

How the Rabbi's Son Made Me Retire

A More-or-Less True Story

Note: The names in this story have been changed for no good reason except that I'm getting old, and I've forgotten the real names of some of the people in it. So I just went and changed everyone's name.

Sometimes, maybe our goals are a little . . . off.

I'd been teaching upper elementary school for five years when I decided to return to college. After completing my dissertation, I took a position as an assistant professor at the State University of New York (SUNY), Potsdam College, specializing in elementary science education. I taught there for four years and then decided to return to elementary teaching. Truth be told, I enjoyed teaching science more than I enjoyed teaching science-teaching.

Unfortunately, I made this decision in 2008, at the beginning of the Great Recession. All the public schools in the area were laying off teachers, not hiring them. I was, however, offered a position at a very prestigious private school in New York City. So my wife and I packed up and moved from Potsdam down to Sunnyside, in Queens, and I began teaching science at the Dalton School on the upper East Side of Manhattan.

One thing I liked about teaching at Dalton was that all the science teachers had their offices—well, actually their desks and bookshelves—in the same large room. Whenever a student had a science question that I couldn't answer, there was always someone in the room whom I could turn to for an explanation.

Compared to teaching in a public elementary school, Dalton was something of a paradise. The teachers were respected by the administration. Science education was considered important rather than treated as a distraction from teaching reading and math. I could buy supplies, and the school would reimburse me. There were rooms set aside exclusively for science classes, and elementary students had science class four times a week. This was all very different from what I experienced in public schools.

But shortly after starting there, something started nagging at me: I had given up a tenure-track faculty position at a college to return to the trenches—why? I'd assumed that I would go back to academia in time. So what was I hoping to achieve here, at Dalton? How would I know if I was accomplishing anything professionally? Or personally, for that matter?

What were my goals?

It took me almost two years to figure this out.

The first hint of what ultimately made classroom teaching meaningful to me arrived halfway through the first year. I was teaching a fifth-grade unit on human reproduction. Sex. I felt it was important to answer all students' questions as accurately and non-judgmentally as possible. We had gotten through most of the material and were literally at the climax of the unit: intercourse. Then, without warning, in one class, a student asked if it was possible for a man (i.e. his penis) to get stuck inside of a woman. I said that I didn't know, but that I'd never heard of that happening to humans. I could have stopped there, but instead I added: "I know it happens to dogs sometimes." Everyone started laughing. Some students didn't believe me, so I explained that I'd actually seen it happen once. This brought about general hilarity in the room, and on a roll, I elaborated:

One afternoon, I was in an open-air café in Korfu, a Greek island in the Ionian Sea, enjoying a quiet lunch with a friend. Suddenly there was this wild, cacophonous outburst as two dogs ran through the café, the male on top of the female with just his two hind legs touching the ground, both yelping in confused terror and crashing into chairs and tables, knocking things over and just creating a raucous chaos in that quaint, little eatery.

Poor William was laughing so hard that he fell out of his chair onto the floor. Still laughing and holding his stomach, he struggled to his feet and pushed his hand against the classroom door for balance. But he ended up pressing down on the door handle, which opened the door into the hallway and dumped William back down onto the floor and then closed behind him.

"Cool," I thought.

But I didn't appreciate the significance of this episode until the following year. Keep in mind, I was still struggling with the why-did-I-give-up-a-tenure-track-position-for-this and what-is-the-point issues. I was somewhat lost without concrete, measurable goals. Then one day after a science class ended and I sent the students on their way, I walked back toward the communal teacher's office. Along the way I passed a room full of 5th grade students but no teacher. Several students saw me and came running out quite distressed because Ms. Beam, their teacher, hadn't yet shown up for class. (Dalton 5th graders, bless them, tend to take their science education very seriously.)

Not to worry, I assured them. I was on my way to the science office and would try to find out what was going on. Several students, Ashton and Connie among them, tagged along with me, I guess just to make sure that I didn't get lost along the way or forget about their plight or totally garble the message or whatever.

I walked into the office and saw Mike McGlothlin, the department head, at his desk. I told him that the students in Ms. Beam's science class were upset because class was supposed to begin four minutes ago and Ms. Beam hadn't shown up yet.

"Oh, yeah," Mike said, "I'm covering that class for her today. Tell them that I'll be right there."

So I went back into the hallway, which was now filled with about three-fourths of the class—one wonders what the other 25% were up to—and told everyone: "It's okay. Ms. Beam is out right now, but we've got another teacher who's filling in for her, a good teacher. He's a little ugly, but he's really nice, and I think you'll like him."

Several students thought it was funny that I called a teacher ugly; Ashton found this characterization particularly amusing. He bent over laughing, and at the same time, Corinne chirped "Mr. Randi!" delightedly.

"Nooooo," I said. "Not *that* ugly."

