

Mr. J.

Of all my teachers, and there were many, from Kindergarden through the very last before college, those who were effective, ineffective, smart, stupid, boring, kind, unkind, men, women, tall, bald, fat, ugly, pretty, those who smelled funny or bad and those who didn't, only one stands out as being completely different than any other, only one does not fade into a recessed memory where all the rest linger together almost indistinguishable, only one changed my life in a way that I knew had changed while taking his class, only one person had any clue what was going on with me, only one deserves special mention--of having a chapter all to himself. It is a real treat for me to let you know about him, to think about him, to remember what he did for me, who he was.

If you and I had gone to the same high school in 1981, you will be lucky enough to know who this very special man is or was, if he is no longer alive. His name was Mr. Johnson. I couldn't tell you his first name. He preferred to be called Mr. J. Kids called him Mr. J. Not as a joke, but because he wanted you to do that. I called him Mr. J. Although he was one of my teachers in my last trimester of my last year in school, he was the first and only teacher I ever genuinely respected. It mattered that he approved of me, what I said, what I did, who I was. It mattered because his approval was automatic, was not an earned thing like all other teachers, but was an impression he had of what you might offer to him, to the class, to humanity. All of that meant something to him that made him seem or be a little crazy.

A modern-day Socrates, he wore swirling, unkempt and ragged white hair all over the part of his head which wasn't yet bald and surrounded his face with only a little more order a great white/grey beard. Mr. J. could not have been called Santa Claus, but only

Socrates because he did not look the part of Santa (too crazy looking) and did not speak the words of Santa's bringing the light of the world down our chimneys on the day of Christ's birth. Mr. J. begged us kids, us adolescent inquiring minds, to ponder, question, and most of all doubt—everything.

School so often gets it wrong. Maybe its better said that School, public school, private school, all involuntary forms of school, all school before college, does not get it right so often that when it does it is, well, startling. With Mr. J. Highland Park Senior High School got it right, got it so right I can't even now figure out how someone didn't put a stop to it, didn't carve out Mr. J., his person, his method, his message, the course content, and shield us from his passion and brilliance. Not only did Highland Park get it right, they made sure everyone participated. Mr. J. only taught one class, called Social Problems. Every single kid who graduated from Highland Park not only had to take Social Problems, but had to take it from Mr. J. who was also the only person who taught the class. The only person qualified, crazy enough, smart enough, brave enough to try to teach it, the way that only Mr. J. could. Allowing Mr. J. to teach there, to teach that class, to teach it the way he did, and then forcing all of us to go through it, there was a genius behind that decision. I wonder if they knew it. I suspect they did. Someone did, someone higher in the order of the school machine than Mr. J. And we were the blessed recipients of that genius, and Mr. J.'s genius, kindness, toughness, rightness, goodness.

What could possibly make a cynical guy like me blather on like this about some guy. No, we did not have a springtime romance. I had not found the father always wanting in my life (that would come later with others). I think, I hope, I know I am simply heaping praise where praise is deserved. The first day of class in social problems

fit with my thinking for so many years the rest was gravy. In one hour that day Mr. J. earned from me a level of respect, admiration, curiosity and attention that no one adult in school or otherwise had ever earned. That first day in Social Problems, Mr. J. handed out our books, like any other class. U.S. History textbooks, old, battered, as irrelevant as anything I'd seen in 12 years of irrelevant schooling. As usual, he asked us each one by one to pick up a copy of the text, bring it over to his desk where he flipped open the front cover of the book, wrote the handwritten number already there on a list next to our name. Nothing unusual here. And to think the work program during ninth grade to eleventh grade had not allowed me to skip this bit of ridiculously irrelevant information. U.S. History for God's sakes. Please.

