

## **My Classroom – Years One and Two**

While the chapters in *The Book of IFs* are meant to be read in any order that you wish, this chapter is an exception to that rule. Before reading this chapter, please read the two-page-long [Chapter 6](#).

As [Chapter 6](#) will tell you, the purpose of this chapter is to relate what I learned as a teacher from my first two years of teaching. You will also learn that my first two years of teaching were already described in my *What To Do, Teacher?* Master's Degree Thesis. That description is much too long to include in this book.

My solution: Provide a summary here of what you might learn from *What To Do, Teacher?* and then, at the end of this chapter, provide a link to a PDF download of the related chapters for anyone who might be interested in learning more.

### **Denese**

Before the Years One and Two Summaries begin, however, I will share with you an email exchange I had with Denese, one of my students from my first and second years of teaching. Sometime in 2010, Denese sent me an email that was the beginning of the email exchange that follows:

### **Message from Denese**

To: info@center.edu

Subject: Mr. Lorton--My Favorite Teacher!!!

From: \_\_\_\_\_@\_\_\_\_\_

Hello Mr. Lorton!!!!!!!

I was a student of yours many years ago when you taught at Cortez Elementary School in Richmond, CA. I am now 54 years old, and I happened to be on Amazon and saw some of your books.... and I wondered to myself if this could possibly be the same innovative, water-polo playing teacher I had in the 5th and 6th grades. I saw your picture and I smiled. It is certainly you :)

At the time you were my teacher, you were dating Miss Baratta and you were attending Cal Berkeley. What a fond memory this is. You were the best teacher I have ever had in my life!!! I have talked about you to so many. I talked about the incentives you established to cause us to enjoy learning. You were a blessing, and because I had such an abusive father, you were the male [teacher] I looked up to. You brought a modicum of peace into my life and affirmation to my spirit. I was always smart... but you gave it a forum and put it on display. Thank you!!!

Well, I am a theology major, a Bible teacher and minister, and today I employ many of the skills learned by you to motivate others to learn. I was not surprised--although impressed, to see that your company has to do with innovation. You were my teaching hero. I have patterned myself after you in so many ways.

I am so proud of you. I know you will not remember me, since you motivated so many of us to achieve "A's" I am just another one of your success stories, and I so appreciate you!!! I certainly hope you are able to read this email, and it doesn't fall by the SPAM wayside. It would rejoice my heart to know you have received it.

One of your most impacted students.

Cassandra Denese \_\_\_\_\_

### **Bob's Response**



Denese,

I remember you quite well.

As an example of the many, many things I remember about you (as opposed to my just saying "I remember") -- On the very first day of my first year of teaching, there was a student waiting in line outside my classroom with a note pinned to her. The note said, "This is Virginia, she only speaks Spanish." I asked everyone in line if anybody spoke Spanish. Two hands went up — yours and Earl's. I picked you as Virginia's seatmate. Earl later told me, among other things, he had met Hitler, so I was lucky to have chosen you as Virginia's partner. I sat you and Virginia right in front of me, and I quickly learned that you did not speak Spanish at all. Every time I would say something to the class, you would turn to Virginia and repeat to her in English what I had just said. At the first break I asked you about why you had said you spoke Spanish

and you said that Virginia was your neighbor, and you were already used to getting her to understand. I may have remembered Virginia's name incorrectly because I was never too good with names and because she was not in our class for very many weeks, but I will always remember you quite fondly.

Do you remember in the sixth-grade when I negotiated an agreement between you and Valerie that was to avoid an after-school fight between the two of you. Valerie had hit you in the face earlier and she agreed to let you hit her in the face, for you to get even. You, Valerie, and I were alone in the portable classroom and Valerie let me wrap my arms around her and hold her so you could hit her. You gave her a pretty good slap to the face. Of course, unknown to all of us, Lois Montgomery's little sister was peering beneath the wooden window shutter and saw the whole thing which complicated matters a bit.

I remember a thousand other things about you, but if you can recall these two instances, you will know that I am remembering you quite well.

