

## Better Learners

Athena sat in her jail cell hastily scrawling in her journal. A prison is a seemingly unlikely place to find a teacher. That is aside from the borderline personality pedophiles currently populating prisons in ever increasing numbers. The irony was that she had taught in a detention center. Some of her former students would probably get a real kick out of the idea of her, "The Teacher" locked up in jail. She had just a few minutes to jot her thoughts down before lights- out. Where she had gone wrong? Her intentions had been good. But isn't that what they say the road to hell is paved with? If she could just reexamine her actions, maybe she could sort it all out and make some sense out of it. It all started two years ago, her last year teaching.

Her desk was a mess. Her attendance book, grade book, and various papers to be graded were haphazardly strewn about the desk, along with memos and notices from administration, the detritus of her profession. And where was that stapler and why couldn't she hang on to a descent pen? The copier was jammed, which it never failed to do and always at the worst possible time. Her brain whirred like a slow moving fan. On a biological level, the brain chemicals or lack there of, when one experiences, anxiety, fear, panic, and depression made her head feel like there was a fan turning inside. It began to dawn on her that the state of her desk reflected exactly the state of her mind. She was in the advanced stages of teacher burnout. Why wouldn't she be? This was the teaching job from hell. Teaching 15 students, different subjects, mixed ages, mixed abilities and hardly anyone wanted

to learn anything. It was a one- room schoolhouse from hell. And here come the demons.

She spun around to face them as they entered the classroom. The fan in her brain whirred on. They ambled in with as much enthusiasm as a New Orleans funeral procession on the way to the cemetery. Dominick sauntered over to his desk and assumed his usual position; head down, fast asleep. Leanne sidled to her desk keeping her eyes on the boys, and assumed her usual position, torso bent over her desk, cleavage on display. Dijon crip-walked to his seat with his jeans slung so low that you could see his entire behind clad in a festive patterned pair of boxer shorts.

Rodrigo wished her a good morning in his very best English. He was a recent immigrant from Peru, where they actually had respect for education and teachers. Too bad he hardly spoke English. Then there was Broderick, the incessant talker, talking to Dylan, the ceaseless tapper. Behind him was Charles, the unremitting rapper. Then Gina who could not remain in her seat for more than 5 minutes, fluttered in and then after her was Sarah. Thank goodness for Sarah. She was twelve years old and smarter than everyone else in the class and well behaved. Why was she there in the first place? She hadn't attended school for 5 months.

And so began another day at non- secure detention school. They weren't demons, really, not bad, just kids who had gotten into trouble and not even big trouble. Mostly it was staying out late or not coming home at all, or truancy. They had stolen their mother's car or occasionally someone else's. Most of them had tested positive for marijuana or painkillers on a drug test. That was the big one. Yet

here they all were the uninterested, the untenable, and the unteachable (was that even a word?) and here was Athena and it was her job to educate them.

Maybe she was the demon because she just didn't want to do it anymore. She needed a vacation, to get away for a couple of weeks. There was a school holiday approaching, but at her salary she could barely pay her bills. She'd ask for a raise. She hadn't had one in five years. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if she earned a little more money.

"But Athena, you earn \$18.80 an hour. That's a lot more than many people at this agency earn, plus you get all of those paid school holidays."

"But I have a Master's degree and teacher certification, and I've completed all coursework towards a Doctorate from an Ivy League College, I just didn't have the funding to finish."

"Well a miss is as good as a mile, Athena. Stop whining! You get a half an hour prep time every day, in addition to a half an hour lunch. I don't see what your problem is."

Time for a new career. Something entirely different. Helping people. She had always liked to help, but different, totally different. She came across an ad in the paper offering a course in hypnosis. She could learn to help people lose unwanted weight or to stop smoking. The course was relatively inexpensive and could be very profitable. What did she have to lose? It was worth a try.

Athena took the course and did exceptionally well. Within two months she had helped five people quit smoking and three people lose weight. She still had her teaching job and was doing hypnosis on a part-time basis. She had quite a talent for it, as it turned out. That was no surprise. She had always done well in her studies. If only she could just impart her enthusiasm for learning to her recalcitrant progeny.

The idea came to her one day while she was lecturing the class, not lecturing, really, but trying to encourage the students to try a little harder.

“This society is a meritocracy and people judge you, value you according to what you know. Tell me, what do you know? Aside from the lyrics to the hottest new rap song, or where to get marijuana, what do you know? I guarantee you know a lot more than you think. Everything that you have ever devoted any attention to is there in your brain. The way you learn is by bits of new knowledge attaching onto bits you already know. You just have to learn how to retrieve it, that’s all. Suddenly, it hit her like a bolt of lightning. What if she hypnotized the students to make them better learners?

The day had been relatively relaxed. There had been no episodes. Athena put a hypnotic, moving, geometric pattern on the smart board and began to speak in a soothing voice.

“You are very relaxed. You are feeling so calm and relaxed that you could fall asleep right now, but you are not going to. You are going to remain relaxed, totally relaxed but your mind is alert, alert and receptive, alert and receptive. You are very smart, very, very smart. You learn easily. You love to learn. You are an excellent

student, an excellent student. You study, and take notes. You use outlines or flash cards to help you memorize information. You always do your homework. You always do your best. You even do extra because learning is fun and enjoyable to you. Learning is so, so, much fun. You will never, ever lose your passion for learning. When I count down from ten to one, you will wake up refreshed and ready to learn. 10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1.”