When the class was finished and everyone had sat down, Mr. J. excused himself, said he'd be back in a minute, left us there, no indication about why he had left. A few minutes later, he came back into the classroom, pulling through the door behind him a man-sized greasy grey old garbage can, the kind janitor's pull around after school, only this one didn't have the paraphernalia of cleanliness and good sanitary practices. The big old thing was empty. Mr. J. left the garbage can standing near the door, walked over to his desk, sat down, saying nothing along the way about why he had fetched the garbage can, brought it into the room. At his desk, Mr. J. asked us to turn to a page near the end of our textbook. On that page printed inside a neat orange-brown box was a one paragraph description of the Vietnam war. Mr. J. stood up, held his book open, pointed at the heading at the top of the orange-brown box, read aloud, "The Vietnam Police Action." He snickered, asked us to raise our hands if any of us knew what a police action was, in this context. None raised their hands. He asked if we had ever heard of Vietnam.

We all raised our hands. He asked us if we thought what we had done in Vietnam was a war. We all raised our hands. He asked us if we had ever called it a Police Action. None of us raised our hands. Mr. J. sat back down.

He asked us to return to the beginning of the book, to the third or fourth page, where he directed our attention to the year of the copyright for this edition, pointing out the books we had on our desks were only a few years old. Why, I thought, then, did they look so old. That was not his point, although the answer would become clear in another minute. He asked us if any of us had any ideas about why he had asked us to turn to those two pages, one near the end of the book about the Vietnam Police Action, and the other showing the book had only just been printed a few years back. No one raised their hand. Okay, I can't remember if they did, but if they did, their answer didn't jive with anything he was trying to show. I only know that much because if they did, Mr. Johnson wouldn't have said what he said next, which was up to that point probably the most powerful thing anyone had ever said to me.

Mr. J. stood up again, his face red now, held the book above his head, showing us all the cover, and screamed at us, not caring about the spittle coming from his lips "its important because you have been lied to, lied to your whole lives, because for all these years in school you've been reading rubbish, garbage, lies, and it hasn't changed, none of it, they are still doing it, doing it to you, and you don't even know it, still handing us teachers these lies, wanting us to have you read the lies and memories the lies so they know you are ready to be good little Americans for the rest of your lives."

Now I had a pretty good idea why Mr. J.'s class was all by itself at the end of a little used hallway. Mr. J. was a fucking loudmouth, the best god damned loudmouth I

had ever heard. Mr. J. didn't scream for effect, even though it had a profound effect. Mr. J. screamed because he was that mad, red-faced, spittle-lipped raving almost psychotic mad, in only a few heartbeats after considering the point. This is a guy I could relate to, never mind the reason, but the anger, the outrage, the ballsiness of what he said, how he said it. I was sure he was gonna get fired for saying it, for screaming, for being a totally crazy guy. Who cares. Not my problem. I got to see it, to watch him, if even just for this day. Yes. Yes! Fuck yeah!

What Mr. J. did next was a bit more staged, but no less cool in its own way. From where he stood by his desk, Mr. J. took the book down from where it had been while he was screaming, still floating in his hands above his head, tossing it with both hands across the front of the room into the janitor's man-sized greasy-grey garbage can. He said, much more calmy, even humbly and maybe a little embarrassed, "that's where that pile of lies belongs. You are welcome to throw yours into the garbage if you want, or just put it on my desk when you leave. We won't be using a book of lies in this class, not this year, not with me." He waited as probably 1/2 the students went to the front of the class to toss their books into the garbage can, most of them giggling, a little unsure about this bizarre test, if it was a test. I didn't care if it was a test. I relished in having the opportunity to become part of a dazzlingly decadent detour from everything else I had ever experienced in school.

Mr. J. explained to us that his class would focus on a whole bunch of different ways of telling a story, that the only way to teach us how to decipher the truth from lies was to take a look at the same story told by people who had very different reasons for telling their version of the story, and then decide for ourselves when we had enough

versions to weed out the crap from the truth. Mr. J. told us that each day, he'd be handing us the daily papers from around the country, and sometimes around the world, that understanding the story, jotting it for memory, was a waste of our time, he being sure we had already learned all that we needed to know to successfully accomplish that not so useful task. This was to be something called Critical Thinking, and would entail allowing ourselves to become confused intentionally by contradictory information to come up with a truth deep enough to satisfy each of us. Socrates had landed in my life, and would be teaching us the Socratic method.