Yes, I was going to U.C. Berkeley while I was teaching you. And yes, I was dating Mary Baratta. Mary and I were married the summer between your fifth- and sixth-grade years. A few years after we were married, Mary came to me to tell me that it had recently become legal for women to keep their maiden names when they got married. Mary asked me if I would mind if she went back to using the name "Baratta". Mary was Italian but that name-identity was lost for her when she became a Lorton. At first, I said, "No problem!" but then I thought about it and said, If you do that, people will think we are divorced, so how about if you keep my name and I take yours? She agreed, and I had my last name legally changed to Baratta-Lorton.

Mary and I co-founded the Center for Innovation in Education as a non-profit organization whose purpose was and is to train elementary school teachers in methods for teaching math and reading. Since you addressed your e-mail to me at [info@center.edu](mailto:info@center.edu), I assume you have seen the Center's website at [www.center.edu](http://www.center.edu). Mary died in 1978. I wrote a tribute to her that is on the Center's website. You can find it by clicking on the blue Newsletter button on the left-hand side of the home page, then clicking on the Tribute to Mary Baratta-Lorton link in the Table of Contents.

So, which picture of me did you see? I have enclosed a recent photo taken with my two godsons. I have been helping their mother (a single parent at the time) raise them since they were born. Every August since they were four years old, we have had our pictures taken together. This

is the picture from last August. They are now 26. I am, of course, the old guy in the middle.

What have you been doing with your life since the sixth-grade?

Bob Baratta-Lorton

**Denese's Response**

Mr. Lorton,

You clearly remember me!!! I remember each incident you stated. I wonder where Earl is these days :) I am just overwhelmed by the tribute to Mrs. Baratta. I will need to respond tomorrow. I just need a moment to collect my emotions. I will e-mail you tomorrow.

It is so wonderful to hear from you.

Blessings!!

\*Cass\*

**Denese's response to Bob's brother Jack**

Hi Jack.

Please call me Cassandra. Thank you for your email. It touches me to know that my email to Mr. Lorton touched him. His impact on me has been far-reaching, as I am sure it has been with so many others. What amazes me is that after all of these years, he is still the only teacher whose effects I literally see in my daily life. He really imprinted himself on the canvas of my young spirit.

He was not an ordinary guy, and I was not destined to be ordinary, so we had to meet :) He showed me what an extraordinary educator looked like. When my daughter was in school (she is now 32), she had such a difficult time learning fractions. Even I couldn't explain the concept to her on a 4<sup>th</sup>-grade level. Her frustration saddened me.

Well, she had a teacher named Mrs. Tobias, who told me that if she could write a curriculum just for my daughter's way of learning and spend one-on-one time with her, she would enjoy math. She promised that my daughter would totally understand fractions within two weeks. I told Mrs. Tobias that years ago I had a teacher named Mr. Lorton who taught in a very unorthodox fashion, and the entire class loved learning at his hand. I expressed to her how Mr. Lorton made learning relevant.

Mrs. Tobias spent 8 days with my daughter, and she became a sensation in the field of math. She went around the entire house cutting things up so she could tell me what 'fraction' was in operation. All of my fruit was cut in various angles... now that the light was turned on!!! All because Mrs. Tobias took the time to give the time, and resist the status quo.

It is such a blessing to have unorthodox people in our lives that challenge us beyond our reach. If we are really blessed, we, too, become unorthodox for the right causes.

It has been a joy to share my regard for Mr. Lorton with someone who also regards him highly.

\*Cassandra\*

**Denese's response to Bob**

Mr. Lorton. (You have to know I can't call you Bob :)

I'm just elated at the opportunity of e-connecting with you. I needed a moment to share my memories of you with my daughter. She was equally emotional.

She said, "Mom, Grandma told me about him... that he was your favorite teacher, and your unorthodox methods of teaching stemmed from his influence. Wow, Mom, now I understand part of the reason you are such an enemy of ordinary!!!"

I find it ironic that I have been asked to speak at a Mother's Day Event, and my chosen topic is "The Power of Influence." Somewhere in my message, I will be talking about you.

