


#52 Ancestors 2020 Week 37- Back to School

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Week 37 - Back to School

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N.J. Gleeson and wife Gwynne at his graduation with M.A from the University of Sydney 1952

everyone can probably remember a teacher who had an influence on them – for good or ill – but those of us who are teachers remember some of those who taught us because either we wanted to emulate them, or because we never wanted to become like them

My father started school in about 1920 and began his career as a teacher in a small two-teacher school in 1935. When he retired from teaching in 1973 he was the Principal of a large High School in country NSW. Writing some reminiscences of his childhood, he recalled the first Headmaster he encountered, the man in charge of South Lismore Primary School in the 1920s.

The Headmaster of South Lismore Primary School was B.J Reilly, whose name I believe was Bernard, but who was always “Ben” to the pupils of South. Ben was an old-style disciplinarian. In other words, he wielded the cane with gusto, appearing to take pleasure, like so many of his kind, of small boys (the oldest, after all, would have been twelve or thirteen, fourteen at the outside) cowering before him. He was, I suppose, the sort of disciplinarian remembered fondly by lovers of the “good old days” when they lament the decline of “discipline” in today’s schools. Such advocated of the “Spare the rod and spoil the child” school of thought are wont to recall with pleasure the thought that a good hiding never harmed anyone, with implication that their own sterling characters are the result of such treatment. One wonders if, in fact, they were ever the recipients of such treatment and, if so, whether they were so enthusiastic about its benefits at the time. For my money, far

from being a model of perfect discipline, Ben was a sadist who might have made an interesting study for a psychologist.

Dad had not really wanted to become a teacher but as a bright boy of poor parents had few options. For many years, the NSW Department of Education offered scholarships for teacher training at either University or Teachers' College. For Dad, and later for his children, this was the only affordable way to get a University degree.

He wrote:

It seems to me that many of the teachers that I have known in the course of my career did the very same thing and, having committed themselves to several years of training, followed by several more years of being bonded to the Department of Education, came to accept it and even to like it, as they did it to the best of their ability, feeling, as I did, that the rewards – certainly not financial – outweighed the disappointments and frustrations. Many talked of leaving and trying some other career but became finally hooked when, in the words of Bacon, they had “given hostages to fortune” by marrying and having children. Some never reconciled themselves and simply became bad teachers, who never could get along with children, who had never-ending problems with classroom discipline and for whom, every day they spent in the classroom must be sheer purgatory. Those who finally made the grade were, first, those who had a genuine vocation and really loved teaching and second, those who made a determined effort to do it as well as they could. It helped to recognise that you would never really be much good unless you really liked children and unless you recognised also that the teacher had an important part to play in preparing the next generation to take its place in society. It was important, too, to acknowledge that teaching was a professional skill and that it could not be done “off the cuff” without serious preparation and an assiduous attention to its basic principles.

Dad used to say that people who did not like children should not be teachers. That seems obvious, but people become teachers for many reasons and all of us have encountered the teachers who speak down to children, who don't believe them or trust them, and who judge too harshly.

An incident in my childhood comes to mind. I was kicked out of a class for giggling – by a teacher who was notoriously short-tempered and was struggling to find a way to deal with a group of giggly 10-year old girls. Sent to the Mistress in charge of Girls (of whom all of us were terrified), I dawdled my way to her office and was hugely relieved when she wasn't in. As I wandered back, wondering what I was going to say, I encountered the Headmaster who was watering the garden.

This Headmaster was a kind and courteous man, always beautifully turned-out in three-piece suit, who was loved by his students and his staff. He was a keen gardener, who did nearly all the school gardening and won prizes for it. He invited me to walk around with him and extracted the story from me. We chatted until the bell went, and he sent me off, happy and relieved, to my next class.

The antithesis of Dad's first Headmaster was the man who was the Principal of the High School to which he was sent in the early 1950s. This man was a huge influence in my father's life, and in the kind of Principal he became himself.

Dad wrote: ***“Frank was an object lesson in how to treat children. He loved children and treated them with enormous compassion. To see him worming the truth out of a child who had done something wrong was an education in itself. It was made easier for him because the child knew that he was not going to be punished by being caned or deprived of anything...he was convinced that children could not be taught by being hit.***

(In an era when the cane was routinely used by teachers to discipline or punish even minor infractions, a school where it was banned was an anomaly).

“He also used to say, even of hulking 18-year olds, “They’re only little boys” (he had done most of his teaching in boys’ schools) and “I’m a teacher and it is my job to teach them what is right and what is wrong.”

Dad is remembered by his pupils and colleagues as a man of compassion and fairness. He always thought of Frank as the most interesting person he had ever met. When he became a Principal himself, he often asked himself, “What would Frank do?” when faced with a problem or a difficult person.

Two of my sisters and I became teachers and I think we all tried to bring to our classrooms our memories of the kind of teacher our father was, and the lessons he had learned from Frank, which were often the subject of dinner time discussions when we were growing up. While there have been many changes in schools and in teaching practices in the years since 1935, the essential role doesn’t change and the qualities needed to do a good job and have a positive influence remain the same.