

Chapter 12 - Getting things wrong: the stories of Linda, Salvatore, and Christine

In any given workday, most teachers are required to make dozens of decisions. Will we accept a student's essay three days late without penalty? Can I bring a friend to the next Sociology class, because she's super keen on the discussion we are having about Canada's immigration policy? Can I leave class at 2:45 (instead of 3:15) to catch the bus to the volleyball team's away game? The questions and decisions come in rapid fire.

We try to get all the decisions right. But we're humans and accordingly, we get some of the decisions wrong. Here are three examples of how I got particular decisions wrong.

Linda's Story

Linda was in my Grade 12 World Religions class. I was still a rookie teacher at Marlborough High School, only my second year of teaching. Linda was an exceptionally talented essay writer, document analyst, and developer of interesting ideas. But she was deeply distressed about something. Her face always looked downcast. She didn't interact positively with the other students in the class. And some days, she arrived in class looking very untidy. Her hair was often uncombed, and her clothing looked out of date. She sometimes appeared to be depressed. But on good days, her academic skills were conspicuously on display.

As the school year progressed, Linda's physical well-being seemed to be in decline. Her academic work remained excellent, but her physical health looked frail.

I spoke to my department head for suggestions. He said that we should refer Linda to a counsellor in the Student Services department. A female counsellor would be able to deal better with some of the issues in Linda's cleanliness and hygiene.

I spoke to Ms. Winter in Student Services, and she set up an appointment time for Linda to come and see her. The appointment went badly, according to Ms. Winter's report. As long as they discussed Linda's academic progress, things were fine. But the minute the conversation strayed into Linda's home life, or her hygiene and clothing choices, she became uncooperative. It was none of the school's business, Linda said, how she dressed or whether she'd had a shower this morning. Finally, she refused to continue speaking with Ms. Winter and walked out.

Today's teachers are far more aware than we were 40 years ago of issues relating to physical and sexual abuse within families. Today's teachers are required by law (a "duty to report") to notify the Children's Aid Society if they have a legitimate concern about a student's well-being or else they can be fined. This duty of reporting cannot legally be delegated to another person, such as the Vice Principal. However, while I was teaching at that time, "duty to report" didn't exist. Unknown to me, Linda was in fact exhibiting some of the behaviours associated with sexual abuse.

There was a sort of stand-off, and unfortunately I didn't insist the school investigate fully. A few months later, I saw in the newspaper that an uncle of Linda's who lived with the family had been charged with several sexual offences relating to young females.

While I did take the step of having her talk to a counsellor (which wasn't usually done back then), even today I'm sad that I wasn't able to do more for Linda to get her out of an intolerable situation.

This isn't the sort of the story that I look back on with pride. I got it wrong.

Salvatore's Story

At 16, Salvatore had good looks, a devil-may-care attitude to life and a sharp sense of humour. He was not in any of my classes, but was in the Grade 10 class of Mr. Jackson; he was a member of the Social Sciences department, of which I was the head.

"Every time I phone home, no one can speak English," said Mr. Jackson.

"You write a letter (in English)," I said "and tell his mother and stepfather of the problems you are having with Sal. I'll get Davida to translate the letter into Portuguese." (Davida was a student in another of my classes and had provided translation services for me before.)

"We'll take the translated letter to the secretary in the Student Services department to type letter by letter and send it to Sal's family."

A couple of days later, Mr. Jackson showed me the letter of concern, written in English, and I approved it. Davida translated, the secretary typed letter-by-letter. The letter was mailed home. The countdown began. After a week – nothing. (The letter had requested the family to contact me to set up an interview.)

A few days later, I saw Sal in the hallway one day and stopped him.

Me: Sal, did your family get a letter from the school?

Sal: Sure, why?

Me: I'm concerned that they haven't called me as I asked them to do. Do you know why they haven't called?

Sal: Well, they can't read the letter; they can't understand it.

Me: What do you mean "they can't understand it?" I deliberately had it translated to make it easy for them to understand.

