

## The Becket Years

Theodore A. Becket High School, where I now hung my professional hat, was more like Marlborough than Verloren to my mind. It served a reasonably affluent student body in a competent manner, but of course I had lost my headship when Verloren closed and this did nothing to improve my mood.

The closure of Verloren H.S. and my move to Theodore Becket H.S. had been an unsettling period for me. The closure was extremely painful, and some days I had to force myself to go to work. Teachers were encouraged to take extra time to support those students who were experiencing grief. Frankly, I personally was not capable of providing much additional support as I was already skating too close to the edge.

Like George E. Verloren, Theodore A. Becket had been a former chair of the local school board. The school carrying his name had run a variety of successful programs from its founding in 1958. But its programs were more academic, more like Marlborough's, than those offered at Verloren prior to its closure. Some of the students and teachers assigned from Verloren to Becket felt that the latter was more anonymous (it was certainly much larger). Others made the transition with no problems.

I had never intended to stay very long at Becket. At the end of my third year there, a department headship became vacant at Macaulay High School in the town of Trevelyan. I applied for the position and was successful. The new job was challenging, and closer to home. I had landed on my feet again.

My stay at Becket turned out to be only three years. It was a period in which much stress was brought to the teaching experience by the provincial government. It began to implement compulsory unpaid staff leave days as a method of trimming operating costs. Teachers and other civil servants held street protests, but the cuts continued.

## Chapter 10 - The Credit River Gorge Story

“Three hundred million years ago, the waterfall was six kilometres downstream. Since that time, erosion of the rock by the river water has brought it back to this point.”

I was at an outdoor education program in the Credit Valley region. Seven teachers, including me, had bravely introduced 50 kids to sleeping under canvas for three nights. The students provided and prepared all their own food and other needs. Campfires, songs and skits at night helped to round out healthy days.

During the day, students participated in class work similar to the regular program in school.

That morning, I had 15 Grade 10 students -- boys and girls -- plus three Grade 12 counsellors, and a yellow school bus with driver.

We were cruising around looking at the features of the natural landscape. The Credit River Gorge is one of five features where we would leave the bus to look at the evidence.

I launched into another animated description of the river eating its way through the bedrock. My arms flew around, and my voice rose and fell dramatically, as I gave an overview of the geological processes that helped to form the gorge.

I turned to face the students, away from the downstream horizon to make a major observation. Not a single student was paying any attention to me. Instead, they were looking to the side of and directly down into the gorge. They were immobile and completely silent.

I was slightly further from the rim of the gorge and couldn't see into it, so I didn't know what was going on. “Pay attention please,” I shouted, “we have a lot to cover this morning.”

I started up again in my explanation only to notice that again, the students were fixated on something in the gorge, just below the waterfall.

“Let me have a look,” I cried out and attempted to push through the students to the rim. But the students physically tried to prevent me from getting through. “Get off!” I yelled, anxious to ensure that it was perfectly safe where we were and there wasn't any readily apparent threat to us. As I approached the edge of the gorge, I could finally see what it was that had them so fixated.

There were three adults, one man and two women standing at the bottom of the gorge. They had a gasoline fuelled generator, which provided electric power to a bank of lights. There were a number of reflectors, the ones that looked like silver umbrellas, and three cameras plus much other photographic equipment strewn about. It was obviously a professional shoot.

Oh, and did I mention that the two women were completely naked? Well, they were wearing miniscule thong bathing suits, but precious little was left to the viewer's imagination.

The kids were loving it, because I had forced myself into a potentially embarrassing situation. Handle this badly, I mused, and I'll be the butt of their jokes for the rest of the year.

I stood there looking down into the gorge, taking it all in. Slowly, I turned to face the students and in a quiet voice I asked, "Did anyone bring binoculars?"

A huge cheer arose. So, I ended up a hero, not a spoil sport. We all laughed loudly and slapped each other's backs. Soon, we returned to base camp for lunch.

As you can imagine, word of the morning's adventure spread like wildfire. Some of the boys scheduled for the afternoon trip to the gorge and the surrounding area were asking if the gorge was still on our itinerary.

"You dirty devils," I replied. "That's all you ever think of isn't it?"

"Yes," they all shouted back agreeably.

The girls who witnessed these exchanges did so with a mixture of bemusement and distaste.

The students who were part of the creative writing program had to submit a log of the key activities each day. The English teachers told me that the students who had been on that "special" trip to the gorge wrote in great detail about the experience.

It's a delightful story to look back on; it added weight to the notion that in teaching, we all have to be prepared for the unexpected. Even if you're nonplussed as a teacher, you should always look calm and in charge.

A former director of the school board was quoted as saying: "Teachers are like swans – calm and elegant on the surface, but paddling like crazy underneath."

This day was a fine example of that observation.

## **Chapter 11 - Getting it Right: The Stories of Thomas, Bob, Anastasia and Maria**

You will probably remember from a few other stories that it is very easy to mess up and to make things worse. Quite often when we are talking to students about how unpleasant situations arose, developed, and were resolved, teachers find themselves calmly analyzing a series of events. Students themselves are likely to be more excited, spontaneous, and sometimes even hostile. Indeed, relationships among the various sub-groups in a typical Canadian high school are at generally low levels. Things can quickly shift from mature contemplation to a surprise ambush.

I was fortunate that I never had to deal with extreme student behaviour – the kind that put my personal safety at risk. But various kinds of incidents cropped up from time to time in my days as a teacher. In the background there are always fellow teachers prepared to become involved, if necessary. Our involvement with students hinges around the day-to-day assistance we can provide to solve problems.

