

The Silk Not Taken

My parents did not want me to be a teacher. They had both left school when they were fifteen, and although my father did well in his work, he always wanted his sons to make more money than he had. My mother, who had been very poor and very aware of it when she was the fractured, unhappy, pretty girl she was when she met my dad, hoarded money all her life – when she died there was £1,000 in each of five old handbags hidden in different parts of the house that my father did not know about: she was always ready to flee with cash in hand. So she too did not like the idea of my teaching.

My brother Jimmy, four years older, very tall, very handsome, very clever, had been dux of George Heriot's School, and had gone to Cambridge to study Law. As I was deciding what to do at university, he, at twenty-two, had done the hard bit of training necessary to qualify as a solicitor, after all the philosophy and punting and balls, and had set himself up with a job in London. So when I was filling out my own UCCA form, selecting the six choices was easy – five applications for Law in Scotland and one to study English at Edinburgh, this last only because the school demanded the 'safety net' application for something easier to get into. And that was that. Because I talked a lot and debated at school, my mother decided I would 'take silk' and be an advocate. She loved that phrase – 'take silk' – I was never entirely sure what it meant, and I doubt if she was. But silk was luxury, and we were a family who wore nylon shirts and plastic shoes, not because of vegetarian principles but because they were cheap. One day, in a court somewhere, she would watch me and I would be wearing silk.

My parents did not sin. My mother stopped smoking and my father stopped drinking on the same day in December 1963. I was six and it was ghastly. For years, every morning my mother had rolled herself ten astonishingly thin cigarettes in a Rizla machine and smoked them at regular intervals through the long days of housework and what for her

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approximated to child-raising. I don't remember my father drinking, though he talked about drink a lot, for he was the third generation of his family to work in the whisky industry. He saw, he said, too many men turned into alcoholics by the ready availability of cheap, or free, booze. So he stopped when she stopped. It was not a good Christmas.

From then on their one regular concession to pleasurable living (apart from TV and sweets) was having lunch out on a Saturday, followed by a film. In my later teenage years, I would go for lunch, but skip the cinema, since the choosing of the 'picture' was scarcely democratic – my mother had all the votes and liked slasher films and, more surprisingly, weepies. We would eat in cheap places with good service, which meant water and bread on the table and the menu being presented within thirty seconds of your arrival, preferably by an older waitress to whom my mother could talk and whom my father could tip generously. The food itself didn't matter in the slightest.

So one hot and sunny Saturday, walking to a pub for a lunch, the best bit of which would be the lime and soda which would accompany steak pie or scampi and chips, I said that I had decided I didn't want to study Law, that I wanted to pick up my English offer and I wanted to teach. My mother's disapproval was instantaneous – no silk, no one to defend her free of charge when her crimes were at last revealed (for Jimmy, my brother, was after all an 'English lawyer'). She said nothing, but simply allowed my father to say, as he was always going to, that if that's what I wanted, that's what I wanted. And it was.

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There are many reasons why people become teachers, including the long holidays, the great pension and sometimes because they didn't become what they wanted to become in the first place. I was lucky that it was what I really wanted to do because teaching in a secondary school requires two things – you need to like young people, and you need to be interested in telling them about your subject; if you have these two things then teaching is the best possible job you could have. Though I was by no means an academic student, I enjoyed English at school and at university. And though I had many friends, I think,

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in the school staffroom – easier at the start of my career than at the end – generally I was always happier in the playground talking to kids. My working life passed so quickly, each year like a huge steadily revolving stone wheel, marked by events – plays, concerts, sports days, Leavers Balls, Founders Days, church services, exam diets, that were each year never quite the same. The doctor who did my medical on my entrance to the profession said I was chronically underweight; I started teaching wearing size 26 trousers. How did I get fatter, as indeed I did? Why is my hair no longer on my head but in my ears? And where are all these children now?

I loved university, but I'm not sure how much I learned. I went to teacher training at Moray House which was like going back to school in a building that, with its cold yellowing white tiles, resembled a big public lavatory. I got a job at Daniel Stewart's and Melville College, then got promoted there, then got promoted again into a job in pastoral care, then left to be Head of English at George Heriot's. After four years I became Head of Sixth Year, a job I loved; then for ages I was Head of the Senior School. Finally, under unexpected circumstances, I became Principal and I did that for the thirty-nine months leading to my retirement.

I loved my career, and I don't regret a single thing about it. I applied for fourteen posts in my thirty-seven years in teaching, and I got seven of them, though I only ever taught in two different schools. I was very lucky. But I did not get jobs at Dollar Academy or Hutchesons' in Glasgow, or George Watson's College, and the two applications I made to the state sector were (and I think this is bad) not even acknowledged. Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I had taken up a post in a state school right at the start: what would have happened? I was days away from doing that when I was offered my first post. I pretend to myself that it all would have been much the same, but really, who knows? Certainly, during my time as a teacher, independent schools have diverged further from state schools. When I was at school in the Sixties and early Seventies, what happened in state and private schools was much the same, though the facilities and equipment and class sizes might differ. But by 2020, with

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the advent of Curriculum for Excellence and the greater importance of extracurricular activities in private schools and the difference in disciplinary attitudes between the sectors, there was a bigger distinction in the experience of private and state pupils (or 'learners' in state schools).

