

## CHAPTER 12

### Paper Teacher

I often felt like George Plimpton, the writer and sports journalist who embarked on a Walter Mitty type life by attempting to participate in pro sports endeavors such as boxing, football, baseball and hockey and then writing about the experience in Sports Illustrated. His attempt at pro football was the source for his 1966 book, *Paper Lion* that became a feature film in 1968. He wasn't accepted by the team's actual players who immediately saw that he lacked any kind of athletic ability, and they hazed him mercilessly. In practice, he initially went to the wrong player to put his hands under center, lost yardage on the only plays they allowed him to call, and he even tripped over his own feet and sacked himself when dropping back to pass. I know the feeling.

Every day during my geometry, algebra assignment I stand up in front of the class feeling like a total fraud for even attempting to teach something that I don't grasp with the fluidity necessary to convey how to do it to a room full of bored teenagers. Many of them stay on their phones or just listen to music with their ear buds; walk around the room and interact with their friends as if they are in the basement of their homes, indifferent to my droning on and on about isosceles trapezoids or doing the math to find how many bags of sod you need to cover a huge lawn. I'm naked, vulnerable and exposed. It's not exactly a new feeling for me. I attempted stand-up comedy when I was 25, getting up at Open Mic night at the Comedy Club in Denver, once having to follow rising comic Rosanne Barr who totally killed it that night. It goes back to our basic needs to be approved and everybody, at some point, becomes our parents. You reveal all your flaws and neuroses when you put yourself out there like that.

I have had a reoccurring nightmare for decades. I'm back in college, but I'm always my current age. I know that I haven't done whatever work was needed, be it reading chapters, writing a paper or studying for a test. To complicate matters, I'm wandering around campus, having totally forgotten where the

building with my class is located or anything that clues me in to where I am. I have read up on this dream and consulted therapists when I had them and the books and psychologists seem to agree that dreams where you are back at school, but totally unprepared are a sign that you are suffering from Imposter Syndrome. When Harry Potter was informed that he was a wizard, he recoiled at the possibility, insisting that it must have been a mistake. He just knew that he couldn't be magical.

Perhaps that was why I donned the "Skittles" look, to hide the fact that I didn't belong there and who was I to think for one second that I could impart knowledge and wisdom to children looking up at me, hoping to get a magic elixir of facts that would make everything all right in their hardscrabble lives. Of course, they retreat behind the safety and comfort of their phones. They don't see me as their teacher, but a clown attempting to be both a ventriloquist and sleight-of-hand expert. It's all in the misdirection.

You can't let those thoughts permeate or else you'll be completely paralyzed. You must become the *Saturday Night Live* character, Stuart Smalley and look in the mirror and repeat your affirmation, "*I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And gosh darn it, these kids like me.*" After all, the administration has complete faith in you, but you often wonder if it's just that you're the best option they have and not based on your talent. I remind myself that I've been through this movie before. Nobody taught me how to establish and run an international film festival. You received no training about how to be an Information Manager at Olympic Games venues and there was no tutorial regarding creating, writing and producing a syndicated radio show. The biggest difference between those events and substitute teaching is that failing the prior mostly impacted me, while screwing up this gig can have an enormous, domino effect on children; children who are depending on you to help them develop their critical thinking and social skills, even if they don't understand that's the real purpose of high school.

George Plimpton failed miserably at every sport he attempted because of course he did. Pro athletes are elite. Even the bench players who rarely see any action are still in the top percentile of people in their respective sport. He went out there, screwed it up and wrote fascinating articles about the heightened

sense of the experience he received just from the attempt. He held his head up high, knowing that all the embarrassments were short-lived and that it was all a part of his true calling, writing, and in that he triumphed.

Writing this book isn't the same thing, not by a long shot. Regardless of potential sales, this can't be the achievement. It must be the ability to get a large percentage of the children in my charge to grasp the material and not lose ground until their *real* teacher gets back. I'm not a fake. I can't be. If all goes according to plan, I'll be doing this for three more years.