

STOP BULLYING THE TEACHER

It's tough being a teacher these days. I can remember back to the times when any potential trouble by the class would have been immediately nipped in the bud by subtle innuendos made by the teacher, reinforced by the hurling of the blackboard rubber towards the offending child. The latter invariably met its mark, and the resulting bruise would have been sported with great pride by the pupil for the following couple of days at least. I've also seen (and been subjected to) many a caning session, and even witnessed on occasion an unruly pupil being grabbed by the hair and pulled forcibly out of the classroom, before receiving a tirade of verbal (and sometimes physical) abuse by the alpha male (aka teacher). This would often be followed by a humiliating dunk of the offender's face in the nearest inkwell. Halcyon days!

My wife is a primary school teacher, and I think it's fair to say that she is one of the most even-tempered and gentle people I know. Both children and adults alike have on many occasions congratulated her on her teaching methods, which have, when necessary, centred on the approach of getting an errant child to understand the implications of its negative behaviour, and helping them to improve themselves as an individual. Nowadays apparently a teacher isn't even allowed to gently restrain a child for their own good and the benefit of others. There is no individual power of "last resort", and all a teacher can do is to involve the school's "Behaviour Manager", which at best gives the class time to erupt into an orgy of madness before the offender is taken away, and at worst gives the child an opportunity to make up their own version of events and pass this on to their aggrieved parents. Believe me

when I say working as a teacher in an inner city school in a place like Portsmouth does indeed have its challenges!

Bullying, however, doesn't stop there. In order to reach the top of the teacher tree in an inner-city school, one has to be a pretty tough cookie, in exactly the same way for anyone wishing to reach giddy heights in a large corporation. The individual concerned has to have, shall we say, certain traits that enable them to focus on their own career first, and everything else becomes secondary. It is, after all, the only way to make it to the top. One method used to ensure compliance in the ranks is to surround yourself with individuals that you know for certain will toe the corporate line, and the older one gets, the more individual (or "arsey") one becomes. Solution? Simply replace the "difficult" members with young, keen (and pliable) ones! How does one do this? Simple! Make the lives of those you want to get rid of as difficult as possible. Call me cynical, but working for over thirty years for the large corporates does tend to make me that way. However, mix in a bit of stoicism and the resulting recipe makes for an easier life.

So, enough said. My wife Chris and I discussed the situation over a number of bacchanalian evenings and decided the plan would be to find a new teaching job for her elsewhere, where she could make more use of her individuality and creativity. However, upon close scrutiny of local job opportunities and a couple of failed interviews, it soon became clear that Chris should open the net wider and keep an eye on jobs further afield. By this time we were pretty apathetic about life in England, and didn't hold out too much hope of finding work abroad, as we had been through a similarly disappointing time a few years back, trying to find me IT work that would enable a subsequent move to Italy, France or the Netherlands, which were our favoured destinations at that time.

"Hey Jim, how do you fancy Seville?" Chris asked one evening whilst surfing the online international teaching job scene. "A new job has come up today where they're looking for a primary teacher to free up some time for the head of the lower school, and they're looking for someone to start next term. Do you think it's worth a try?"

"Why not?" I replied, "We're not getting anywhere at the moment, and a spell in the world's orange capital wouldn't be so bad". "It's hot there, isn't it?" I queried with hope in my voice, as it was below zero and raining in a typically English way (you know what I mean, where it doesn't really seem as though it is raining, but you get soaked from it anyway). Drizzle seems to be a really onomatopoeic word, doesn't it? Not so obvious as sizzle, but if someone says drizzle to me, I immediately consider a bout of self-harm and reach for the kitchen knife.

Chris duly applied for the teaching job, and we did a background check on Seville and the surrounding area. The school itself, although Spanish-owned, roughly followed the British curriculum, and all of the classes would be in English, ably assisted by a bi-lingual Teaching Assistant. A couple of Skype-based interviews ensued, and as luck would have it, Chris was offered the position. We were both relieved and elated. The former because it was getting perilously close to Christmas, and the latter because we were off to sunny climes! Chris had already spoken with her head-teacher, who had kindly agreed to shorten the required notice period if necessary. Why is it that Skype always sounds so easy, but to get it working in two-way video mode requires at least ten attempts? We had one-way audio, two-way audio, one-way video from Spain but only audio from England, and every single permutation! By the time Chris had accepted the position, we had done some calculations on the cost of living in Spain, as the salary offered was considerably less than a UK equivalent position. Accommodation costs were going to be far less than in the UK, due in part to Spain's

economic climate at the time, and we were looking to rent hopefully superior accommodation for a much lower monthly rent than we had at that time in the UK. Sums done, Chris accepted and our new life started.

By far the worst moment following our initial euphoria was when, at a family meet-up, we told our two daughters of the news. Vicky and Kim were both young adults by this time, had left home and were living their own lives with their respective boyfriends. However, we had gone through some pretty tough times together in the past when, aged only seven and four, their Mum had died of cancer. Life really can be cruel, and, as you would expect, we grew closer together and our dependency on one another increased as a result of those extremely sad times. Needless to say, they were both thoroughly shocked, but within a couple of days had come round to the idea of us living over a thousand miles apart, and individually congratulated us with real sincerity on our up-coming life in Spain. I learned afterwards that they had spent a lot of time together during those two days, discussing the situation and experiencing alternating emotions of anger, frustration, deep sadness and bewilderment, but reaching a level of understanding that only real love for their Dad and Step-Mum could have allowed them to achieve. We both love them dearly, and were simply amazed at what a mature outlook they took once they had got over their initial shock, and they both helped enormously in the following weeks of packing, moving and cleaning. Thank you Vicky and Kim, from the bottom of my heart. What a truly amazing pair you are, and what fortunate people we both are to have you in our lives.