Mr. J. was true to his words. Each day, he'd have anywhere between two and four stacks of newspapers on his desk. Most days, but not all days, one of the local papers would fill a stack. Beyond that preference, there seemed almost no rhyme or reason for Mr. J.'s decisions about which papers he picked up, or how he found the time to read the same stories in sufficient different newspapers to decide which stories justified our attention, or which storyteller deserved our skepticism one day, or admiration the next.

The nature of the stories were all political to some extent, ranging from civil wars in Africa, to the economic dependence of Central America on the World Bank and its derivative first-world investors. Mr. J. often acted out the story teller in front of the class, especially if he had a particular mistrust of the motives, of the bad journalism, of the likelihood that facts had been omitted or exaggerated to make a point, a disingenuous point. As we read different versions, Mr. J. asked us to tell him why the story was untrue, either completely, or partially, never accepting that any story was a complete story, complete truth. Most of us obliged his curiosity. We were never ridiculed, no matter how ridiculous I suspected Mr. J. might have thought some of the kids' answers

might have been. He seemed never to forget that we'd none of us ever been asked to speak out loud in school about being lied to, being persuaded by alterations of stories, twisting of facts. We were newbies at the art of critical thinking, or thinking critically out loud with a high school teacher.

Everything was fair game, but some game were fairer than others. Reagan was president. Covert action abounded, justified in the name of a stronger America than the one his predecessor, Jimmy Carter, had left in a shambles, on the brink of ruin and shame in the eyes of the world, losing its manifest destiny as the greatest nation since Rome. The ghosts of Vietnam had also come a haunting, voices too loud to ignore. Its refugee families and children had come to our shore in their boats. The Boat People, we called them then. Its veterans, still treated with disgrace for not allowing our textbooks to call the thing a war because we lost, started to raise their voice, and the words they spoke were these: "Agent Orange."

Given his age, its possible that Mr. J. had been a Vietnam War Veteran, one of those who went there in the Kennedy or Johnson Presidencies. Even if he hadn't, it seems likely that he had friends who did, or more likely he and his friends dodged the draft as they watched high school classmates return in body bags or completely phased out of reality by the experience of a particularly unjust cruel and wayward war, a war by any other name, including the plausible deniability of a Police Action, kind of war.

Hard to say what his connection Mr. J. had with that War. Some kind of connection seems likely, though. Not just because of his age, but because of his reaction to the tide of soldiers getting sick and dying from their exposure to nasty clouds of the herbicide with a sinisterly-pleasing name: Agent Orange. This is no candy, nothing

pretty about it, or what it did to our brothers and uncles and dads and brothers who brushed it off their shoulders as they walk through the jungles of Indochina. Some kind of Congressional Hearings were going on to learn more about the myth of Agent Orange symptoms were giving low-life soldiers an excuse to lay around for a few more years on the dole. Here came Mr. J.'s craziest act of all, manic and all kinds of weirdness in its presentation to us, if it was a presentation and not the inner stirrings of an up and coming psychosis. Hard to tell. Mr. J. acted out the testimony of a soldier appearing before Congress, telling them about his symptoms, whatever they might have been, and as he spoke, his eyes and then other parts of his face began to twitch, then so did his body, facial terrets taking over the all of him, until it reached the stage of what looked like real convulsions. Mr. J. fell to the ground still convulsing, as he screamed at the Congress that was us how he his life had been ruined by the symptoms of exposure to this lethal chemical and no one would listen. We stood up looking at him, not to miss the show, and to make sure he hadn't really gone completely the way of lunacy. Near the end of his testimony, as he began to quiet down, manic episode coming to an end, or the classroom hour nearing completion, Mr. J. began to cry there on the floor, real tears, muttering, crying for his mother, for anyone to help him.

The bell rang with Mr. J. still on the floor. By this time, I had begun to like Mr. J. enough that I was scared for him, concerned that what we had seen here was more than a good teacher, a good Socrates, a good actor, but was a man in trouble, serious trouble. As he lay there on the ground, a part of me wanted so badly to ask him if he was okay, to make a move toward some kind of friendship. I didn't. None of us asked. We all walked out, unsure what to think.

I still feel guilty for not showing him that little kindness, all because I was afraid of what the other kids might think of me if I did.

