise. Here he is doing whatever he feels like. And he mostly feels bad. God forbid I came to school (late) one day and let my unhappiness show. Then we'd have fun. It also annoys me that he wouldn't let them work to music. Like he won't let students use the stockpile of good brushes to paint with. What is this? Art purgatory? A place where you must suffer as you create? Not that they are expected to make art. He's such a drama queen *I've been called that many a time*. He's such a whiner, *I'm whining now*, He's a petty tyrant, and

I'm not that. Maybe I'm learning something, like how to survive under difficult conditions? But I already knew that one.

I guess when I've completed this prac I'll feel I can teach anywhere. Which is something. School is like life. If you are competent, people mistake you for invulnerable, they assume it doesn't matter how they treat you. And everybody wants a little bit. *Gimme, gimme, gimme. You are strong, you are light, you are giving, so I can be demanding, draining. You sure like giving, don't you? What, it hurts?* Also, if you're like me, get caught in your own invincible. One hype, and you don't want to tell people it is starting to hurt. Usually, I just end up running away. But not this time. I'm passing this baby. But since when did I become a drudge? The photocopy lackey? Never. Maybe I'm being too pompous. What happened to my sense of humour? Maybe I should become a flake instead? Miss Incapable? Then my coop wouldn't be so threatened, but I'd lose my precious self respect. Why am I taking this so seriously? Why am I letting him get to me? Why is he trying to get to me? I hate petty tyrants. How that phrase recurs. I have any tyranny really. Also hypocrisy. And I loathe the people patronising me. But at the same time I want them to hold my hand and realise I'm very often whistling in the dark. It's just a loud whistle, is all.

Prison warder guise. I wake up in the morning. I get ready for the day. Dress in my dark, saclike clothes. Bland and uniform. Asexual. No body shape. Revealing as little skin as possible. I put on conservative makeup. I mask up. I twist my hair into a chignon. I twist it tight so it'll last all day. I scrape all loose hairs up in a comb. The comb is pushed in. Dug into the roll. Plastic teeth nudge my scalp. I spray the lacquer. I lacquer my hair until it has stopped being my hair and become instead a signifier of calm and dignified authority. I put on my sensible shoes. The ones that make me walk like a man. Often as I am walking past my Year 8 students in the corridor, they begin to sing, "Walk like a Man", but quietly.

Those who are motivated and vaguely capable are no longer thought about. Get out of that nest and fly! But instead of hitting high heights, they often slip into the warm air stream of mediocrity. It's like this for school and prac students around here. What will I do if Mr Coop fails me? Maybe I want attention? No, I think I just want recognition. There's a difference. In the future, I'll be paid. Maybe I just need some praise. When I ask my uncooperative teacher for feedback, he says grumpily, "I'll tell you if you're not OK", I cannot express how I despise this method of teaching. His critiques come short, terse and all negative. He takes about 30 seconds to demolish my teaching. It's simply a list of things I did wrong. There is no room for dialogue. If I want to discuss something, he gets confused and frustrated. Maybe he thinks I'm giving him backtalk? There is no way I can uncritically accept the judgment of such an unintelligent person.

My coop told me, on an initial observation visit, that he'd tried as hard as he could to fail an earlier prac student. Apparently, this person was bonking their supervisor so they passed, much to Mr Coops chagrin. Did I need to hear all this? It sounds like a personality clash to me, with the bonking thrown in as a spice for sour grapes. Why am I complaining this much? Why is it effecting me so completely? I'm like Dickens spending a couple of months in a blacking factory and lamenting the rest of his life about merciless childhood abandonment into a horrid, corrupting undersociety. I'm only here for two more weeks! The poor sod of a coop has been here for

eighteen years. No wonder he takes days off. *But what if he fails me?* Two more weeks seem like such an awfully long time. Maybe the school will burn down?

The other day I was observing a class of Year 7s I usually teach. They were drawing comics. I drew up a page. It wasn't great but they'd be impressed at anything, so they kept asking me to help them. As I was drawing, happy to be drawing, the other art teacher came in. "Hey look", yelled my coop, "we've got a new boy in class". He was talking about me, "Nigel Newboy!" He was laughing. My sense of humour has long disappeared. The other teacher looked at me, my students looked at me. I just kept drawing. If you feel threatened, go ahead, attempt to disparage me in an attempt to make yourself feel better about yourself. It ain't gonna work. Namaste.<sup>1</sup> There is no me vs. you, there is no us vs. them. Buddha taught that in separateness lies the world's great misery.

