

Teacher Tales: True Stories of the Classroom Featuring Interesting Solutions

Story Break – A Woman I Never Forget

She read to us. That was her gift to me. My fifth grade teacher read to me. In all the years that I have been a student, I do not believe that I have ever met an unhappier teacher. She yelled at us daily, punished us regularly and, and this is no exaggeration, when we took up a collection and gave her a present at the end of the year, she gave it back. She did. She said, “Don’t think you can give me something nice now and feel good about the way you have treated me all year. I don’t want it.” She gave it back.

I recount this unfortunate incident because it counterpoints a profound truth: there are few teachers in my life that to whom I am more grateful. Why? Every day after lunch she read to us. I loved to hear her read. I am sure it was at least in part because it seemed to me that when she was reading was the only happy time. But I loved to listen to the stories that she read. It was something about a cabin by a lake in the woods.

Now, after lunch, when I have a good but not too filling lunch and I take a little break I’m feeling the food just begin to digest, I get this warm feeling. The very same feeling I got when she read to us and I think of her. I always smile.

If you want a small measure of immortality, read to your children.

Story Break - Do You Want a Measure of Immortality?

He’s known as Mr. Fitz. He’s a fifth grade teacher but mention his name to an older child or adult in town and you’ll witness a quick, vivid reaction. You might see a flash of fear, sometimes a ripple of joy, occasionally, a look of look of regret. There is always a reaction. Within their town Mr. Fitz is immortal. Why has Mr. Fitz become a legend, because he tells "The Story." Every Halloween (or on the Friday right before) Mr. Fitz tells a story. He started telling the story in his first year of teaching and that was many years ago. In that very first year the story blazed through town.

He was asked to tell it again and again. It got a little tedious. So, he announced that he would tell it once a year, in his classroom, just before the dismissal bell on Halloween of the closest day. The following year Mr. Fitz started getting visitors.

I met him in his twentieth year of teaching, his legendary status long in place. Now, to be fair, I must disclose that Fitz worked ceaselessly in cementing his status. He would begin warning children in September that he was going to tell the story. He took particular glee in suggesting that nervous students might choose to “be sick” on the day of the telling.

Mr. Fitz never bothered with attendance on the day of the tale. Every seat was filled. I don't know whether it was the story teller in him but he regaled me with tales of children checked themselves out of local hospitals in order to be in class. No matter how much you may beg and plead, Fitz only told The Story once a year. I worked with him in the spring and he would not even tell it to me. He wouldn't even give me the plot synopsis.

When I asked anyone else, they gleefully shared every detail. I almost got sick. It is a terrible tale, some twisted thing about a little girl, Becky something or other, who was systematically torn to shreds. It's gruesome. When I mentioned to Fitz that I had heard the tale from others, he said that I had heard only a pale rendition. When I suggested that he might choose a gentler tale, Fitz turned toward me with a maniacal grin and pronounced, “Why? They Love it!”

I pleaded but to no avail. He told me that if I wanted to hear it, I would have to return on Halloween. Legends can be most unreasonable. He did promise to save me a seat and that turned out to be a good thing.

The school bell rings at 2:30. I figured an arrival at 1:30 would allow plenty of time. When I checked in at the office, I noticed an unusual number of people milling about the hall. I recognized some parents but there were also quite a few high schoolers and one or two college-age folks. The guest book had a load of fresh entries and on the “Why Line” every person had entered the same word: Fitz. I was formal and wrote “classroom visit.” The secretary laughed and pointed down the hall toward Fitz's room.

I was given a warm greeting, although it was clear I was by no means today's main event. Fitz was in the front teaching away. With a grand gesture, he indicated his chair. I would have a front row seat. The children were acting like they were paying attention but, in truth, we were all clock watching. At exactly 2:00 he snapped his book closed and began pulling down window shades. I think he turned his back on the door so that the arriving guests would not have to offer lame excuses for their visit. The back of the room quickly filled up with guests. They lined the back wall, and filled both sides of the room. Some even crouched down in the aisles. A few hospitable children gave up their seats. With a grand gesture, Fitz indicated the floor before him. The gallant ones, followed by anyone else who would fit, dashed to the front and sat at his feet.

The room was packed. I was momentarily concerned that this might be shut down by the fire chief but then, of course, he was probably somewhere in the back listening. I had a perfect vantage point sitting at Fitz's desk to observe both teller and listeners.