At this point, Ashton lost it completely, falling to the floor and literally rolling around, laughing.

And that's when the epiphany struck: this is why I'm here!

I now had a tangible goal: once a year, I will make a student fall to the floor laughing. If I can do that, then I'll know I'm doing important work here, and leaving academia was the correct decision. This is how I can judge my value as a teacher.

And then, things turned dark.

The next school year came and went. Throughout the year, I cracked a few jokes and managed to make a few students laugh every now and then, but I was never able to get anyone rolling on the floor laughing. By the end of the year, I was downcast and insecure. I had failed. I was not an effective teacher. I tried to console myself: maybe it was just an off year; maybe it was just a particularly snotty group of students that year; whatever. It didn't matter. Next year I'll get two students rolling on the floor laughing, so it'll even out.

I'll bet you can guess.

Next year, my fourth year, no one fell to the floor laughing at any of my jokes. I did manage to get some kids crawling on the floor as they plotted out a route through the classroom during a robotics unit, but that was a shallow and disingenuous substitute for my real goal. It wasn't just dirty pants that I was after, it was the laughter. By year's end I was in despair. So much of my personal identity was wrapped up in my ability as a teacher, and my failure to achieve my goal two years in a row made me question my worth.

So I was receptive when, two-thirds through the next school year and still failing to get anyone rolling on the floor while laughing, someone emailed me and asked if I was interested in a teaching position at a different school closer to my home in Westchester County. I liked working at Dalton, but two-and-a-half years of failing to achieve success there made me a little more open-minded about changing the scenery. Maybe a new gig at a new school would help me get the old spark back.

I wrote back that I was interested. Before long, I was discussing the position with people at, what was then called, the Solomon Schecter School of Westchester County. The more I heard about the position, the more excited I was. They were without a science teacher that year and needed someone to be responsible for the third- through fifth-grade science program. In addition, they were creating a Maker Space and expecting the science teacher to oversee the completion of the room—including purchasing all the tools and materials—and to develop an elementary-level engineering program. I always believed in learning by doing, and this seemed like a good opportunity to put my ideas into practice.

As part of the selection process, I was invited to visit the school and present a science lesson. Despite my enthusiasm, I was still somewhat reluctant to leave the Dalton School; it was one of the most prestigious private schools in NYC, if not the whole country. But the chance to create a science program unencumbered by standardized curricula and testing was too tempting to pass up, so I prepared a lesson and scheduled a visit.

The school seemed pleasant enough; the building was older and not nearly as well-resourced as Dalton, but it was on a large, beautiful campus with ball fields, outdoor play areas, and wooded paths. I was taken aback when I saw the science lab, though. Since there was no science teacher that year, the room had been used for storage, and many tables were stacked high with boxes. It was pretty clear that any science program would have to be built from the ground up. I started having doubts.

And then I noticed the stools. They were round, without backs, and with shiny, thermoset plastic seats. In a word, they looked very slippery. Hmm. . . how hard could it be to get a kid to fall off one of these? I was immediately sold on Schechter.

Long story short: I got the position. And thus began five-and-a-half years of bitter disappointment.

Solomon Schechter was a Jewish Day School. I'm not Jewish, and I know very little about Judaism except that I think it's, like, half of Christianity somehow. The school was divided among two campuses: the K-5 Lower School, where I worked, and the Upper School in a nearby town for grades 6-12. Each campus had a rabbi on staff. Rabbi Becker was our lower school rabbi. I have no idea what her actual responsibilities were, but I guess she made sure that whatever we did at the school was okay with God. She must have been good at her job because the whole time I was there no one ever got struck by lightning or swallowed by a whale or anything. (There was a goose that got killed flying into one of the light poles in our parking lot, but I think that was more the wages of the goose's behavior than the school's.) Anyway, she was pleasant and easy-going, and we got along well. Ultimately, though, it was because of her kid that I decided to retire.

I liked my work there. The science was all hands-on. There were no textbooks or videos. Every class had a different discovery-based activity.

And the Maker Space was amazing. We'd stocked it with hand tools and some power tools and a great variety of construction materials.

I scoured the internet for fun design and construction challenges for my students. I also came up with plenty on my own, because I wanted some of the engineering challenges to complement what we were exploring in science class. Students were designing and building, among other things, devices to launch ping-pong balls into baskets, or rubber-band-powered cars that would stop at a certain distance, or zipline conveyors to ferry a toy dog and cat across the classroom. Almost without exception, the students rose to the challenges. Engineering class began with me talking for a few minutes to introduce a new challenge or perhaps suggest some design strategies, and then saying, "Okay, get to work." That was it! I'd just covered that class. The rest of the time I wandered around the room, offering advice or suggestions, or maybe showing a student how to use a new tool that they hadn't used before. Sometimes I'd just stand off to the side watching everyone working and think: "I can't believe I'm getting paid for this."

