

GODDAMNIT, MR. IDOL, THIS IS YOUR JOB!

THE STORY

In 1964 I was in my first year of teaching for The Francis W. Parker School on the Near North Side of Chicago. It was February, and Webster Street was cold, gray and dirty with snow. Kids, teachers, parents - we were all drifting in the educational doldrums by this time. My sophomore English class was giving me a hard time, complaining about reading Henry IV, Part I and everything else. "We did Shakespeare last year," they whined, as though reading literature was like learning multiplication tables. Clearly it was time to let them share the burden of curriculum responsibility.

On the next Monday I told them they could use the full week (four 40 minute periods) to plan which books they wanted to read during the next unit, and I gave a long list and some minimum requirements. Then I sat back to let them go to work. Of course this group of 15 and 16 year olds had neither the maturity nor skills to manage a complex consensus process like this one - and sophomore boys do not want to read the same books that sophomore girls do!

It was a disaster. The Monday class seemed to take hours as the frustration and volume grew. Tuesday was an eternity, and nobody felt good about anything or anyone by the time the bell finally rang. But I was committed. Come hell or high water, we were all going to see this through.

Wednesday came and these kids dragged themselves into my room as though they were being marched to an execution. Once again the brouhaha started. Tempers flared, voices rose, cruel insults bounced off the walls. I was caught. I knew this couldn't go on, but I didn't know how to stop it without losing face. A gift from the universe in the form of Maurice Ginsburg saved us all.

Maurice was a good-natured kid with salt-of-the-earth commonsense and a low tolerance for the bullshit of intellectual dilettantism. He was also big as a house and played tackle on the football team. Fifteen minutes into the Wednesday class Maurice rose to his feet and slammed his ham-sized fist down on the table.

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The room went absolutely still. Not one of us had ever seen Maurice like this before, and it seriously scared most of us. Most important, it brought us all, especially me, to our senses. Something profound and powerful - too powerful for high school sophomores - had been happening, and Maurice's frustration and directness gave us all a chance to learn from it. I was able to say,

"OK, let's pull our chairs in a circle and talk about what's happened to us."

THE LEARNINGS

We spent the rest of the week looking at what had happened and trying to understand why it had happened. We were a group of people who genuinely liked each other, and in less than 100 minutes we had jeopardized relationships it had taken four months to build. We took the rest of Wednesday and most of Thursday exploring our feelings of frustration, hurt and impotence. The intensity of negative feeling generated was deeply disturbing, and I've never forgotten it. I've also

never forgotten how beautiful that whole group of kids was as they helped each other and their teacher understand it was the situation, and not the people, that was the problem.

What I learned from this was humbling. In my ignorance and ego I'd put a group of wonderful people in a situation that could only bring them frustration, failure and fear of trying again. Probably only two outcomes were possible. The best would be a false consensus arrived at through exhaustion and most dropping out. The worst would be irreparably damaged relationships, perhaps even physical violence, and an avoidance of democratic process forever after. Nothing could have been further from what I meant to teach. How did this happen?

Ignorance Let It Happen

At the time I was only ten years older than Maurice and the rest of the class and didn't know much more than they did about the way the world or people worked. I had no idea collaboration among peers was such a complex and tricky business so I provided none of the structure necessary for teenagers to have some chance of success. Up until this time in my life virtually all of my attempts at collaboration had been structured for me by more experienced adults - parents, teachers, coaches, camp counselors, priests and other bosses of various stripes. Even when we did work on our own (in fraternities, sororities, clubs, etc.), we functioned within very precise (and often ludicrous) rules and regulations. The result of this lack of experience was a colossal ignorance on my part as to what a peer group needs to function effectively, and so I didn't provide it. This is how ignorance lets terrible things happen, and it becomes so easy when you have unquestioned authority over others as I did. The only real cure I know for the dangers of ignorance is life experience. Now, at 65, my sense of my own ignorance is so much greater, and my behaving of it so much less; for this I am very grateful.

Ego Made It Happen

While ignorance let me make this mistake, it was ego that drove it. In those days my ego wanted everybody around me to think whatever I did was stupendous. The kids' complaints about reading Shakespeare (a perfectly normal adolescent response to the Bard in gray Chicago February) triggered a totally unwarranted response in me. My ego took this as a humiliating personal rejection and, in its flailing about, seized upon this sadistic solution and kept me locked into it until Maurice rescued us all. I can't count the times my ego's paranoia has seen rejection, humiliation and attack where there was none and has driven me into corners from which I could find no escape. How much easier my life and the lives of others would have been if I could have seen my ego as only one useful part of me and not let it act as the whole for all those years!

