

In Memoriam?? by Charles Wendel

A few days ago an email arrived telling me of the death of one of my high school teachers, one who had taught at that school for almost 40 years. The email went on to mention the “guidance and friendship he offered” and the “blessing” he was to the school. Not my memory.

My memory recounts a teacher who was verbally and, in my mind, sometimes physically abusive and who seemed more sadistic than friendly. Looking back decades ago, he convinced me that my language skills were nonexistent; I dreaded each class, in my memory afraid of what might happen that day. He did not provide anything near the nurturing, “snowflake” environment that schools seem to emphasize today. Back then, there was no safe zone.

Decades later, I was attending a wedding and whom should I see across the room, but this person I remembered with some residual horror. What to do? I went up to him calmly, introduced myself calmly, assuming he would not remember me, and said something like, “I just wanted you to know you were a destructive teacher and had a terrible impact on me” or something to that effect. I then turned around calmly and went on to enjoy the event, never talking with him again. I have no idea how he reacted, if it even registered with him, or if he cared, but I felt better.

Clearly, a disconnect exists between my experience of this teacher as a sadistic bully and the comments of a senior school leader who just wrote of his “great fortune” in knowing this man. I am certain I am not wrong in describing the nightmare experiences I had, but I believe neither is the writer who wrote the laudatory comment. So, what’s going on? We all change and, I hope, just as I became stronger and no longer open to victimhood, maybe he mellowed as expectations around teaching and teachers changed.

Having not yet then having reached the level of sophistication and charm I have today (humor alert!), I was set up to be an easy target and victim back then...fat, awkward, uncertain. Fortunately, I benefited from the warmth and care shown by friends and the majority of the teachers at my high school, but I will never know whether I headed toward English Literature as a study focus due to a natural predisposition or the decency of the teachers in that subject area versus this language teacher or Physics where the teacher had a wood paddle (!) that he was happy to apply for inattention or the wrong answer.

Upon reflection, my concern is that I may have picked up as many traits from the brutal teachers as the good, and it may have taken decades to exorcize their negative spirit. Maybe all of us, myself included, are fated to cause reactions in readers similar to the one I had, whereby people may react negatively to laudatory comments about the deceased. Just as this teacher could not erase the stain he put on me, we (me) cannot erase the mistakes we have made and their impact on others.

All we can do is to try not to make more of them. For example, while I mourned the passing of the client most responsible for my forming a company and a person I admired, I know others continue to harbor resentment against him. Maybe this is simply unavoidable.

As a consultant, I see all types of clients. Fortunately, in recent years I have been frequently impressed by the thoughtfulness of senior people who have to make tough personnel decisions and work hard to minimize any negative impact on individuals. Conversely, in the past I worked on some big cost takeout projects in which cuts come at great human expense as well as at the expense of bank culture.

Clearly, it is emotionally healthier to focus on those teachers, bosses, colleagues, and situations that had a positive impact rather than being consumed by the negative ones. But...that's hard to do. I did have a boss at a bank decades ago who actively pursued trying to get me fired while I was fighting a potentially deadly disease. (another spoiler alert: I lived.) Somehow, I cannot forget him either (Eventually, he got fired.) I just checked...he's still alive.

We all act in ways we should not when we are young, maybe stupid or inexperienced, and scared. This teacher was probably all those things.

Maybe all we can do is strive to have as few negative reactions as possible to any laudatory eulogies we are lucky enough to get.