Sal: That is true, but it's written in Portuguese and we're Italian.

Brilliant! How could I have been so stupid? But it was funny too. And I genuinely laughed out loud when he told me.

But I wanted to make some progress on Sal's case so, in the spur of the moment, I offered him a deal.

Me: I want you to pass this course.

Sal: Why?

Me: Come on Sal, this is a compulsory course. If you flunk it, as you're set to do now, you'll have to take the course all over again next year.

Sal was a practical person and he could see the logic in what I'd said.

Me: Here's the deal. If you sign a letter of agreement with me and fulfil its terms, I'll make sure you pass the course. You need to guarantee three things and meet the targets on each one.

1. You'll attend 80% of remaining classes till end of semester.
2. You need to submit 75% of the assignments left in the course.
3. You need to keep a weekly log of all your activities in the course, and how you participated in them. And you need to sit down with me every Friday afternoon to go over your paperwork.

Sal hemmed and hawed for a while, but he knew he was being offered a good deal. Eventually he signed up, met the conditions of the agreement and passed the course. Was this a failure or success? Was I right to offer Sal a deal not widely available to the other students? Should teachers go out of their way to encourage alternative methods of gaining credit and eventually graduating?

I think I came up with a workable solution, but only because I had a few more years of teaching experience under my belt than I had when I was involved in Linda's story.

And I only felt stupid in the language of the letter. Without considering all the facts, I had assumed that their home language was Portuguese.

Moral: it's okay to feel ill equipped, but don't reveal your feelings to the students. The same goes for self-doubt, indecision, or frustration. The students might well tear you apart if you show any weakness.

Christine's Story

Christine was a student in my Grade 9 history class. She found it difficult to concentrate in class and became frustrated when she could not finish her work in the class time available. Any inadequacies in her class work, she averred, were caused by her teachers or the other students.

Perhaps more importantly, Christine's worst problem was that she very quickly became angry when criticized even in the smallest way. She signalled contempt for her critics and I could see that this might sometimes cause severe problems in her life. Human relationships can easily be seriously harmed if people don't know how to disagree in a positive fashion.

The school vice principal, Ms. Welsh, picked up on Christine's facial expressions and demeaning argumentative remarks to critics, especially teachers.

But Christine seemed unable to discuss her difficulties in communication in a dispassionate manner. Ms. Welsh wondered if I would agree for the three of us to meet and discuss this issue. Ms. Welsh would only allow Christine to speak as long as Christine could do so without displaying demeaning behaviour. Was I willing to participate?

I tend to be fairly liberal in matters of student behaviour. Some teachers would resist participating in such sessions. Their position might be, "I can teach French, or math, or any subject and I can do it very effectively. But don't expect me to teach touchy feely stuff like this."

In the session, Christine could normally speak about two sentences before she began to raise her voice, screw up her face and exhibit a hateful expression. She seemed unable to control her feelings and behaviour."

After a few minutes, she had learned something about speaking as calmly as possible and not disparaging her opponents. But it was clearly difficult for her to continue in this discussion any further.

Was this strategy effective? How might we have structured the session to be more effective? Should teachers attempt the "touchy feely" behaviour intervention in the first place? In the end, I felt that we had gone some way to helping Christine with her difficulties, but it was going to take a heck of a lot more work.

Solving problems and building relationships requires conversation and communication. Christine must be taught communication skills just as importantly as being taught courses such as history, sociology and math.

Chapter 13: Cam and Vince

When I first moved to Macaulay H.S. in the town of Trevelyan, I soon noticed that the local churches were very influential in the community's daily life. This probably had much to do with the rural nature of its economic development. In Trevelyan, there were a number of small churches that had combined their resources to provide sports and other programs to keep their members, particularly younger members, away from the temptations of sin.