On the other spectrum, the end furthest removed from animation, hyperactivity, bitter tears streaming from a beet-red faced man screaming in convulsions at the no-Congress in the room, there was a calmer just as brave side to this complicated great man. We never knew what to expect from him, but we knew there would never be a dull day in Mr. J.'s class. Well, there were actually two dull days, but even those dull hours were better spent than almost any other I had spent from Kindergarten until I went to college. On these two days, there were no newspapers on Mr. J.'s desk. Instead, there was a small ghetto blaster plugged in. Nothing else in the desk, on any desk. After we had all sat down, without saying a word, Mr. J. hit the "play" button, and proceeded to bow his head, close his eyes and listen, as we all did, to the first two sides of Pink Floyd's double album "The Wall." The next day we listened to the third and fourth sides, this time only half of the class showing up. On the third day, Mr. J. said, simply, "Let's not talk about what we heard over the last two day. Just think about it, okay." Not another word was said about those two days.

In all of this, his pageantry of stellar performances, courage, raw and sometimes bizarre teaching methods, I have yet to tell you the single most important thing that Mr. J. did, did for me. Sure, he was cool and strange in other memorable ways. He didn't take attendance, said we were each of us free to decide for ourselves whether to come to class. He told us at the beginning of the trimester that there would not be tests. In the middle of the trimester he told us we'd be grading ourselves. At the end of the trimester, he kept

his word. I gave myself a “B,” thinking I deserved an “A” for getting what he was trying to do with such little effort, but realizing that an “A” might insult him because I continued, despite how much I liked him, to miss one to two days of school each week, still apathetic enough to miss the whole day, and not interested enough to go just for one hour, which would have meant detentions for all those others I skipped that day.

No, none of this mattered as much as the one time Mr. J. singled me out of for a little talk after class. Two weeks left before the end of the Trimester, the end of the school year, the end of High School. We were all seniors, would be after just a few short weeks heading off into the direction of the rest of our lives. On one of the days I showed up for class, Mr. J. asked me to come back to his class at the end of the day, said he wanted to talk to me. Sure, I said.

At the end of the day, I returned to Mr. J.’s class, as promised. He asked me to sit in a chair already there at the side of his desk.

Mr. J. asked, “so, what are your plans after you graduate?”

“I am thinking about taking a class to become a semi-truck driver,” I said.

“Why,” he asked.

“I don’t know why, it just seems to make sense, good money I guess.”

“Where did the idea come from?” He asked.

“My brother Kevin is thinking about it, we talked about it. I might take the class with him.” I said.

“I can’t tell you what to do with your life, Michael, but I need to tell you that you would be making a big mistake if you did that.”

“Well, it makes sense to me.” I said. In truth I hadn’t thought about it too much, it was more a default kind of decision than anything else.

“Once in a while, I get a kid in one of my classes. And he’s kind of special, and you can see it right away. It’s the way he talks, or the way he is, I am not sure. Lots of times, they don’t even know it, know that they are special. Michael, you are one of those kinds of kids, and based on what you are telling me, its obvious to me that you have no idea how special you are.”

I’d heard this kind of speech before, from teachers in the past, foster parents, social workers, always the same: “Michael, you have so much potential, and yet you waste it away with your drugs, and fighting, and skipping school. Blah, blah, blah. A rehearsed speech, something they had learned to say to troublesome kids in a class in college, or a workshop with other social workers or foster parents. No sincerity, no real belief that the speech would have any real effect, but saying it just the same so they could make a note in their files that they had said it. Part of the job.

As he began the speech, my mind roved over all the other similar speeches. I had thought Mr. J. wouldn’t stoop to this, that he was different, that what he had to tell me, his reason for asking me to come by after school had ended would not end up being a complete waste of my time. I was barely listening. At first.

I also knew this was different. Different than all the other speeches. Because Mr. J. was different. He wasn’t half-assed. He never did anything because it was part of his job. He seemed more likely to not do something precisely because he was supposed to do it as part of his job. I watched him a little as he said these oft-repeated words to me. And I could see this was different, and was not going to be a waste of my time. Tears

welled up in his eyes while he was telling me this. I began to pay more attention to him, sensing these were not crocodile tears.

