EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS IN THE CLASSROOM

A Memoir

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By

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To my fabulous wife Suzanne

PREFACE

As you can tell by its title, this is not a "how to" book. It is a memoir of my experiences during the 42 years I taught students with emotional and behavioral problems and trained others to do so. It begins with my first job in 1957 as a high school teacher in a residential treatment center in New York and ends with my most recent position as a teacher trainer in Malawi, Africa.

I have included an abundance of anecdotes from my work with children and adolescents and with students in the departments of regular education, special education, psychology, and psychiatry of 16 universities in the United States, Africa, Europe, and Latin America that I anticipate will help me accomplish two important goals.

Perhaps you remember the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each man was allowed to examine one small part of the elephant. The blind man who examined the elephant's tail reported that the elephant was like a snake. The one who felt its leg said no, an elephant was more like a tree, and so on. Since none of them had the full picture, none of them understood what an elephant really was. When I started teaching I had no conception of the elephant, "teaching students with emotional and behavioral problems." Not having completed a regular education teacher- preparation program, much less a special education program, I hadn't had a chance to explore a single aspect of the elephant. However, I was eager to learn. I wanted to know the whole elephant.

Throughout the memoir I describe the *mistakes* I made at each stage of my learning about the elephant and the misconceptions and misunderstandings I brought with me to the job that caused me to make them. Hopefully, regular and special education teachers and teachers-in-training will be prompted by my experiences to question their beliefs and attitudes about children and adolescents with emotional

and behavioral problems and the best ways to educate them. And, by questioning them, they will avoid the kinds of mistakes their individual misconceptions and misunderstandings cause.

Secondly, I describe the *positive* things I have learned as a result of my attempts to grasp the whole elephant by formal studies in clinical psychology, neuropsychology, and the biological basis of behavior, as well as informal explorations of multicultural and gender issues. I also explain the positive things I have learned from my experiences teaching African American, Asian Pacific Island American, European American, and Latino students in the United States, as well as regular and special education teachers and teachers-in-training at home and abroad. I hope that sharing the positive knowledge I have acquired during my 42-year adventure will provide readers with some useful information, models, and shortcuts in their attempts to help students.

H.G.

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Chapter 1

MY FIRST TEACHING EXPERIENCE

DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION of the 1930s, without any kind of diploma or trade, it was tremendously difficult for my father to earn enough to feed us, clothe us, and pay the rent. For nine years, my parents had to make do any way they could. My father had three ways of making money in those days: peddling fruits and vegetables; buying and selling rags, paper, scrap metal, second-hand furniture, and other miscellaneous junk; and the occasional jobs he sometimes secured from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), a federal program designed to provide some employment for the unemployed. Occasionally, he fought a four-round fight at one of the local boxing clubs. My father knew what it meant to want to work and to be unable to do so through no fault of his own.

World War II changed all that. Suddenly, there was a great demand for labor. My father found work on the docks, first as a stevedore, and then as a welder, repairing ships that had been damaged in battle.

When the war ended, my father lost his good-paying job and we moved to the docks of Brooklyn. Sunset Park was the only green area for miles. There was a big, inviting pool in the park that cost ten cents–the same as a round trip carfare to the beach in Coney Island by subway. Since my friends and I were usually dimeless, we had to choose between climbing the pool fence, hopping the subway turnstile, jumping off one of the docks into the polluted East River when no one was looking, or doing without a swim.

Doing without and swimming in the river being the least attractive alternatives, they typically lost out to climbing the fence or hopping the turnstile.

There was a neighborhood movie theater, but the quarter it cost was way beyond our means. So we resorted to a number of techniques in order not to miss out on the movies. Sometimes, if we had the dough, we would all chip in and buy one ticket so someone could get in and open the emergency exit for the rest of us. If we couldn't come up with 25 cents, we would arrange for one of the ushers to open the door for us. Occasionally it was necessary to persuade them to cooperate.

We quit sneaking into the movies, climbing fences, and hopping turnstiles when we started earning money. It should have been clear to anyone that most of my friends were good kids. They did what they did only because they had no other way to get what other kids could get legally. My friends knew right from wrong. Their parents had taught them not to steal. At times, however, their circumstances made it difficult for them to put their knowledge into practice. Once they could afford to behave like upstanding citizens, most of them did.

There is another aspect of my life that I have to describe. From the time I started school, people recognized that I was smart. Before I had a chance to get too bored in the neighborhood school I attended, I was skipped from the second to the fourth grade. Later, my school guidance counselor advised my mother that the neighborhood junior high I was scheduled to attend wasn't suitable for someone with my academic potential. However, I could go to a different school if she insisted that I be assigned to a school where they taught Latin. So, I flourished in a junior high that offered a more academic program, while my friends floundered in the local school.

When we graduated from junior high, I attended

Stuyvesant High School, a school for gifted students, an hour subway ride away in Manhattan; my friends walked to Manual Training High School. I took academic, college preparatory courses; they learned how to work with their hands.

One day during my senior year, I was called to the principal's office. I was told to wear a suit to school the next day because I was to be interviewed by a Harvard recruiter. To make a long story short, the recruiter informed me that if I applied to Harvard and was accepted, I would receive whatever financial aid I required. That was an offer I couldn't refuse.

I wanted to be a teacher when I graduated. It was clear to me that I alone among all the kids in my neighborhood had been born lucky. They had no opportunity to get the kind of education that had changed the way I saw the world and understood things. No one was recruiting them for anything except the army. I wanted to help kids, like the ones I grew up with and had left behind on the docks, to get a good education, to do for some of them what Harvard had done for me. I enrolled in the summer session of an experimental teacher-training program. Six weeks later I had a provisional/emergency license and a job teaching students with emotional and behavioral problems.

The school where I started my career served about 50 young elementary school age children, one hundred adolescent males and 50 adolescent females. Originally it had been part of a walled-in facility for delinquent adolescent boys who spent most of their time working on a farm. By the time I started, the walls had been removed; it had become co-educational; and most of the adolescents spent their school time in various shops, learning trades like printing, beauty culture, automotive repairs, and so on. Those who weren't ready for a vocational program were in self-contained classes. Academics were included but not empha-