Two outstanding representatives of these programs sat in my World Religions (WR) class in the same year. Cameron (Cam) was a young man of astounding energy. He assisted in managing the girls' soccer and softball teams, demonstrating that he possessed organizational and managerial skills, not just those of a player. Vincent (Vince) was similarly multi-talented. He did lots of organizational work for the teams that delivered the Big Sister/Big Brother programs. Cam and Vince had been friends for many years. But new pressures were soon to intrude on their relationship and put it under stress.

In the 19th century, Cam and Vince would have been described as adherents of "muscular Christianity." This movement proposed that their task in life was to convert the people they met to become Christians, and that they should live lives of purity as they did so.

WR was a popular Social Science course at Macaulay. Many students took WR to complete the requirement for a senior Social Science credit. Others saw in it as a way of investigating some of the dreadful events that have taken place when religions collide. Perhaps the largest group of students studying WR that year were looking for converts. This was a controversial mission in town. On the first day of class, the principal directed me to read a statement from her to the class about the importance of freedom of thought.

The statement from the principal reminded members of the school that religious and spiritual beliefs and attitudes were considered matters of conscience at Macaulay H.S. and all the other schools run by the local school board. No member of the school board should put undue influence on another member in an effort to interfere with their religious or spiritual beliefs.

One of the activities I most liked doing in WR was comparing the various creation stories that were handed down by seers like the Buddha (Hinduism), Muhammad (Islam), Jesus Christ (Christianity), or Joseph Smith (Latter-day Saints). The students selected or were assigned material about one of the people previously mentioned. Then all the students who worked on a common individual would get together to prepare a short presentation on their subject. Finally, the whole class would work together to find some similarities and differences among the individuals studied. A wide-open class discussion finished our examination of the topic.

Near the end of our wrap-up discussion, Cam suddenly shouted out a question clearly directed at me: "Do you believe in the Christian God?" I hesitated. "I don't want to answer your question just yet because I don't want to influence you unduly. But I'm willing to answer your question nearer to the end of the semester."

But this was not enough for Cam. He pushed me to answer his question. There was a bit of back-and-forth before Vince interjected: “He doesn’t have to tell us, just ask the principal. Let’s just leave it alone.”

Apparently, Cam’s and Vince’s friendship had been fracturing for some time. They were of different minds about the principal’s no-undue-conversion-efforts statement. Vince wanted to operate within the limits that the principal established. Cam wanted to ignore them.

At first glance, Cam seemed mildly disappointed that Vince had not supported his position but appeared to let the matter pass. There were no instances of public ill-will between the two students.

Then a letter arrived addressed to me. It was neat, grammatically correct, logically composed – and anonymous. (“Dear Bain,” it began.)

The letter “demanded” that I issue the class an apology for failing to maintain a scholarly atmosphere. I should acknowledge that I was stirring up dissent, the letter continued, and should ask the principal to find someone else to teach the course as I was clearly incompetent.

In WR class that day, I mentioned that I had received this letter, purportedly from a class member. I said it was unsigned and contained some suggestions for changes to the delivery of the course. I urged the letter’s author to see me privately about its contents.

Then a second letter arrived. “Very clever,” it sneered. “Do you think I would be so dumb as to come forward and admit I’m the author? You would just try to kick me out of the course, and maybe out of school.” This letter “ordered” me to give Christianity a sharper focus in the course than it had previously received. In class, I said I could not respond to anonymous letters. Cam suggested that I release the contents of the letters. Perhaps the writer had left some clues in it that another student might recognize.

In fact, the letter contained a number of details supposedly describing the author.

1. He/she lived with their mother and older sister.
2. She/he played sports through a representative league in the next town.
3. His/her father lived in Montreal.

I guessed that this was all invented material designed to direct attention away from one student and towards another. I was unwilling to give the letter writer the satisfaction of seeing me tear around trying to find someone who matched the invented clues listed above.

Another complaint forwarded by the letter writer centered on the way I pronounced certain words. The word “evolution” came up quite frequently in class. Apparently, I pronounced it EE-vol-ution instead of EH-vol-ution. I say “apparently” because I was not aware of this difference. Forty years of living in Ontario had not erased my southern British accent entirely!