Mr. J. seemed to sense that I was beginning to pay attention. He continued. “I don’t know what has happened in your life to make you ignore what you are, what you could be, but I can guess it wasn’t pretty, isn’t pretty. I can also guess that whatever it was, or is, it is part of what makes you special, because you are here, now, still trying to make it all okay somehow, even when you and I both know it isn’t, and might never be.”

This was turning into a new kind of speech, a kind of a speech that didn’t pretend anything, that hadn’t been rehearsed, that didn’t end with the usual “things will get better,” “things are better than you think,” “things can’t be as bad as you seem to make them,” and “if only you’d try a little harder, they would be much better, and it is all up to you to make your life all the great things it can be”. No platitudes. No bullshit here. No pretending he knew things that he didn’t, just guesses, and his guesses were correct, hit home. No bullshit here. I knew he knew some things that I knew, about my life, about the way things go for kids sometimes, maybe went for him, for other kids he’d taught, and how that might make those kids feel about possibilities, and realistic limitations.

“I am not special, Mr. J. I am just a kid trying to get out of high school as fast I can so I can go get a job and get on with my life. No big deal.” I lied, knowing that I was special, believing it, not because so many had told me that, but because I’d had lots of time to think about it, to wonder about it, to choose to believe it so I could manage my way through and out of the struggles that had come my way over the 17 years I had lived so far.

“Ah, but Michael, you are special. You are a free bird, and you don’t know it because you don’t know how to get your wings. You’ve never tried to fly yet. If you go to truck driving school, you’ll never find out what it is to be a free bird with wings. You need to find your wings, so you can know how to fly, to do what you really want to do with your life. The only way for you to find your wings is to keep learning, to figure out what your mind can do for you, which I suspect is something you’ve never really given a chance before. I am guessing you’ve had other things on your mind, and learning has been a necessity, not something you’ve ever really wanted. Am I right?”

Sounds cheesy now, “Free Bird,” makes me want to pick up my air guitar and grab the Lynard Skynard song from iTunes. It didn’t sound cheesy then, because it was Mr. J. saying it, the first teacher who could say this stuff to me and deserve to be heard. I listened. I said, “yeah, like I said, I’m just trying to get through high school as fast as I can to get out of here.”

“Okay, so high school is something you thought you had to do. Now I want you to think about what you want to do. I want you to make a promise to me. Right now. I want you to promise that you will apply to go to college next year. I don’t need you to promise me you’ll go. You can decide that later. But, it is important to me, really important, that you come back before the end of the year and tell me that you’ve at least applied. Then you can spend the summer deciding whether to actually go. Will you make me that promise, Michael, promise to find a college you can apply to. And if you need help, I can help you.”

I made the promise. “Yeah, okay, I’ll do that.” I can’t say I was sincere in my promise, can’t say whether I intended to keep the promise when I said it. I probably

wanted to get out of there, to have a smoke, or get to a job, or just go home. Making the promise might have been an automated response, automated after telling so many teachers, and social workers, and counselors, at the end of their speeches, which always ended with “will you at least think about what I have told you, Michael?” To which I always played the same tape, “Sure, I’ll think about it.”

I think probably I just had too much respect for Mr. J. to let him down. I did not want this guy to be disappointed in me. Besides, he didn’t know that my social worker had already told me that if I did want to go to college there might be a way to continue living in my current foster home for another year for free. I had told her I would think about it. I had lied then. I wasn’t sure if I was lying to Mr. J.

Less than a week later, I told Mr. J. that I had applied to Lakewood Community College. This time, I knew I was not lying to Mr. J. I also told him that I wouldn’t be spending the summer trying to decide whether to go, that I had already decided to go and would go, for at least a semester, just to check it out. Mr. J. cried. So did I. We both knew something had passed between us that would change my thinking about myself and possibilities forever.

After my first year of college, I went back to Highland Park High School, found him in his class, and told him I had finished the first year and would be moving onto the University of Minnesota. I did not want Mr. J. to be disappointed in me. I wanted him to be proud of me, and himself for what he had bothered to tell me. I told him that the thing I liked most about college is that I didn’t have to go, which made me want to go. Mr. J. was not disappointed. Mr. J. was proud, of me. That almost by itself made my first year of college worth it.