"They're a hard bunch. Don't worry, you won't have much to do with them." This and other comments make me scared of our Year 11s. Also, during the classes I've observed, they are extremely belligerent. It doesn't occur to me yet that they are bored and bitter. These are the early days, when I still saw Coop as that incarnate knowledgeable being – the teacher. During an observation visit, he points out the ones to watch out for: the immature ones, the bad attitudes, the ones who want to do it to their English teacher. Then he says they'll pay attention to me, because I'll give them a pretty face to look at. All this is said in their hearing. My coop teacher tells me most of these kids shouldn't be doing elective art, apparently it's an admin error. He tells me that going by their English rankings they represent the bottom end of the intelligence spectrum. This was also said within their hearing.

As I start prac, one of these students, Gabriel, is recovering from catching his finger in a bandsaw. I saw the bandsaw demonstration lesson on an initial visit. It took about five minutes and consisted of watching a man cut wood. At the time that seemed sufficient and ample to me. But, I guess it wasn't. My coop tells me about the incident. Apparently it's all Gabriel's fault because he is emotionally immature. This child is a young Year 11 but he has become the class clown because he is treated like a fool. Coop teases him about the bandsaw at every available opportunity. He brings a welding helmet into an art theory lesson and sticks it on Gabriel, "for safety". Gabriel isn't laughing.

The class have been making sculptures, they've been working on them for weeks. Gabriel has finished his about a month early. I can see that for the next few weeks he'll be just sitting in the class. His sculpture is pretty bad. Coop is resigned. He tells Gabriel to paint an incongruous design all over it. When Gabe finds it hard to paint (with a bandaged finger) the teacher gives him a texta to use instead. Nobody expects Gabe to make art.

This afternoon I had a Year 11 double. My scary Year 11 big, noisy young man. I was just meant to observe, but Coop was once again away. The lesson was simply them continuing to work on their sculpture. I was firm about requesting a substitute this time. Why do I have to *request* this? A teacher I knew was harpooned. He told

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<sup>1</sup> Hindu greeting, translates as "I see and I honour the divine within you, as you see and honour the divine within me".

me that on the harpoon notification, it had added “prac teacher will be there – capable”. A backhanded compliment. It meant – you needn’t show up. As a matter of fact, when he told me about the note, he also told me he couldn’t be there. I was asked again if I really required a substitute. I growled yes, and I got a couple of grumpy old men who looked rather displeased to be there.

The lesson went well. I talked to everyone. How do they know so much nothing about art in Year 11, or are they bluffing? They sit around, goofing off. I come up and get them talking about their work. They start reluctantly, after all, I’m a teacher. As they see that I’m really listening, they get excited. I throw a whole lot of ideas at them sandwiched in between praise for their work so far. I try to link what they’ve already done to their broader ideas. We work out some logical next steps to take. This class, they are so hungry for attention and for someone to bounce ideas off. They need to be taken seriously. I encourage professionalism. They stop goofing off. They lap it up when I show them I think its OK to think up wild and crazy art ideas. I let them dream up art. I give them the space to do it in. There is no right or wrong as long as you can justify it. There is no right or wrong as long as you can justify it. Then, they relax. As they come to this – I hit them with, “So, what’s the first step?” They tell me. “So, what do you need to do now?” They know they have been tricked. I con them into starting work. Once they get going they’re OK. They get seduced by the materials. They are so hungry for attention. The attention I give them makes them surprisingly respectful. And successful. In eighty minutes, we’ve got blossoming going on. It’s so beautiful it’s almost a cliché.

The art they were doing when I got there was simply busy work. Ezekiel is making a sports’ trophy as a sculpture. The Coop avoids him. I talk to him and he has gratitude in his face. Again, he cannot make the link between the germ of an idea and a 3D work. We discuss structural problems. He asks me if his subject matter is OK. As far as I’m concerned, you can make art out of anything, a puppy for example. It’s not what you do it’s the way that you do it. Art is style,chutzpah, elan, spirit, duende, passion. You can take a wallaby pattern and make it into art. I tell Ezekiel that I like his ideas. He thinks I’m a cool teacher forever. Still, when it comes to work, he goofs off. So, we talk about transferring his design onto a block of wood. I give him options. He chooses. I help him to do it. Eventually, it works the way he wants it. He cuts it out. Twice. Both times it breaks. The frustration! He wants to give up. I give him more attention. We work out why it’s breaking in the bandsaw. I agree it’s not easy. I agree its discouraging. I tell him to get back on that horse. He wants to goof off. I tell him this is not an option. He agrees. He cuts it again. It works. He is so happy he almost dances back into the room to show me, so proudly.