Once we had told family and friends, and received positive feedback from most of them, we set about the logistics of the move. As anyone who has endured a house-move will know, it can be very expensive to maintain two dwellings at once, and so, money being a bit short, we agreed that Patch, our trusty twelve-year old Welsh Border Collie, and I, would drive over

to Andalucía as soon as possible once everything had been sorted out in the UK. Little did we know at this point that our loyal and trusted canine friend would cause quite a problem once we had moved. Luckily the school had agreed to pay for Chris's flight. They had, however, purchased a particular flight at the end of the week, which turned out to cause Chris an entire weekend of boredom and uncertainty. She would be met at Seville airport by the landlord of our new apartment (we later dubbed him "Juan one" - difficult to say with a part-Spanish, part-English accent!) and his daughter, who would act as interpreter, as her Dad spoke no English and Chris would have had no time to start learning Spanish. The ensuing rigmarole of obtaining residency permit, NIE and Social Security would be eased with the help of various school staff members who already had hard-won experience of the levels of bureaucracy required in performing even the simplest task involving members of the Spanish Civil Service.

We had about four weeks to go before Chris's departure, and so made the best of our time together as a family, as I would not be following for a couple of months, and we had no dates at that time for either daughter to visit. We reckoned it would take two months for me to sort everything out in England, but luckily we managed to reduce that to only one. We had just bought a car, as I was doing a fair amount of driving for a friend's business to bring in some extra cash whilst my own online art business was starting up, and I needed to be more mobile, as Chris used our old R-reg Corsa for her daily commute into Portsmouth. The new car had to be sold, and luckily for us the finance company we had arranged a loan through took it off our hands (for only a small profit, of course).

Vicky had bought Chris and I each a Spanish language course, and these turned out to be invaluable. Kim's parting gift was a really lovely collage of family photos that we keep

above our writing desk in the new lounge/dining room/study. Once again, how thoughtful of them both.

We had a family farewell meal on the eve of Chris's departure, and it all became quite teary and emotional. Up early the next day and I took Chris to Gatwick, where more emotions ensued. We hadn't been away on holiday for a few years, and the "pre-check-in" booths were quite a surprise to us both, as was the full-body scanner to Chris when she was invited to run the gauntlet. Haven't times changed since the 11th of September atrocity in New York? I used to work at NATS in Whiteley, and at times of high security risk the palaver of trying to get self and car through the security gates was unbelievable, but rightly so I guess. Do you remember the "Protect and Survive" leaflets that the government sent out to households in Britain in the 70's and 80's, outlining the steps required to prepare for nuclear attack, and what to do then if an attack took place? Scary times indeed.

Now that Chris had departed, I set about a concerted "pack and chuck" regime. The girls managed to do OK out of our "leftovers", but I couldn't help thinking at times they felt sorry for us and so just agreed to give some of our possessions a home. It reminds me of when Mieke, my late wife, was alive. She was deeply into etiquette, and had a remarkable memory that enabled us to prepare for visits by friends and family, whereby we always remembered to display whichever awful gift that had been given to us by our guests ten years previously. We got away with it for over fifteen years! After Mieke died, however, I designed and built my own mock-Georgian house in Fareham, when both Vicky and Kim were still in their teens. My aim was to hopefully introduce a contemporary, minimalist interior, and the girls scoffed at this, preferring (for some bizarre reason) to fill as much of the house with their belongings (and friends) thus shattering my attempts at keeping what they termed a "show home". Vicky, however, has since metamorphosed into a "de-clutter-bug", although she

keeps all of her "spare" stuff in the loft for ages, until it's time for the next cull, and off to the local "car booty". As for Kim, well, she prefers the "cosy" approach, although I never cease to be amazed when I visit her, as I reckon she has probably spent the past week on clearing up. When we lived in a tiny bungalow in Portchester, you couldn't even find Kim's bed under the mass of stuff in her room, let alone find the young lady you wish to inform that at two pm she may wish to consider getting up in time to shower and eat ready for going out again in the evening.

Rooms were slowly emptied of items not needed immediately in Spain, and the piles of boxes in the two rooms designated as "packing rooms" (one up, one down) correspondingly gained mass. Ever aware that all I could take had to fit into our old Corsa, along with me and the pooch, we had to keep moving stuff from the Pilas pile (alliterate away!) to the Other pile. Mum had agreed to keep a few things at hers for a few months, and seeing as she lives in Canterbury, it would be handily en-route to Folkestone and the Channel Tunnel. I hired a van through the company I drove for, and with Kim's muscles and Vicky's "eye for detail" we managed to pack the van and clean most of the house in record time. It was, however, a long-player for those of you with vinyl memories (no pun intended). Our very last meal was fish 'n chips in paper, washed down with bottles of beer. Oh what luxury!

Kim and I took the stuff to Mum, who almost had a heart attack when she saw the volume that equated to "a few things". We had already rigged up a pulley and rope mechanism above the loft trapdoor from a previous move, but on this occasion, despite the numerous trips to the local amenity tip and the considerate ownership take-overs by both Vicky and Kim, poor old Mum's bungalow really was creaking at the seams. Have you seen any of the works by the late, great, Anton Pieck? He was an extremely accomplished Dutch artist, whose individual approach included buildings with sagging roofs - the bungalow could have adorned any Pieck

painting without much alteration! However, it all went in (the house, garage and shed) and Kim and I returned to the now almost-empty house in Waterlooville the following day. After brief but poignant goodbyes with Vicky and Kim, I then drove back to Canterbury with Patch, where we spent a very enjoyable couple of days with my Mum, in preparation for my 1,200 mile trip to Pilas.