But more important than getting to create my own science program, or watching the students working in the Maker Space, was the fact that the kids usually liked my jokes. Well, at least, sometimes. I don't often brag, but if you asked my students if they thought I was a good teacher, I think most would probably say something along the lines of: "Well, he yells a lot, and he seems to have quite an ego, but he's pretty funny sometimes, and getting to work with tools is pretty cool, so yeah, I guess he's okay."

But even though I was enjoying my work, I never achieved any real success at Schechter School. That is, I'd never gotten anyone rolling on the floor, laughing. This created a nagging void that grew with each successive year. I tried to rationalize it, and I gave myself pep talks—all teachers struggle with not being able to get their students rolling on the floor, laughing; it comes with the territory. Just suck it up and get on with your job. But deep inside, I still felt like a failure.

I turned 65 years old my fifth year at Schechter School, which celebrated by changing its name to the Leffell School, and I began wondering how much longer I would continue teaching. Our children were all out of state, and my wife was suggesting that maybe we should consider moving closer to one of our kids someday. Altogether I'd been teaching for over 20 years, and retirement certainly seemed inevitable within the next few years. And after eight straight years without getting anyone falling out of their chair with laughter, I was slowly accepting that I would probably retire feeling incomplete and futile.

Judaism recognizes a holiday called Purim. The holiday commemorates the salvation of the Jews by the wily Queen Esther from a plot by the nasty Haman, prime minister of Persia, to exterminate them. Unlike many Jewish holidays, which tend to feature somber displays of guilt and penitence, Purim is a celebration, a day of "Whoopee, they didn't kill us!" At Leffell, they commemorated the event with skits and games and costumes and other fun activities. Mora Yana, the art teacher, always created a simple toy or noisemaker that all the students would make at some point during the day. I would help with this. Half the students went to the art room to make it, the other half came to the Maker Space.

My sixth year at Leffell, Mora Yana created this goofy, wobbly-type toy thing. Students would put a lump of clay inside a plastic Easter egg—although I doubt that we called them "Easter" eggs. Purim eggs? I can't remember; maybe we just called them plastic eggs. Anyway, they would then decorate them with googly eyes and tiny paper hats and stuff. The result was a

funny, clown-like head that, if you pushed it over with your finger, would wiggle back up into its original position.

I always enjoyed Purim at Schechter/Leffell. All I had to do was assist students in building their goofy clown-head toys and maybe help supervise a few games or contests. It was a day off from the constant pressures of science and engineering lessons. And I liked that I didn't have to plan anything, which was generally the most stressful part of my job. But three days before Purim, Rabbi Becker asked me to create a video explaining the science behind the clown-head toy that could be shown to all the students.

I was affronted and snittified. Not only was I now having to prepare something for a day I assumed I could coast through, but high-quality science videos take a long time to write and produce. (I know this because I have made numerous science videos, and none of them are high quality.) Three days was not enough time to produce a video, in my opinion. So I decided that I would make a video so bad that, after viewing it, Rabbi Baker would never ask me to make another science video again.

(Note: The subtitle describes this story as “more-or-less” true. The above paragraph is the less-true part. Actually, it's the untrue part. I enjoyed making goofy science videos, and this seemed like a fun challenge. But, when talking to Mora Yana about it, I pretended that I was annoyed and was planning to make one to guarantee that Rabbi Becker would never ask me to make another. So it's almost true.)

I made a video in which I attempted to look inside the plastic egg to see what made it stand back up after you pushed it over, but I couldn't separate the two halves and grew increasingly frustrated until finally I smashed the toy with a mallet and broke it open. It was silly, and it fit in well with the overall fun spirit of the day. (The video, called [How Does It Work?](#), is still available on YouTube.)

Several students and teachers told me they liked the video and thought it was funny. That pleased me. But at the end of the day, Mora Jennifer, a kindergarten teacher, stopped me in the hallway and told me that her class loved the video, and added that Stephen Becker, Rabbi Becker's son, was laughing so hard that he fell out of his chair!

Suddenly, angels were singing, and everything was right with the universe. I'd had a successful year! I had gotten my groove back. Next year, I'll have two students falling out of their chairs in laughter!

And then I thought: “But what if I don’t? What if, like last time, I go another eight years before someone else is rolling on the floor, laughing at me? At my age, I don’t think I could handle eight more years of failure.” I realized that I was at kind of a high point right now. If I retire at the end of this school year, I could leave at the crest of my career, basking in the glow of my self-awarded glory. And I remembered something one of my parents—I don’t remember which—told me when I was young: “Glenn, never be afraid to take the easy way out.” The best path forward was not clear to me. But the easiest path was.

So thank you, Stephen, for falling out of your chair. Even though I’ve never had you in class and don’t really know you, I am grateful to you, because you made it possible for me to retire believing that I had been a successful teacher.