The students approached their work with enthusiasm and a zeal for knowledge that was unprecedented. Even Dominick who had been categorized with a low IQ excelled and demonstrated curiosity and deep interest in a variety of topics from astronomy to etymology. The transformation was nothing less than remarkable. Even more amazing was the change in their behavior. They used to squander more time avoiding work than they spent doing work, asking question after question about why they had to learn certain things and what would they ever use it for. Dijon’s pants were pulled up to some acceptable height. Leanne’s eyes were no longer on the boys but in her books.

The tapping and the talking stopped. The rapping was cleverly transformed into mnemonics for remembering vocabulary or facts. Rodrigo seemed to be learning English at a much faster rate. The only student that didn’t seem to change noticeably was Sarah because she already loved to learn. She was, however, able to learn a whole lot more without the constant and inane disruptions. The students were motivated and enthusiastic. They were, in a nutshell, a teacher’s dream.

When they all excelled in their standardized tests, the administrators started to take notice. Dijon Peters, with a 98 average in Earth Science? Leanne Marshall with a 95 in Bio? Rodrigo Perez with a 90 in English? There was something fishy going on and they aimed to get to the bottom of it. Athena was called into the head administrator's office.

"Look at these scores! Just look at them. What are you doing, inflating grades to get a raise?"

"No, of course not! The kids are just better students than they used to be. They enjoy learning. In fact, they have an insatiable appetite for knowledge. If you don't believe me, spend some time in my classroom."

The administrator came to the classroom and was even more stupefied by what he saw than he was by the students' grades. Some students were working quietly at their desks, while a small group was working on a lab, and still another group was engaged in a quiet debate on the concept of multiple universes.

"You know it wasn't until the early 20th century," Dominick pontificated, "that they understood that there were more galaxies than the Milky Way."

The administrator was flabbergasted. Were these the same inexorable delinquents that he knew and disliked?

"What did you do to them," he laughed, "hypnotize them?"

"Well yes, actually I did." The smile evaporated from his face as rapidly as if it had been wiped on with an alcohol wipe. The police were called immediately and

Athena was taken away, head down and in handcuffs right in front of her bewildered students. The image was played over and over on the local TV news station, headline flashing across the screen; “Local teacher hypnotizes her students!” but they never, ever said what she hypnotized them to do. By omission, it sensationalized the whole matter as news stations often do. Tune in at eleven.

For all the controversy that ensued, you would have thought that she had sexually abused them. As the prosecuting attorney had so melodramatically contended in his closing remarks, she had done worse.

“She has violated the innermost sanctum of the human psyche; the subconscious.” It appears that every child has the God given right to be dumb and make stupid mistakes and to waste their time, their minds, and their lives if they so desired.

Initially, the parents were shocked and outraged. The nerve of her! Who did she think she was? Using hypnosis to make up for her laziness and incompetence. To pump up their grades so she could get a raise! Eventually, they came to appreciate the transformations in their sons and daughters. They read books, studied, attended class, completed their homework, and stayed home. Their grades were excellent. They no longer roamed the streets until all hours. Their parents’ prescription medications were safe. Their car keys were safe. When the court ordered that Athena reverse the hypnotic suggestion, the parents protested vehemently. They petitioned the court to allow the students remain the way they were.

A legal battle ensued and it was decided that the final decision belonged to the students, themselves. The students unanimously decided that they did not want to return to the way they were before. They each testified before a judge, but the deciding testimony came from Dominick.

“ I don’t think Ms A changed us. I mean, I can only speak for myself, but I believe she just gave me a short cut that somehow allowed me to realize what it would have taken me another twenty years to figure out on my own. By then it would have been too late.”

Athena was not ordered to reverse the posthypnotic suggestion, but she still had to serve a two- year sentence. She had only wanted to help. If only she had received permission before she had taken it upon herself, she would have never ended up in jail. But in retrospect, would parents or administrators have given her that permission? It was as clear as glass now, that her only mistake had been telling the truth.

Five more minutes before, lights out. She pulled out an envelope from beneath her pillow. It was a letter from Dijon’s parents, thanking her for what she had done for him. He had just been offered a full scholarship to Harvard University. It was one of many letters of a similar nature from her former students and their parents.

Her sentence would be over in a month with time off for good behavior. Had two years in jail and the onslaught of litigation and bad press been worth it? She was looking forward to a lucrative business doing hypnosis in her own office,



hypnotizing students to be better learners for a lot more than \$18.80 an hour. In addition, there were now fifteen young adults who, because of what she had done, were confident that they had the brainpower to tackle whatever intellectual task came their way, and to reap the benefits of that ability; good jobs, good incomes, full lives. Had it been worth it? You bet.

“So what are you here for?” an inmate had asked her.

“I hypnotized my students”

“No shit. What did you get them to do? Rob a bank?”

“ No, just to be better learners.”

“You’re kidding. They locked you up for that? Could you do that for me? I always wanted to get a General Education Diploma...and maybe go to college!”