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Mr. Fix and Me: When an English Teacher's Lessons Refuse to be Confined to the Classroom

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Today is my birthday and in Mr. Fix's tenth-grade English class this means a Harley ride. Not a real Harley, which has luxuries like brakes, handlebars, and DOT-approved tires, but an old steel desk chair with wheels and four legs. We start the ride at a mellow pace, just cruising out of the classroom. Mr. Fix is the engine: powerful and loud, as Harleys are, of course. My engine roars and thumps as we roll down the hall of the high school. We start picking up speed into the first turn and continue to accelerate down the long straightaway. The wind whistles, my eyes water, and my 'hog' vibrates beneath me as we reach top speed. FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) is now in a dead sprint and we are running out of hallway. Mr. Fix takes a break from making Harley noises to yell, "Hold on!" Up ahead is a space between tiles in the floor, a space roughly the size of the OSHA-violating chair's wheels. We hit it at full speed. I was certain the chair would explode and send us and the twisted wreckage careening into the approaching wall. "Whoa! ...Holy shit. I didn't think we would make it." FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) exclaims as we lean into the third turn. We return to a cruising speed and pull into the garage (classroom). The class is standing on their desks with wadded paper in hand; it is an ambush. They pelt me with the paper and a loud, out of tune rendition of the birthday song.

This was a typical day in the world of Mr. Fix. His passion was infectious. C. Douglas Fix was his name, but to his friends and former students he was

"FXGRRR (the "G" is silent)" - pronounced Fixer—a nickname that was given to Mr. Fix by his students at some point in his thirty-plus years as an educator. Students often described FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) as, "the crazy (in the good way) English teacher that looks like Hulk Hogan." Mr. Fix was Hulk Hogan-esque; he had the long hair, the mustache, and he was tough. He was a veteran of the Vietnam War, a former body builder, and a finisher of multiple marathons, including the Boston Marathon. Unlike most teachers, Mr. Fix rode a motorcycle, had a tattoo, long hair, and questioned authority. Yet, he was respected by administrators, teachers, and students. Likewise he respected them. Underneath the tough exterior was a man tough enough to tell others how much he loved his wife Anne, poetry, daisies, and his granddaughters who called him "Papa Gug."

Mr. Fix's passion flowed into his teaching; he could take the most mundane English lesson and engage the students without needing to bribe or threaten. He was cognizant of students that were generally lost or left out of the more academic (non-shop) classes and found ways to reach them. FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) cared enough about his students that he was somehow able to keep track of their soap opera lives. This continued even after students left his class and high school. I knew that whatever I did, I wanted to be as passionate about it as Mr. Fix was about teaching.

The summer after I had Mr. Fix I became a lifeguard and swim instructor. This was my summer job until I graduated from college. I spent the entire day with my best friends on the beach, and we were paid to teach kids and to keep them safe. Swim lessons were my first teaching experience, and I was passionate, looking forward to every session. When working with the younger children, the students and I would become sharks, minnows, alligators, elephants and even monkeys. We regularly held underwater conversations with the well respected, yet invisible Mr. Fish. The older students were less inclined to implement their imaginations, so on cold days or when I felt they needed a break from the monotony of

kickboards and rotary breathing, we would launch a 'Splash Attack.' To the untrained eye this would appear to be one swim class splashing another. However, a well-executed splash attack required the element of surprise, followed by a torrent of water unleashed by platoon of preadolescents. It was often difficult to determine whether the lifeguards or students enjoyed the swim lessons more. Every once and a while I was stopped after a session by a parent, who told me I was good with children and should become a teacher; even FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) came to me for advice when he wanted to start teaching his granddaughter to swim. I was flattered, but the idea of teaching was relegated to the back of my mind; I felt I belonged somewhere else.