Some Games Should Not Be Played

In Game Theory, there are three kinds of games. Simply put, they are:

- WIN-WIN Everyone who plays wins (family holidays, a walk in the woods, cherishing a loved one). It makes sense to play these games as often as possible.
- WIN-LOSE Everyone who plays chances winning or losing (poker, the stock market). These games should be looked at carefully before, during and after playing.
- LOSE-LOSE Everyone who plays loses (nuclear war, terrorism, demeaning a loved one). It makes no sense to play these games.

We've all been caught in LOSE-LOSE games like the one I created for my sophomore class. Most of us will choose one of two paths. Many will just drop out rather than engage in the painful and seemingly endless conflict. Others will vent their frustration by entering deeper and deeper into the conflict like Brer Rabbit punching Tar Baby. A very few, like Maurice, will take on the controller of the system and demand that he or she change the game. This is the only hopeful choice. By confronting me, Maurice focused the group's energy and attention where it needed to be - on the person who could change the structure of the situation. Way to go, Maurice! We need more of you!

You Can Always Change the Game

Of course, the way to have a great life is to maximize the amount of time you spend playing WIN-WIN and minimize the LOSE-LOSE. It's never too late to change the game, but it's very hard to do once you're caught up in it. The best way is to pause before entering any game and ask yourself, "Which kind of game is this?" If it's a WIN-WIN, jump right in. If it's all WIN-LOSE, check it out. It's a LOSE-LOSE, either walk away or convert it at least to a WIN-LOSE. That's what Maurice did for us - he interrupted a LOSE-LOSE game and allowed us to convert it to a WIN-WIN from which we all learned an enormous amount.

There's Nothing Along with a Little Pain (If You Learn from It)

My son, Scott, who's a teacher himself, reminded me of Maurice's story and of another important point. He lets his kids play "Teacher of the Day" from time to time and says it's "very useful" in helping them gain a larger perspective on the complexities of running a classroom. I couldn't agree more; experience is the best teacher. The key is whether we can make sense of the pain soon enough to learn from it instead of deciding never to play again. Both timing and insight are crucial here. Wait too long and there's no impact. Do nothing to change the pain to learning and the experience imprints only bitterness and negativity.

Here's one of my best memories of putting insight and timing together. When my youngest daughter, Katina, was walking but hadn't yet begun to speak, she started over toward the hot oven in the kitchen. Her loving mom, Nancy (a better parent than I), said:

"No, Kate - that's hot!"

"Nancy," I said, "That doesn't make any sense to her - she doesn't know what hot means. Hey, Kate, you want to learn about hot? Come on over here."

Nancy looked at me like I was a barbarian about to roast his own daughter for dinner. I took Kate's little wrist in my hand and moved her fingers toward the hot oven. When we were about three inches away, Kate yanked her hand back and said:

"Hot!"

It was the first word she ever spoke, and she's had very few burns since.

"You Get What You Need" - Often from Unexpected Sources

If you polled us before this incident, my guess is that very few of us would have guessed the leadership we needed in this situation would have come from Maurice. But it did, and with the

power and force we needed to hear it. The longer I live, the less surprised I am by this phenomenon. "Out of the mouths of babes..." someone said, and that wisdom is everywhere when I have my ears open. Someone else said, "You may not get what you want, but you get what you need." We certainly weren't getting what we wanted in that gray February of 1964, but we got what we needed, and because we used it, we got what we really mattered. That's how it works.

SO HOW HAS THIS MADE A DIFFERENCE?

Recognizing what kind of game I'm being offered and making a conscious choice about whether to play has been more valuable than I can say - and I only remember to do it about 25% of the time. But even that makes all the difference in the world.

I Still Get Sucked In...

I remember when I got attracted to and involved with some radical groups in the late sixties how much this learning helped. If you've ever been with extremists like this, you know that Radicals, Fundamentalists and Fascists operate from the same mentality: their position is absolutely right, and any deviation from it is evil. In those days I was a naïve, guilt-ridden, middle-class white boy who couldn't atone enough for all the horrible things his ilk had done to the world, and this made me very vulnerable to radical idiocy.

When I arrived at the UMass School of Education in the fall of 1969, I found myself in the middle of every kind of anti-establishment radical group. In 1968 we'd had the Tet Offensive, the King and Bobby Kennedy assassinations and then the Democratic Convention. Since then things had just gotten worse and worse. It was easy to feel righteous, and we did. Simply demonstrating wasn't nearly enough when the SDS were smashing windows, Black Panthers were being killed and railroaded and Chicago's Finest were bloodying kids by the hundreds in Lincoln Park. In this a black-and-white world of good and evil, and any form of negotiation or compromise with the enemy was "selling out."

At first I thought I was playing a WIN-LOSE game of good against evil, and it was easy to get sucked further and further into it. No one saw a WIN-WIN possibility anywhere on the horizon, so the game was "bring down The Establishment and good will triumph." For a while this seemed to make sense. Then one day I had a profoundly disturbing insight - if these people I was hanging out with actually won and got their hands on the guns, they'd shoot me even quicker for disagreeing with them than the "Fascist Establishment" ever would.