The only element missing was the flickering of fire light. It was like some ancient ritual. Fitz paused. He reached up and, yes, he did, he fisted his suspenders. There was a hush.

"Have you heard about little Becky?" he asked the crowd. With mouths agape (even the adults) they shook their heads. "It's a terrible tale," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't tell it." He looked right at me when he said this.

"Oh no," they pleaded. "Please," they whined. He winked at me. Oh brother, I thought, this was positively shameless. The tale began. It was gruesome; it was awful, bloody, rude, without merit, and perfectly politically incorrect. In short, it was positively delicious.

I won't tell you the tale. I won't steal Fitz's thunder. Besides, I couldn't equal his telling with a year's dedicated rehearsal. If you want to hear it, you'll have to set aside Halloween day in your schedule. Be warned, arrive early, you'll be wrestling me for a seat.

If you want to be memorable, tell stories. People, old and young, relish a good tale. However, if you want to be immortal, be bold and when you find the right tale, never let it go.

Story Break: Professor Pen of the University of Pennsylvania on Penmanship.

I don't know if it is true in your school. I bet it is. Third graders dislike penmanship more than any other subject. I find this true wherever I go, moaning and groaning, everywhere except New Salem, Massachusetts. In New Salem children love it. Why? Because each and every Friday Professor Pen flies up in a helicopter from the University of Pennsylvania to lecture his prized young students on Penmanship.

The third grade teacher dreaded penmanship. She always put it off until Friday. The children hated it endlessly moaning and whining, begging and pleading. The teacher tried threats; she tried bribes. She begged. She pleaded. She even got down on her knees. Nothing worked.

Then, fate stepped in. She was doing some fall closet cleaning and happened upon her college graduation gown. Once again she grumbled, "What a waste of money having to buy this thing for one wearing." A wild, silly, possibly brilliant idea occurred to her.

On Monday morning she announced that she had given up trying to teach penmanship. There was a cautious cheer. "Instead," she said, "I have asked the greatest

teacher of penmanship in all the known world, my former college professor, Professor Pen from the University of Pennsylvania, to visit on Friday after lunch and to teach you children the art of penmanship.” The children were curious.

During the week the teacher secured the last key element of her disguise: a cheesy fake stick-on black moustache.

All Friday morning she played up being distracted and nervous because HER teacher was due for a visit. Right after lunch, she got the children settled and said, “I have to go down to the office and get the Professor. Sometimes he gets lost.”

She exited. Moments later, Professor Pen arrived. The children reported later that he was dressed just like a professor in a gown and flat hat. He had a large black moustache and he spoke oddly. (Mrs. Gould had decided to try a French accent at the last minute.)

As Professor Pen entered he inquired after his former student. The children explained Mrs. Gould had gone off in search of him. “Well, no time, no time” muttered the Professor. “I have been told that you children are fascinated by penmanship!”

The children were trapped. They meekly nodded and Professor Pen was off. The children were by the passion of this strange fellow. For an hour they worked steadily without a break.

Professor Pen glanced at the clock. “Oh dear, I’m expected elsewhere,” he said and dashed out the door. A moment passed in stunned silence. The Professor popped back into the class to ask if the children wanted another lesson the following week. They were ecstatic.

“Tell your teacher that she is to report to me. You had best be on our best behavior,” he warned. “Professor Pen usually only teaches on the college level and never does he teach unruly children.” He was gone.

Seconds later, Mrs. Gould came dashing back into the room all out of breath and quite frustrated. “Have any of you seen Professor Pen?”

“Why, yes,” they said. “He was here. He taught a whole lesson. He was soooooo cool.”

Professor Pen was all they could talk about for the rest of the day. In the weeks to come, not only did penmanship become the favorite subject of the third grade. It became a tool for controlling the class. Whenever someone would misbehave, Mrs. Gould would take out a note pad and say, “I’d better write that down. Professor Pen wanted a report. You know how he goes on and on about misbehaving children.” The trouble would vanish.

However cracks began to appear as the year progressed. Third graders began to develop doubts. “How does he get here all the way from Pennsylvania?” asked a child.

“He flies in a helicopter,” said Mrs. Gould off the top of her head.

“Where does it land?” queried another.

“Behind the trees,” said Mrs. Gould.