I had a hunch that unless I took command of the situation, things would get nasty pretty quickly. I set out some guidelines of my own. I told the class I would have nothing to do with any further anonymous letters. I would not even read them. We had no obligation to spend any more class

time on this matter. This approach sucked the oxygen out of the writer's campaign to undermine my position in class.

And what of Vince? Well he remained on the periphery for the rest of the WR course. He never seemed to suggest that the anonymous letters to me represented any complaints he might have.

There the matter ended. Unsurprisingly, the author never came forward. I'm not 100% certain that Cam was the author, but it did not really matter. I had preserved the dignity of the classroom.

I still think of this story today. I wonder at the speed with which the incident blew up and then went away only to be quickly forgotten. As soon as Cam realized that the other class members had no interest in supporting any complaints that he had, he dropped the issue like a hot potato.

It emphasized for me the fleeting nature of crises. To a certain extent, we get caught up in the arguments and dilemmas of daily life. I suspect that the best way to deal with them is to remain calm, reasonable, and optimistic.

Perhaps that is something we should practice in all aspects of our lives.

Chapter 14 - Midori's Story

Midori Nakamura was a Japanese student who spent a year in our local high school. She was a participant in the famous, and well respected, Rotary Youth Exchange project. Students such as Midori take a full year's academic program in a foreign country. They are billeted for three months with four different families. They participate in many projects to foster international understanding. Midori had just turned 18 years old on arrival at her new Canadian high school.

She was placed mainly in Grade 11 classes so she was a little older than her classmates. But she interacted well with them, and was well liked. At first, her fluency in English was limited and this presented some problems of understanding. But she had an electronic dictionary that she used when in difficulty.

Occasionally, she used a word or phrase incorrectly, not realizing its notional weight. For example, one day we were summarizing the lessons to be learned from Hannibal's use of elephants in his failed attempt to defeat Rome in 217 B.C. Midori stated her position clearly. Hannibal and his brother Hasdrubal were "silly bast***s" for thinking that the elephants could ever make an effective war weapon. You could hear the slow sucking of air as the students caught her use of street slang. I never spoke with Midori about what she had said. But someone obviously did (the kids were on her side after all). From then on, it was strictly academic language.

I learned a lot from Midori. She reinforced for me that so many of our behaviours are learned. She was in the habit of conducting small Japanese tea ceremonies for the students in our class (Grade 11 ancient and medieval history). She preferred to perform these tea ceremonies in small student groups, so it took a few days to get around to all the class members. I had a kettle that I kept on the counter in the social science office. When there was a tea ceremony scheduled, I'd take the kettle to class and put it on her desk.

Midori's fame was travelling. Students in other classes began to request their own tea ceremonies. Soon, she arranged to perform additional tea ceremonies, some of which were in a different timetable block. When the first of these additional presentations came up, Midori arrived at my door.

"Mr. Bain, may I please borrow your tea pot?"

"Oh, I'm sorry Midori, I don't have one to lend to you." Her face showed distress and then she exhibited a behaviour that I never saw in any other student. She lowered her head and shuffled her feet.

It was a perfect demonstration of humility and helplessness. Further investigation revealed that she was there not to borrow a tea pot (which I truly did not have), but the electric kettle she had used many times before. She simply forgot the word "kettle." This misunderstanding cleared up, she strode off with a huge smile and renewed confidence in human beings.

Midori was obviously a person of many talents. She had played badminton in Japan. Our school did not have much history in that sport. She tried out for the team, easily made it, and represented the school in several tournaments. She moved onwards to the district championships where she displayed much finesse and tactical understanding but she did not qualify to go any further.

She was also skilled at sewing. In the ancient and medieval history class, students had to create a historical artifact and present it to the class. Midori chose to make a Roman toga - a loose outer garment worn in Ancient Rome. With some help from her billet-mother, she produced a lovely copy of a toga complete with much decorative stitching.

