

Therapy Lessons

My work in school desegregation at MPS had instilled within me greater faith in the importance of understanding human motivation to learn. Aware of my limited effectiveness, I asked myself: From what I have experienced in the last year, what do I believe is worth pursuing—dedicating myself to understanding and taking the next step to more fully realize? I was 35 and the world still seemed ahead of me. What I thought I could trust as essential beyond professional success or failure was: *When we support a love of learning in students, we equip them with a powerful lifelong tool: the means, the drive to delve deeper than their ancestors could to solve the unresolved problems of their generation.* Youth who found learning itself to be a triumph might persevere toward solutions beyond their predecessors' imagination. In this way, the failures of myself and my peers to leave adequate knowledge to meet the great challenges of our own time, such as unequal educational opportunity, did not remain static because the energy and hope of the next generation had been well nurtured and safeguarded. To this purpose, I could dedicate myself. It offered the potential to continue learning, to further my chances for discovery, and to avoid reifying my beliefs.

However, life is often far less lofty in its design and reality. To this point, the way for me to begin realizing this purpose was preceded by a poker game in Houston. This was the night before I was to give a small presentation (one of more than 250 such sessions) on Saturday morning at the national conference of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. Dick Larson held the game in his hotel room starting at 9:00pm. As was customary, anyone leaving before midnight had to announce the time of their departure before we started playing so that no one suddenly left early with major winnings.

As we sat down and the cards were being shuffled, I said, "Sorry guys, I'll have to leave at 11:00."

Dick frowned, "Why so early?"

"I'm presenting a session tomorrow morning at 8:00am. I'll need a little time for breakfast and reviewing my notes."

He laughed, "At 8:00am? On Saturday, the last day of the conference when it ends at noon, most people are partying Friday night. They're not going to get up for an early session. You could be B. F. Skinner teaching pigeons to play ping-pong and they wouldn't come. They're going to sleep in and catch a flight home. Sorry, but that's how it goes."

I looked around the table and saw the heads of my colleagues nodding along with him. I felt disappointed, "You sure?"

"So sure, I'll bet you twenty dollars you don't have ten people at your session at 8:00am tomorrow."

I hesitated and let out a sigh, "Okay, twenty dollars says it eleven or more."

Dick shook my hand, "Good. So you won't be alone, I'll be there to collect my money but you can't count me as one of the participants. Alright?"

"Alright."

When I woke up the next morning, I felt calm, partly because of Dick's certainty about the small attendance at my session. Even though it was my first national presentation on the topic of teaching and motivation, I didn't envision a large group and my excitement had diminished.

I had prepared a hundred handouts. When I entered the session room at 7:45am, there was seating for sixty people and no one was there. At 7:55am, Dick came in along with three others, joining five people who had preceded them. Dick took a back seat and grinning, signaled the number eight with his fingers. At 7:59am, three more people came in. Dick rose from his seat at 8:00am waving a twenty dollar bill which he handed to the person sitting in front of him to give to me. He left to catch his plane silently mouthing, "You lucky son-of-a-gun!"

By the time I started the session at 8:05am, twenty-five more people had arrived. I began by telling them how I had just won twenty dollars and, "Because luck is infatuated with effort, this was going to be one darn good session. We'll all be glad we came." By the time I finished my story, there were over a hundred people in the room, many of whom stood the length of the presentation, an entire hour. My handouts were gone. I had to borrow one from a participant to lead the program.

Two "big hits" during the session were the practicality of the motivational strategies and the realism of my stories, such as how easy it was to become a menacing teacher, "Children did pay attention when I raised my voice but that kind of reinforcement led me to shouting at them most of the time: an action that made me feel powerful and hate myself in the same moment."

Afterwards, a number of people came up to me to ask questions. The man who waited until the very end was Gordon Felton, director of publications for the National Education Association.

His directness surprised me, "How would you like to do a book for the NEA on the topic you just presented?"

I was so naïve and inexperienced, I didn't quite know how to answer. I hesitated. Then I stumbled out a reply. "Well, it's certainly something I'd enjoy talking about with you."

Three weeks later, I was in Gordon's office in Washington, D. C. He had invited me to plan the book and negotiate a publishing contract. There was a