On Friday, Mrs. Gould looked out of the teacher’s room window to see her students all lined up looking through the trees. They were waiting for the helicopter to arrive

Then, in June, her boldest and brightest student challenged her. “Mrs. Gould, how come you are never in the class when professor Pen is here? We think you are Professor Pen.”

Mrs. Gould looked at her class. It was clear that most of the children still believed but for how long? Something must be done. On Friday, during lunch, Mrs. Gould drafted Dr. Leonard Strauss, the school's principal, a man much larger than Mrs. Gould, to impersonate Professor Pen. "No big deal," she said. "Just put the robe over your shoulders, hold the hat on your head, stick on the moustache, and dash by the outside window after recess."

Mrs. Gould tried not to look but the sight of this huge hulking fellow dashing by the window was almost too much for her. The children gasped. They yelled for her to look out the window. He was gone but the children were now completely convinced.

Mrs. Gould left in search of Professor Pen as always. He arrived without her. (It was still Mrs. Gould. Leonard Strauss could not do a French accent.) The lessons continued and the year ended.

Over the course of the summer, her students evolved from gullible third graders to wily fourth graders. Mrs. Gould was afraid that the older students would ruin the secret and then, one fall day, while walking through the school yard, she heard her bright and bold former student talking to the new third graders. "Have you met HIM yet? Pretty cool, huh? Yeah, you better be good though. We were bad once and he said he wouldn't come back."

Mrs. Gould had created a tradition and a powerful tool. With the help of some stuff from the back of her closet, a cheesy moustache, and a flair for the theatrical, she had transformed her worst subject into her most beloved one.

Give it a thought. What sort of event or experience can you create for your students? Be silly. It can make all the difference.

Story Break - Boot Hill for Dead Words

During a visit a sixth grade in North Adams, Massachusetts, I made the mistake of saying the word "nice."

In one voice the class all screamed, "No!" and help out there arms like traffic cops.

I asked, "Why?"

They said, "It's resting." They then gestured toward the window.

I went to the window and there in the school's courtyard I observed the strangest looking cemetery I have ever seen. The monuments were constructed on Popsicle sticks and there were quite a few of them. I was curious. With great pride the teacher explained a number of years ago she grew tired of certain word (words like "nice," and "stuff" and, of course, "good," "bad," "happy," "sad," and "mad.") So, she decided that it was time to declare these words dead. Her class had worn them out and it was time they had a proper rest. She had her students write down the old used up words on slips of paper. She lovingly placed them in a small wooden box. Then she instructed her children to bring in rain coats and umbrellas. The next day she and her class went outside and had a little "service" for the words. She took a photo of the mourners graveside and, from them on, whenever anyone mentioned one of the words, the whole class would say, "No! It's resting!"

The offender then had to go to the Thesaurus, look up the dead word, and share with the class a replacement word and add it to a list on the wall.

When I looked at the list, I saw the pictures of the mourners down through the years. It clearly works! Chalk it up to ridiculous rituals.

Story Break: A Young Poet's First Words.

This first grade poet did not speak. He could speak. He had been tested and when told he must speak reluctantly. However, given a choice, he did not speak. His school had a strange new teacher, a second grade wild man. His principal gave the young poet to this wild man who had only been teaching for a year. Some thought this choice was a poor one but this teacher had a gift for finding ways to make everything exciting. He had wigs and characters costumes for every subject and holiday. He took action; he expected everyone to take action.

The principal tried to explain the boy to the wild man. The wild man just laughed. "Give him to me," he said. "We'll do just fine."

On the first day of school the wild man said, "No matter is happening this year, anyone in our class, on any day, in any month, at any time, can get up, go over to the corner, select a book, sit on this stool (He gestured grandly.), put on the "Cat in the Hat" hat and read a poem out loud and the whole class has to stop everything, drop everything, and listen. Everyone, no matter what we were doing, unless there's a fire drill or something (He clearly wanted to be careful.), everyone has to listen."

The children all nodded very seriously. Two days passed but no one tried it. No one forgot but no one really believed him. On the third day, right in the middle of a math lesson, the teacher stopped, strolled over to the corner and put on the "Cat in the Hat" hat. He selected WHERE THE SIDEWALK ENDS and read his favorite poem, the one about Sylvia Stout and how she wouldn't put her garbage out. Everyone stopped. Everyone dropped. Everyone listened. The wild man had been telling the truth.