But this book is not about education, it's about me and my career in teaching, and not even remotely intended as a primer on the practicalities of classroom practice. I taught as me, as Cam Wyllie, Waz, Willy, Cammy Chameleon, Slim and finally Mr Wyllie, and I do not think that whatever skills I developed would be easily imitated by others. As a senior teacher I watched lots of great lessons being taught by teachers of every subject, and never once thought that they were teaching like I taught; I was often left open-mouthed in admiration of the skills on display, skills which I completely lacked. I have never, ever, done a PowerPoint presentation.

However, one great universal truth for all of us in teaching is that, almost without exception, no one day, no one lesson, matters that much. The brain surgeon sneezes with the scalpel in his hand – not good. The lawyer adds a zero in a will – not good. The minister of religion forgets the name of the deceased; the electrician rewires badly; the policeman restrains someone too forcibly . . . In teaching, the benefits, or the damage, come over an extended period. If you are feeling unwell one day, the kids can sit and read; if you lose a set of essays it doesn't really matter (having said that, on Princes Street one day, a man came up to me and asked for his *Hobbit* essay back, which I had failed to return twenty-two years earlier). Of course, the impact of a good teacher – or a bad one – is huge over a longer period of time, and, very occasionally, a teacher will say something or teach a particular lesson that a young person will always remember. But mainly it is a long hard slog by teacher and student together. No one day, no one lesson.

What do you hold in your hand? Teaching is not like building a bridge, which you can then admire in your dotage. It's more like driving a train back and forth from Edinburgh to Glasgow for forty years and then retiring, except that the passengers, some fleetingly, and sometimes forever, remember the driver's name.

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The trajectory of my career took me in a circle from my schooldays at Heriot's to my last day there, after twenty-six years of working. It was central to my life at the ages of five and of sixty: thirty-nine years within that glorious seventeenth-century building, beautiful, grey and sometimes – particularly on rainy days – a bit grim, with its unbeatable view of Edinburgh Castle; indeed, sometimes tourists wandered in thinking it *was* Edinburgh Castle, or, more recently, Hogwarts. So, my life has not been much of a geographical journey, as I have always lived and worked in lovely Edinburgh. It is a journey of people, young, old, dead, exuberantly alive, and it is a journey of which I do not regret a single moment.

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Did I ever think that I would have liked some other career more? Well, all this time my brother was doing very well as a lawyer in the music business. In 1986 he was interviewed for the Glasgow *Evening Times* – they did a colour spread on him in their centre pages as part of a feature about Scots who had done well in the music business. The reporter, who clearly fancied him, gushed praise about his intelligence, his skills, his good looks; none of which, sadly, could be disputed. Still, he was always good to me, supportive of my career and kind when I came out, so in a mildly masochistic gesture I pinned up the article on my classroom wall. I don't really know why.

I had a registration class of twelve-year-olds. One of them, a cheerful, confident wee boy called Grant looked at it early one morning.

'Mr Wyllie, is that your brother?'

'Yes, it is.'

He continued to read then asked, tentatively, 'Are you jealous of him?'

'No, he doesn't have the pleasure of your company.'

Silence, then with a smile, 'I bet he earns twice what you do.'

I laughed. 'Well, actually Grant, I know for a fact that last year he earned seventeen times what I did.'

But is he happy, I thought, is he happy? Well, obviously he is.

But I was still glad I was doing what I was doing.

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Then I went to work at Heriot's, where both of us had been as schoolboys – very different boys, but identifiable brothers: blond, blue-eyed, bright – Jimmy just being fifteen inches taller than me and, well, probably proportionately brighter.

At the end of my first year there, the school celebrated June Day, its ceremony to honour George Heriot, the wise Edinburgh jeweller who lent money to King James VI and followed him to London and who, when he died, fabulously wealthy, left his money to create a school for Edinburgh's orphans.

The ceremony over, I proceeded to the staffroom where there were lots of people eating and drinking. Approaching the crowded buffet to fetch myself a vol-au-vent and a macaroon, I found myself standing next to Jean Stenhouse, who thirty-five years before had taught my brother when he was six. Miss Stenhouse had a puckered mouth and a straight back, and must have been by this time about ninety. In my mind she had always been ancient. She was standing selecting choice morsels and popping them in her mouth. I felt I should say something.

'Hello, Miss Stenhouse!'

I was not, to be sure, convinced she wanted to be interrupted at her grazing, but her eyes were bright enough as she scrutinised me.

'You won't remember me . . .' I began.

'Oh, I do remember you. You are Cameron Wyllie. You got Bryan Jonson's job. You are . . .' in case I had forgotten, 'the Head of English.'

I smiled.

She continued. 'I did not teach you but I taught your brother, James. He was a fine boy. So tall for his age. Such a good-looking boy.'

I am five feet ten inches tall, just half an inch shorter than the average height of men in Scotland. I smiled again. She continued. 'He was dux of the school, wasn't he? Were you dux of the school?'

'Ah, no, no, I wasn't . . .'

'He went to Cambridge, is that right? Did you go to Cambridge?'

'No, I went to . . .'

'He studied Law.' She stopped, presumably realising she needn't ask if I had aspired to that particular height of academic success.

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By this time, inevitably, I wanted to crush her like a macaroon. Why had I bothered?

And then a splendid thing happened. Moving in for the *coup de grâce*, my ego spread out in front of her waiting for the next thrust, she said, 'What is he doing now?'

'Well, he's done very well. He does a lot of work with pop groups.'

Jean Stenhouse was stilled by this, concerned. She paused, put a tiny sausage roll in her mouth, chewed and swallowed. Then she turned fully to me, placed one hand on my arm and said, 'Well, at least you've done well.'