But I Get Out Cleaner and Faster!

This was a sobering moment. I realized I was right in the middle of the LOSE-LOSE game. If the "Fascists" won, sooner or later I would lose, and if the "Radicals" won, sooner or later I would lose. In both cases it would be for the same reason: I wouldn't be extreme enough for either group, and so they would find me "evil" and deserving of rejection, if not elimination. This scared the hell of me, but, unlike Maurice, I couldn't find a way to interrupt this game, so I chose not to play then, and I choose not to play now. While I wish I knew how to convert this game at least to a genuine WIN-LOSE (and I still don't, especially in the Middle East), I'm grateful for the learnings that taught me not to play - and I again thank Maurice for so powerfully imprinting the costs of LOSE-LOSE on my unconscious.

WHAT MORE DOES THIRD AGE SEE?

Another story will illustrate the deeper levels I've found in this learning over time. My wife, Donna, and I had been interested in living in community for some time, so when we learned of a new Co-Housing Community starting in Asheville, North Carolina, we signed up. Co-Housing began in Denmark and, vastly oversimplified, is for people who want to own their own homes and know and be involved with their immediate neighbors. In general, these communities have at least three things in common. First, parking is on the periphery so that you walk among and run into your neighbors daily. Second, there is a Common House where meals are shared, guests can stay, meetings take place, children have a playroom, and so on. The Common House is considered to be an extension of individual homes which allows them to be smaller (an environmental value). Third, community decisions are made using consensus process which works hard to include and reconcile all perspectives. This, naturally, can take more meeting time than autocratic processes.

The development was building the Common House and twenty-four new homes on a 4 1/2 acre farm, and the old farmhouse (which we bought) was available as a 25th unit. Since we joined the group relatively late and our house was already built, we didn't participate much in the years of design meetings that preceded construction. As a result, we didn't understand how deeply the consensus process and concern for physical facilities was imprinted in the group.

We had previously lived on Prickly Mountain in Vermont, a loosely-tied neighborhood of very individual and independent artists and architects, where spontaneously creative (and often bizarre) social events were the heart of community activities. We were ill-prepared for the culture we entered, especially the emphasis on rules and regulations, the long meetings and the high priority on physical facilities and work. At first we thought this was simply a hangover from the design and construction phases where such constant seriousness is necessary. What we didn't understand was that the group had formed around these values, and we were the ones who were out of sync.

We were the last to move in, so we missed much of the pain others experienced when there were no sidewalks, endless punch lists and all the other frustrations that come with a new development. At first we thought we could make fun as central as work and all get what we wanted (only WIN-WIN games make sense in community). This didn't happen for many reasons, and soon we felt we were playing a LOSE-LOSE game where our attempts at spontaneity constantly turned into proposals for more structure requiring more work ("The faster we went, the behinder we got."). So we each, in our own way, dropped out and created our personal communities elsewhere, and, after five years, moved on to other pastures that fit us better. I'm pleased to say to we did this without making anyone wrong. We admire and wish nothing but the best for our Co-Housing friends and neighbors. They are building a beautiful community that suits them very well indeed, and we cherish our experience here and the growth we take with us, especially a new understanding of what appears to be LOSE-LOSE.

Sometimes LOSE-LOSE Means Nobody's Losing But You

What we learned is that sometimes the pain and frustration of LOSE-LOSE is simply good information we've been too stubborn to get in other ways. Donna and I simply didn't fit with the culture of this community, and we didn't want to fit. In our attempts to change something that should not have been changed, we felt like we were playing LOSE-LOSE. In fact, we were just

gaining the awareness that we'd chosen a game we didn't belong in, and we had no right to expect the game to change to suit us. Once we understood this, it was easy to release ourselves and our friends.

I don't think I could have come to such a mature realization much earlier in life. I needed all the ripening I've had to recognize there are times and places when it is me that needs to change, and not others. In this case, my friends and neighbors were never losing; they were steadily creating the community that suits them very well. So there was no LOSE-LOSE here, only a "LOSE" for us if we persisted in trying to assert our will above the the will of the group. Fortunately, Third Age had brought us to the point where we understood, and could act on, this wonderful advice:

**"God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things that cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the Wisdom to know the difference."**

CHECK YOUR LEARNINGS

Which of these learnings do you want to keep your eye on? It might not hurt to put one of these phrases, or one of your own, somewhere you see it every day for a while...

- **Ignorance Let It Happen**
- **Ego Made It Happen**
- **Some Games Should Not Be Played**
- **You Can Always Change the Game**
- **There's Nothing Wrong with a Little Pain (If You Learn from It)**
- **"You Get What You Need" - Often from Unexpected Sources**
- **I Still Get Sucked In... But I Get Out Cleaner and Faster!**
- **Sometimes LOSE-LOSE Means Nobody's Losing But You**