After that, almost daily, someone would get up and read a poem. As the final morning of the third week ended and the child had dashed to lunch the young poet walked up to the wild man's desk. He whispered, "I want to read a poem." The wild man didn't look up. "You know the rules by now," he said. Then he looked at the boy. "I'd pick out a poem and give it a look see if it were me. Then, when everyone's back, just stroll on up there and don't forget to put on the hat."

The principal told me this story. Her matching of the poet and the wild man had been inspired. On that third week Friday she had just luckily happened to be walking by the

classroom and witness a boy who did not speak reading a poem to a roomful of rapt second graders.

I asked the teacher about the incident, He shrugged, "Oh, he surprised me. I figured it would take at least four weeks. Who knew? When a child knows their turn is just waiting for them, it's too delicious not to try even if you are a little shy."

Story Break: Red Roses for a First Grade Lady

A first grade in the town of Pembroke, Massachusetts for taught for more than 20 years. Last year the strangest thing happened. She had given her first graders something to do and she turned around to look in a file draw. It got very still and it never gets still in first grade. She looked back. All of her children were staring at the door and why not?. The teacher told me that standing in her doorway was what may have been the handsomest man she had ever seen. Not only that, he was standing in a full military dress blue uniform and he was holding one dozen long stemmed red roses. He said, "May I come in."

Before the teacher could stop him, he marched to the front of the room, looked at the children and said, "She used to me my teacher and she taught me something I have never forgotten. It all happened one day when she brought in a record.

Now at this point in the story, I have to stop and explain that a record if a flat plastic thing like a big CD. Teachers always laugh at this, while students all nod quite seriously.

When he said the word "record," the teacher remembered him. He had been the single most troubling student she had ever had. From the moment he started first grade, no matter what she did, he would cry.

"Good morning," she would say and he'd begin to whimper.

"It's lunchtime," she'd say and he would weep.

"It's time to go home now," and he would start crying all over again.

The teacher got very nervous. Everyone was making fun of him and there wasn't a thing she could do. So, she went to the library. The librarian smiled and went in search of a record. As she handed over the record, the librarian said, "Play this song. He'll know what it means."

She brought the record into to class and told the little boy he could play it as many times as he wanted. He played it all day, over and over again. The song was called "IT'S OK TO CRY."

The man looked at the children as a grown up and said, "Because of what she taught me, look at what happened." He stood at attention and announced. "I've just graduated from the military academy with top honors. These are for you." He handed the teacher the red roses. She began to cry

He leaned over and said, "You taught me. Now let me teach you. It's ok to cry."

I share that story not that you should expect a person with a dozen roses. Of course, if he does show up, I wouldn't throw him out. However, consider this, until he

said the word “record,” the teacher never remembered doing this. Yet, for that little boy, that one act, changed his entire education.

On behalf of all of your past students who will never get a chance to drop by your class or your library, with your roses, thank you for the work you are doing.

Final Story Break: The Manatee Express Putting it all Together

This is the story of some third graders and a teacher from a tiny little town in Pennsylvania who got their message out all over the world. The story begins, as many great ones do, with something simple: a blue piece of paper. It was the first day back after the holidays. Mrs. Wood, wily third grade teacher was conducting a math review. For twenty years Mrs. Wood has taught in the town of Westfield, PA, a town, so small that if you want to find a traffic light, you have to visit the next town.

Mrs. Woods was up by the board when she heard someone talking. She turned. There was a child back there waving a piece of paper chatting away. Mrs. Wood put up her pointer. She stalked to the back of the room. “What is going on back here?” she demanded.

“Mrs. Wood,” said the boy drawing her into his chatting, “Mrs. Wood I have seen the strangest thing. I was down in Sea World in Florida, Mrs. Wood. I was down there over vacation with my Gram and Gramps and I saw the strangest thing. Manatees, Mrs. Wood. They’re endangered! They call them sea cows because they eat grass just like cows but they eat it under water. They’re endangered because when they come up to the surface to breathe boats run into them and they are so cute, They say that sailors used to think they were mermaids but these sailors must have been blind because these things are ugly. So ugly, they are cute. This piece of paper says we can adopt one and I would love to and the kids back here would love to, too. Can we adopt a manatee, Mrs. Wood?”

Mrs. Wood looked at her class. “Should we adopt one?”

The children all said, “Absolutely!”