The particular class that Midori was in was full of high ability, high energy students. But at times, they could be raucous and boisterous. Midori sat in the front row directly next to the teacher. She was quite amused at the leeway teachers gave to students to liven things up.

“In Japan,” she told her classmates, “you do what teachers tell you, or you’re out.” At the end of the semester, Midori’s final mark was 70%. Considering her language barriers, I felt this truly showed how academically intelligent she was. She had so enjoyed the Ancient and Medieval History course that Midori elected to take my grade 12 Canadian History course in semester two. It was not the best choice because it was a grade 12 pre-university course, specifically designed to raise the student academic discourse and use of academic language. The students were introduced to words or ideas like “theocracy/secular republic”, “exacerbate/ameliorate”, “civil society”, etc. I used to tell the students that these were \$10 words with a 10-cent meaning. But for some students, and especially Midori, it was a constant struggle to keep up with the historical documents we studied daily.

One day in spring, Midori announced to me that her mother and brother were coming over from Japan on a visit. “Wonderful”, I said. “I’d like to meet other members of your family”. Unfortunately that would not be possible, Midori said, because they did not plan to visit Trevelyan. Midori would join them on part of their journey in Canada, so there was no reason for them to visit Trevelyan. “Where do you plan to go”? I asked. Well, Midori’s mother and brother would visit Vancouver, Jasper, Niagara Falls, the CN Tower, Montreal, Quebec City and Cavendish, PEI, home of the fictional Anne of Green Gables.

“How long will they spend here?” I asked. “A week, of course”, Midori replied.

Of course?

When it came to projects, students were asked to research and present a report on a specific aspect of Canadian history.

I came across a lending library in Toronto that had many Japanese history books available in her language. Some of these dealt with the anti-Asian riots in Vancouver in 1907. To keep her free from distraction, I set her up in my place in the social science office. I would check on her from time to time, and she was clearly upset with the descriptions of the mobs that destroyed

Japanese and Chinese homes and businesses. She was on the verge of tears on several occasions.

When it came to presenting her findings, I realized that the other students would not be able to understand her without copies of her text. Together, we provided individual copies for everyone, and Midori proceeded to read her findings to the class. At the end of her written texts, she continued on for four more sentences. The students really had to concentrate now.

“In Japan,” she said, “there are a number of Korean people who live there. But they’re not allowed to vote or be full citizens. Studying for this project has taught me that discriminating against any minority is evil. When I return to Japan, I plan to tell people that and to do my best to find a solution.”

It was a highly emotional moment. The students were stunned. The fact that they had to concentrate extra hard to hear the message made its delivery more effective.

In June, Midori returned permanently to Japan. I hope she felt that she had learned as much from us as we clearly had learned from her.

Chapter 15 - Brian's Story

I first met Brian towards the end of my teaching career, when he registered in a number of my classes (Grade 10 Canadian History, Grade 11 Ancient and Medieval History, Grade 11 Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology and Sociology). He appeared to have boundless energy. Indeed, his greatest difficulty with school was rooted in his inability (or unwillingness) to focus on what was required of him. He was generally positive towards his classmates, although they often got fed up with his disruptive behaviour in class. Brian's overall difficulty was that he could not stay on task for long.

The second major difficulty limiting Brian's ability to learn was his desire to be the perpetual centre of attention. In his mind even negative attention was better than no attention at all. For example, one day in a 70-minute class, he requested on three separate occasions to use the washroom. He calculated that by the time it came to the third request I would be virtually forced to stop what the class was doing to give a sermon about washroom breaks. This would give Brian the opportunity to get into the act as he dispensed his opinion on the matter of washroom usage.

Brian did not normally act negatively or in a hostile manner towards fellow students. But neither did he cultivate close friendships with them. He might waste three-quarters of a 70-minute class period but he normally presented a happy face to the world. He might deliberately derail the workings of a student-led experiment that tried to place in sequence the needs of an imaginary person, according to the findings of Abraham Maslow. But he generally didn't say nasty things to classmates or about their work.