## **Thomas's story**

I first met Thomas when he was in my Grade 9 Canadian History class at Becket. He was physically small and had only been in Canada for a few months. His family (father, mother, sister and Thomas) had recently immigrated from South Africa. He suffered from asthma, which sometimes distracted him from his learning. He was quiet, diligent, and respectful.

One day in May, he asked me if he could see me after school. I agreed, and at the appointed time, Thomas arrived at my door. His parents had bought a house in a different part of town. It was not in the catchment area for Becket High School. He could still attend Becket, but would have to provide his own transportation. The city bus would be seeing a lot of him if he did decide to continue at Becket.

Thomas was having difficulties deciding what to do. I showed him how to make a cross-classification chart. We identified some of the criteria to insert in the historical axes. "Time to/from school" was one criterion. "Contact with Becket friends" was another.

I told Thomas to go away and work to complete the chart, then come back to show me how he had completed it. In the end, he decided to leave Becket and attend the other school. But at least he had worked his way through the decision chart himself. No one had tried to force a decision from him until he had made up his own mind.

Good teachers know that they will be called upon to help in many ways, going to great lengths to prepare students, rather than focus on policy documents. Such teachers are among my heroes.

## **Bob's story**

Bob was a good student and an even better athlete. The day after Labour Day would be another step in his growing personal independence: he was going to high school. When the first day of school arrived, however, Bob didn't feel well. In fact, he felt terrible, but he didn't know who to ask about going home early.

During a home room class at the start of the day, Bob realized that I was just about the only person he knew, so he might as well ask me. He did look bad, with ashen face and wheezy voice. I told him to stay close to me and we'd soon have the situation fixed. I quickly phoned Bob's home, talked to his mother, drove him home, and raced back to Becket for my first instructional class of the day. It was small potatoes really, but it's how we handle small things like this that help to formulate the public's mind when teacher unions are in conflict with the government.

A couple of days at home and Bob was fine. On his return he gave me some home-made cookies wrapped in a bright cloth.

Such is the public's response to the system. Teachers know that the public is our best ally when we get into disputes. And the surest way to earn the public's respect and support is to show that we care enough for our students to get the small things right.

## **Anastasia's story**

Anastasia was 16 years old. Her family had felt some of the strains that arise when the children – especially girls -- of conservative newcomer parents want to adopt some of the cultural accoutrements of a more liberal civil society. Short and/or tight clothing, make-up, smoking. These are some of the things many parents worry about.

In some families there is a blanket “no” to the new values, but in Anastasia’s family there was a struggle going on. Her parents desperately wanted to keep her from harm in a society they didn’t really understand, without preventing her from new experiences. So, she could attend the upcoming school dance, but there was a long list of restrictions that she had to accept.

It so happened that I was on supervision duty for the dance that evening.

On dance night, her escort for the evening dumped her about half-way through the event. What was she to do? She couldn’t go home alone, and all her friends were paired up. She didn’t want to cramp their style. So she came to me. I could easily drive her home, but not until the dance ended at 11:00 p.m. She was due home at 10:00. We went to an office telephone (no cell phones in those days!). Passing the phone back and forth a few times, we were able to convince Anastasia’s parents that she was safe but would be a little late getting home.

When I eventually dropped her at the street door to her apartment block, she asked me not to pull away until she was inside as the street lock was on (there were a lot of restrictions and procedures on Anastasia’s list). Once inside, she gave me a wave goodbye.

It may sound a little bit over-regulated, but we are handling a most valuable commodity here. By keeping their children safe, we convince parents from more conservative backgrounds that we are fighting for the same things they are – security and self-respect.

## **Maria's story**

One day in Grade 11 Ancient and Medieval History class, we were studying different attitudes to marriage. I forget the context, but as a joke I asked, "Is anyone here married?"

"I am," said 16 year old Maria. "But it's not a normal marriage." Somewhat taken aback, I asked her if she felt she could explain her situation.

It was quite simple really, she said. She was a member of a small ethnic group tied to its own religious community. The members were all descended from a society on the islands off the west-European coast. Their cultural survival in Canada was in doubt so they resorted to desperate measures. Their priest began a program calculated to bring more group members to Canada.

Maria was married to her 17 year old first cousin Pietro. But this was marriage in a very limited sense. Her husband lived with his mother and father in their home just as Maria did with her family. They were never allowed to be alone on their own. And the first rule about their relationship, Maria said, was "no sex."

Maria had married Pietro with an eye on his immigration status. Immigration Canada was examining entry visas very slowly. But as the husband of a Canadian citizen, Pietro would qualify for accelerated entry to Canada. So they were married in their European homeland and Pietro was soon allowed to come to Canada. But they never lived together. Once in Canada, Pietro rarely saw Maria. They lived 200 kilometres apart.

"What's this all about?" you may be wondering. Well, it was simple population growth. Pietro and Maria would soon divorce on the grounds that their marriage had never been consummated (this is why they were so heavily chaperoned). They would eventually re-marry other partners and have many children. But why marry someone not in Canada in the first place? Because the group could increase its numbers in Canada through the method adopted by Maria and Pietro.

If Maria and Pietro could truthfully declare that they had never consummated their marriage, the priest could grant them an annulment. They could eventually apply for a civil divorce. Now they were free to look for marriage partners, and their number in Canada had increased by one person (Pietro).

The system seemed to work for the community. Over time the birth rate increased and eventually the community began to look less insecure.

And how did all this affect the education system? Well, it was another example of how cultural differences are so prevalent in our schools. We need to recognize that in a complex multi-cultural society, the variety of social beliefs is infinite.

As a teacher, you have to be aware of so much going on around you if you are going to learn much about dynamic religious communities.