I get them to help each other. When one is frustrated, another is always willing to help. It becomes a nicer room to be in. They have the leisure to learn and the freedom to be creative.

Gabe. He claims his texta decorated sculpture is finished. I look him in the eye and say “What about a finish?”

“Huh?”

“Like David’s over there”.

“Oh”.

“Yeah, lets see what happens...”

He varnishes one piece of his work. Looks good. We talk about the rest of it. Maybe some contrast?

“What would contrast smooth and glossy?” I say, referring to the varnish.

“Rough”. Gabe thinks.

“OK, what’s rough?” I say.

“Sand”. He says.

I find sand and PVA in the room. We talk about options. He makes the big decisions. I provide the alternatives. I am Miss What-if. So, his once still born sculpture is resurrected. Airborne. This dead idea has blood flowing through it again. And that’s gorgeous. And so is his enthusiasm and the way he is playing in a serious manner with the relationship between his ideas and the materials.

What is ugly is that yes, it took effort on my part, but it was so little effort. How can I do in eighty minutes what this other person can’t be bothered to do in week? Why is it so? I think these students don’t like their regular teacher. And I think this is because they know his feelings about them. All that stuff he said to me about low intellectual ability, immaturity and bad attitudes was said in front of them.

If I say “I don’t believe in ‘can’t draw!’” and I believe it to be true (which I do), it places high expectations on the kids and forces them to work. If I see them working, and they really can’t do it, we will work out why together. They will know I think they can do it. Also, in art, nothing is ever finished. Everyone makes some really bad art sometimes. For whatever reason. It’s OK to make bad art, if you learn from it. We are on this planet to not be perfect. “Either flee from people, or laugh at the world and the people in it, and make a fool of yourself in many things.”<sup>2</sup> It’s a good way to live, making a fool out of yourself. It’s not OK to make bad art and conclude you’re no good. That’s the sound of a door closing. “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities. In the expert’s mind there are few.”<sup>3</sup> Yes, I know people reach limits, but that is no reason to *expect* mediocrity.

Maybe I’m being judgmental? After all, he’s had this class all year and I’ve only been here two weeks. So he’s seen a lot I haven’t seen. Still, I think even if I taught these guys for months, I would not react to them the way he does. I don’t think it’s a good way to teach anyone anything.

Things I learnt on Prac:

Juniors can be very young. Don’t expect your cooperating teacher to cooperate. Put the rest of your life on hold. Sleep a lot. Find someone outside to talk to. You cannot let things slide in a classroom, if it annoys you be seen to deal with it. Little decisions become very important. Good management is in the details. This makes it hard if you usually hate petty details. As someone said “God lies in the details”. It’s up to you to decide if this means he resides or deceives there.

How hypocritical we are when it comes to self preservation. I disgust myself. As a praccie, and a young woman, I am fit for photocopying in Mr Coop’s eyes. Any autonomy I displayed when he was in the room resulted in sabotaging me. No, I’m not being paranoid. He felt the need to put me in my place on a number of

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<sup>2</sup> Abba Or, second century A.D.

<sup>3</sup> Suzuki Roshi, Zen master.

occasions. And it was always public, the coward. I seriously think he felt scared of me. For whatever reason. And, dear darling reader, I think I'll take that as a big compliment. In fact that's better feedback of my competence than the report and the satisfactory grade.

But why was he scared of me? Me? The most squishy, unscarey person? I believe in ahimsa, for God's sake!<sup>4</sup> I dunno, could it be the whole M.Teach, five years trained thing? Could it be that he sensed my disapproval? I think it was this: he felt guilty about what he revealed to me, and then he dealt with that guilt by getting angry at me for witnessing his misdemeanours. Only, he turned it into a (more self acceptable) anger at my invented misdemeanours. Much easier than changing your behaviour, really.

Oh, it's over so lets stop being a drama queen! The miserly little man has his come uppance by having to wade through his self created measly, petty, paranoid, extremely dull ontological swimming pool. Someone should tell him – Hey! There's a great big ocean out there, where all the seas run into each other, where the water is clean, and you can play with dolphins. Someone should say: You don't have to live a gruel fed, mince meat existence, hemmed in by illusions that you fear, day in day out, until you die, or the 3:10 bell rings (whichever comes first). He lives in a dark room and outside the window is a scary mirage. But it's just a mirage. And if he went outside, he'd notice. Yep, someone should tell him or show him. But guess what? Not me. Why not? Because I'm human, too. Because I'm not a saint (as the Pope) and he really annoyed me. And that's the end of the story.

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<sup>4</sup> A Sanskrit word, ahimsa translates as “nonviolence” or “nonharming”.