At mid-year, the school board organized a day of Professional Development workshops for teachers, arranged by subject area. One of the workshops for Social Science teachers was presented by a representative of the Adlerian Institute in Toronto. He delivered a session on the subject: "What is Adlerian psychology? How can it help me to be a better teacher?"

According to the workshop presenter, Alfred Adler (1870-1937) and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) were among the creators of a new Social Science called psychology.

In the case of Adlerians, they speculate that our actions can be explained by identifying one of the central questions in human behaviour: "What's in it for me?" It's quite simple, Adlerians assert. We act as we do because we get some positive benefit from it. Children "act up" because they can gain power in the family unit by expressing their feelings. And what sorts of rewards for their behaviour do children often seek? Attention, recognition and power rank highly on their list.

I tried to relate all this to Brian's behaviour. He constantly acted in ways that grabbed attention. He acted to be recognized - for good behaviour and also for bad. Our workshop presenter advised teachers to give students like Brian lots of recognition, but not the sort he craved. Adlerians recognize that this is a controversial technique. But, used judiciously, it can have positive results. In Brian's case, I believed that it might help him to be more considerate of others.

At our next class following the workshop presentation, I told Brian that I knew he wanted lots of attention. I would make sure that he got it. Whenever he went into attention-seeking mode, I would call it. “Hi Brian, I know you like lots of attention but could you please stop [fill in the blank]?” When during class presentations he started to hit the presenters with rapid-fire questioning totally dominating the moment, I had my entry point. “OK Brian, we know that you like everyone to hear the sound of your voice, but you must give the other students a chance.” Whenever he butted into a class discussion without waiting to be recognized, I would give him a big wave and a smile. (“Wait your turn, Brian.”)

This story ends in what for me was a complete surprise. At the beginning of Brian’s final year, I retired from teaching. I was invited to attend the graduation ceremony in June of the following year. I had had no contact with Brian or his peers for just about a year. I encountered Brian after the ceremony in the gym, where soft drink cocktails were being served.

Brian waved to me across the room. I smiled back nervously. I didn’t want a confrontation on what was supposed to be a night of celebration. He approached me and we shook hands. We began a halting conversation. After a few introductory words, Brian looked at me directly began to speak.

Brian: Mr. Bain, I want you to know that you were my favourite teacher.

I was stunned. At first, I thought he was mocking me, but there was no sign of irony in his manner or his words. I responded from instinct.

Me: Well, Brian, you sure found a funny way of showing it! Why do you say that now?

Brian: Because you never gave up on me, did you?

Whenever I reminisce about that evening, I hope that what he said was fair and true. I had never cast Brian aside. He regularly annoyed the heck out of me but I don’t think I ever washed my hands of him. Maybe too many others had. Maybe for Brian, this is an example of the student showing more interest in the hidden curriculum than in the overt one. I had simply not understood everything that was in play in my dealings with the student.

Good teachers will always go the extra mile for the student who needs it. While Brian was dealing with many personal and identity issues, I hope he is enjoying a successful life.

These days I think of him fondly.

Chapter 16 - Norman's Story

The first class Norman took with me was my Grade 11 Canadian Law course.

I had first met Norman two years earlier when he was in Grade 9. He was a keen soccer player and easily made it onto the junior team's roster, which I happened to be coaching that year. He wasn't particularly tall of stature, but showed great skill as a defender breaking up opposition thrusts and heading the ball away from goal when hostile corner kicks came into the central goal area.

About halfway through the season, I began to notice that he occasionally struck up a conversation with me, after a soccer game, riding on the school bus to and from games, etc. Or, he would check with me in the hallway outside my classroom on game days, just to make sure he had the correct details about kick-off time, or anticipated bus return time to the school afterwards. Our talks were generally about administrative items and certainly had no great depth to them. It was just like any amicable teacher/student or parent/child relationship.