After graduating from Michigan State in the fall of 2004, I began testing for government law enforcement agencies with three letter names—the FBI, DEA, CIA, and ICE. During this time I worked various odd jobs including substitute teaching, which I loved. One morning I could be a kindergarten teacher, the next I was a high school shop teacher. Yet I continued to work odd jobs for two years until I accepted a position with the Bozeman Police Department in Montana. Like a lifeguard I would come running when a stranger needed help, whether it was an actual emergency or someone just did not know who else to turn to. However, my passion was my weakness. I couldn't stop taking my work home with me, and I was miserable, but after a while felt nothing. Muddled in the mire of human misery, even the smallest victories were few and far between. Once, after apprehending an inebriated young male suspected in vandalizing numerous homes on the same street, I performed a search and found a baggie of drugs and drug paraphernalia. The boy was spitting and swearing at me as I put him into the patrol car, and as I closed the door I saw a reflection of someone I did not quite recognize; the uniform was mine and the name plate read: "nosirroM reciffO," but the scowling face was somehow unfamiliar. The scowl was out of disgust, but not for the boy who was deftly destroying his life; I had just washed that uniform and now I had a goober on my shirt that seemed to out-glisten my badge in the flashing red and blue lights. A cop for less than a year, I had already lost my passion and was starting to lose my compassion. I thought back to a time when my compassion was an asset, not a liability, and realized it was when I was working with children.

After leaving the Police Department, I was accepted

to the elementary education program at Northern Michigan University as a post-baccalaureate student. This was in September and I had missed the beginning of the semester. So I did what anyone would do: I moved to Honolulu, Hawaii and learned to surf.

When I started Northern Michigan University in the winter of 2007, I was required to do observation hours for my Educational Psychology course. Placed in Mrs. Russell's fifth grade class at Graveraet Intermediate School, I was scheduled for an hour a week, but began showing up whenever I could, spending anywhere from three to six hours there a week. When my semester ended, I continued to spend whole days with the class, volunteering weeks at a time for something I'd have paid to do. I could sit with a student, listen to his or her problems, and care about those problems. There were a few times Mrs. Russell was leading a lesson and I attempted to enter the room without interrupting, but, the students would see me and begin to applaud. I was humbled. When I had a badge, I could show up unannounced expecting a flight or fight response. Now that I teach, they cheer and hug. As I was getting into my truck after an entire day with thirty fifth-graders, I caught another reflection in my window, there I was. Almost unbeknownst to me was a big, gleaming grin.

I realized that I needed to teach. I looked forward to seeing Mr. Fix and sharing my realization with him, because whenever I saw him in Escanaba, he would become extremely excited. The exchange went like this:

"Hey FXGRRR (the "G" is silent)!"

He would turn, and there would be an almost imperceptible pause between seeing me, running through his vast mental database of acquaintances, and the glimmer of recognition in his blue eyes.

"Tom! How the hell are you?!"

After spending more than a few minutes with Mr. Fix in public it would become apparent that he cared "how the hell" many others were doing. If you consider the myriad lives Mr. Fix touched through his decades of teaching alone, it is amazing he could remember so many people, let alone get any type of errand done.

Unfortunately, a few days after I arrived home from Montana, FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) died of a heart attack running an autumn half-Marathon in Marquette. It is

difficult to believe a heart as strong as his could ever quit.

A celebration of FXGRRR's (the "G" is silent) life was held in the auditorium of the Escanaba Middle School. The large venue was a necessity; all 690 seats were filled. Jack Kerouac, Malcolm X and Mohammed Ali were also in attendance, albeit they were confined to the posters that once adorned the walls of Mr. Fix's classroom. Friends of FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) are ubiquitous, and given the chance, his celebration could have filled Michigan State's Spartan Stadium. However, the classroom was FXGRRR's (the "G" is silent) turf and the school was a poignant reminder of where many of us met him, and all of us will remember him as a blue-eyed behemoth greeting students with his "Harley Handshake" and semi-mischievous FXGRRR (the "G" is silent) smile.

Although it took me a while to realize where I belong, I would not change the course of events that have

led me to teaching. I am not sure where I will teach, or even which grade I will find myself in. And though I know I'll never be Mr. Fix, I will do my best to achieve his level of passion, and maintain it as well as he did.

About the Author

Tom Morrison (tmorriso@nmu.edu) graduated from Escanaba High School in 2000 and from Michigan State University in 2004 with degrees in Psychology and Criminal Justice. After leaving his job as a police officer in Bozeman, Montana, he enrolled in the Elementary Education program at Northern Michigan University where he is pursuing certification.

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