Mrs. Wood sent in the paper with a check and forgot about it. Then, a package arrived. It was a picture of their manatee and a letter from their manatee. The children examined the letter and one of them said, “Hey, Mrs. Wood, he’s got flippers. I don’t think he really signed this letter.” They all laughed.

In the packet Mrs. Wood discovered an announcement. “There’s going to be a first ever Save the Manatee contest. Any school can enter. Should we try?”

The children all said, “Absolutely.”

“We have a lot of work to do,” she said and no one grumbled. They began to conduct research. This was back when the internet was new and research had to be done the old fashioned way. They began in their classroom poring through the encyclopedia and old National Geographic magazines. They visited the school library. When they had exhausted that source, they descended on the town library. When they had read all the

information in town, with the help of a dedicated librarian, they began to send away for materials.

They constructed posters to put up at Safeway; they went on local cable television; they wrote press releases for the local paper; they were interviewed “live” on the radio. They even shared information up and down Main Street. They taught all that they had learned about the Manatee. The one thing the children learned was that people had never even heard of these things and no one seemed to know what they even look like. All the while, Mrs. Wood followed behind with a video camera. They sent everything they done to Florida and tried to forget about it. The package arrived in mid-winter. They had won.

Now what could they do? No one wanted to stop. They wanted to save the manatee but Mrs. Wood had a curriculum full of things to teach. So, she used one to teach the other.

Mrs. Wood asked a local stamp collector if there had ever been a stamp of a Manatee. The answer? No. They were off. Mrs. Wood said, “What if we get the American government to make the stamp of a Manatee? Then everyone in America will know about them and what they look like.”

The children all said, “Absolutely.”

Now they used it for writing. They wrote a letter to Marvin Runyon, the Post Master General of the United States of America. They wrote and rewrote. The message read. “Dear Mr. Runyon, We, the children of the third grade of Westfield, PA, think you should make a Manatee stamp. The Manatee are endangered. No one knows what they look like. We think if people knew what they looked like, they would save them. Please make a stamp.” Every child signed the letter.

A few weeks later a letter arrived. It said to get a stamp made takes at least three years, sometimes more than ten and that all fifty states have to write to request it.

Mrs. Wood read out loud. “Should we try,” she asked.

The children all said, “Absolutely!”

They made a plan. First they needed people to write to all all over America. They asked everyone in town for addresses of anyone they knew around the United States. Mrs. Woods used it for writing. Every student had to write at least one letter to someone in another state requesting that they send to letter to Marvin Runyon and a copy to the class.

Mrs. Woods used this for geography. Every time a letter arrived, the child would have to place a pin in the state of origin. This went on for three years with each new class taking up the challenge.

In the third year, they discovered a “Ham” radio club in town. They asked the old men to get the word out. Mrs. Wood used this for some global geography. When a letter came into their class they had to find the country and add a pin.

In June of the third year, a letter for Mrs. Wood from Marvin Runyon telling her and her children that he was most impressed. Of course, he didn’t say he was doing it. In July she received the announcement: the stamp would be premiered in Sea World - CA in the fall. She wrote back. It was too far her children deserved to be there. They wrote back. It would happen at Sea World in Orlando FL and, if the town paid for their food, the government would send one busload of children to Florida to be there and meet a Manatee.

Mrs. Wood had a huge problem. Three classes had worked on it. Which class would get to go? She used it for a civics lesson. They held a little person town meeting. Mrs. Wood explained the problem and the children decided in less than five minutes. The solution? Send the oldest ones. The reason? No, not because it was their idea. Why? There would be reporters and they had to get the word out. Send the biggest kids, they can speak the best.

In the end they stopped off in Washington, DC to tour the White House and have dinner in National Geographic headquarters. They also stopped in Hershey, PA and Atlanta, GA to pick two kids who had moved.

While they were having dinner in National Geographic Headquarters, the press arrived, including CNN. Mrs. Wood didn't say anything; her students said it all. The reporter was impressed. He invited them to CNN headquarters in Atlanta. During their tour, they saw their faces on the TV screens. "Who's seeing that?" they asked.

"The world," said the reporter. "It's going out over the satellites."

They did get to Florida and saw a manatee. They saw the stamp, too. It's a picture of a manatee – so ugly it's cute. I'm proud to report I have a copy of the stamp on my shoes. It really happened and if you don't believe me, you can look it up on the internet.