When soccer finished for the season, we no longer ran into each other as frequently as we had previously done. Occasionally he would come to my classroom at the end of the school day. He would drop in briefly, ask how I was doing, tell me a test mark of which he was proud, etc. He'd get my response and be on his way. He was a pretty good student as well as soccer player.

It's amazing how fast a school year passes and, before long, it was soccer season again. I had been asked by the Athletic Director to coach the senior team. Norman was now in the senior age group for soccer. He and I continued our sporadic chatting. He asked me the odd question about matters that I assumed were drawn from his real life. Should someone lend \$5 to a spendthrift sister? Does God exist? What should a person do if he suspected an acquaintance was involved in dealing marijuana? Occasionally Norman would pop into my classroom at lunchtime for such a discussion. I was frequently busy and could not talk. He was not miffed if I sent him away. "See you later," he'd say and be on his way. Our relationship proceeded intermittently, depending on the season of the year, if our timetables each semester contained blanks where neither of us had a class scheduled, and other such factors.

It is not uncommon for an individual student to seek out a closer relationship with a particular teacher. The media are full of stories where such relationships have strayed into improper – even criminal -- teacher behaviour. There was never any suggestion of impropriety in my relationship with Norman. We both seemed to like passing the time of day with each other.

When he reached Grade 11, as mentioned above, Norman enrolled in my Canadian Law course. We still chatted occasionally. Our timetables did not really fit each other so there was no steady opportunity to discuss the major issues of the day. But he was a great help in getting the playing field ready on game days. He had acquired a battered pick-up truck and used it to drive the goal nets to and from the playing field. Supervising the setting up and tearing down of the nets is one of the special purgatories of being a soccer coach and Norman was very helpful in this regard.

In his final year, Grade 12, Norman enrolled in my Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology class. We studied such topics as the causes and effects of social change, human fertility, and gender roles. Class discussions on such subjects get quite spirited, and Norman contributed well to our class activities.

He had one habit that irked me a bit. He used to come into the classroom a little early and produce an apple from his bag. He would chew the apple as we both got ready for class. I'm not really sure why but it did bother me a bit. Perhaps I felt that Norman was being a little too informal. In any event, I never brought up the matter.

That school year, Norman's graduating year, sped by at its usual frenetic pace. Before long, soccer was over and final exams were just ahead.

Soon we were into year-end activities. Norman planned to go to a university about three hours away. He did well in his courses, and I was sure that a resourceful person like him would transfer to post-secondary education with a minimum of fuss.

On the last day of classes, the school board had arranged an Exam Return Day. In practice, classes did not meet and the students wandered about picking up their marked exams and saying their goodbyes.

Just after the end of this early-dismissal day, Norman appeared at my door. There were just the two of us in the classroom and he quietly closed the door.

"I just wanted to tell you how much I've enjoyed our friendship," he began. He went on to describe his home life. His father was killed in a car accident when Norman was still an infant. He was the youngest of four children, the other three being sisters. With his mother and three sisters, it was an all-female family. ("Even the dog is female," he grinned.) For Norman there was no male role model easily available. How were men supposed to act? What qualities best exemplified the man he hoped to come?

So, he looked around. He decided to develop his character and personality on four men. These were his one uncle who lived locally, his pastor, his boss at a donut shop nearby, and me. He wanted to thank me for being such a good role model.

At first, I was speechless. Then I felt my eyes stinging. (It must have been a speck of dirt!) As I composed my reply, I said it was an honour for me to play that role.

After we said goodbye, I stood looking out the window, letting the tears roll down my face. "Isn't this great," I mused. "We think we're teaching them the seven reasons (or was it five?) why the Roman Empire collapsed. In fact we're showing them how to be good people."

Sometimes we get fed up with the kids hanging around our classroom in non-scheduled time. As Norman showed, for some students this was the most valuable learning experience of the lot.

Norman and I lost contact. I'm not sure where he is. But he will do well. How could he not do well with role models like that!