Well, since I last saw you, I got married in my second year of college [Contra Costa] got a divorce at 21 because my husband was ultra-intimidated by my desire to go to UC-Berkeley. I was divorced, but had a gorgeous daughter who has now been married for 10 years, is now a mom of three girls, and she is attending Mills College in Oakland, and will be going to law school next year. Her husband is a pastor. Ministry is the family calling.

My granddaughter's favorite teacher is a man named Mr. Kaye, and she said he is her favorite because he makes her do what she can't do, and he always does what the other teachers don't do. Mr. K sounds a lot like Mr. L. She talks about him every day!! Imagine that.

\*Cassandra\*

**Message from Brother Jack and Bob's Response**

Bob,

What really amazes me, and I am sure Denese, is that you could relate some of your experiences involving her to her. Even though your body is falling apart before our very eyes, your mind is still sharp as a tack, if you disregard some of your political beliefs. What a wonderful feeling to know that you had such an effect on her. I am sure that there are many more who feel the same way about you.

Jack,

Jack,

Teachers remember their students. It is what we do. And, in Denese's case, I taught her for two years, in both fifth and sixth-grade. I try to be modest about some things, but not about myself as a teacher. Mary was once asked by one of our instructors who was the best teacher she ever saw, and she said "Bob". When I was a first-year teacher, our intern supervisors videotaped my students and me in my classroom to show my fellow intern teachers what was going on in my class. I was the only intern they videoed. I think I told you before that the general response by viewers to the video was that "The children seem to be floating on air."

Bob

**Message from Susan (the person in charge of Center Instructors) and Bob's Response**

Bob,

What a wonderful message to receive from a former student! Cassandra expressed herself beautifully. I loved her little details about you as a teacher that made her real for me, as she validated your stories as well. Of course, I'm curious what happened when Lois Montgomery's little sister saw the slapping incident. The message got cut off, and I was waiting to read the next part. These are the moments that raise us up. I'm glad that she found you. Teachers do make a difference, and if we are very lucky, we get to hear the epilogue.

Susan,

Susan,

Here is what happened after Lois Montgomery's little sister saw me holding Valerie, so Denese could slap her. When I said that her peeking in was unknown to all of us, that was only two-thirds true. Just after

the slapping, I saw little sister drop the corner of the wooden window covering, so I knew she had just seen what had happened, even though neither Denese nor Valerie had seen her.

Once my class came back in from recess, I told everyone exactly what had happened between Denese and Valerie. I also told them Lois's sister had seen what happened and would try to use it to get a fight going. I particularly praised Valerie for having agreed to the tit-for-tat solution to the problem. From my second year of teaching and beyond, it had always been my rule in class that there was to be NO fighting between classmates, and everyone understood this. Fortunately for me, this was in my second year of teaching and not my first. And, equally fortunately for me, all the sixth-graders in my class had had me as their teacher in fifth-grade, as well, and by this second year, we understood each other quite nicely.

Lois got along well in my classroom, but in the world outside, her family was big trouble. Lois was not in our school much longer because her mother volunteered to be treasurer of the P.T.A. and then ran off with all the money the P.T.A. collected in its fund-raising effort.

A side note about Valerie. Valerie was the only student from the five-week summer school class I taught in my intern summer of preparation who happened also to be in my regular fifth-grade classroom. She was perhaps my least favorite student in that summer school class. She was broody and sullen. When I saw her in line outside my classroom my first day of teaching regular fifth-grade, my thought was that if Valerie is typical of the rest of my class, I am in big trouble. However, one of the things I had learned while driving the Castilleja school bus was that I could suspend my dislikes and prejudices if I chose to, and, in Valerie's case, I chose to.

Valerie and I got along quite nicely during our two years together. As a student in my regular (as opposed to summer school) class (a class she liked very much), she was neither sullen nor grumpy. When I was holding Valerie for Denese to slap, I was impressed with how comfortably she relaxed into my arms. It was like she felt completely secure and trusting as I was holding her. I felt at that time a clear sense of how her's and my relationship had changed since she had been that dour summer school student.

Bob

## **My Classroom – Years One and Two Summary**

### **Year One**

In my first year of teaching, I focused all my attention on teaching my students to be good readers. It was during our reading time that my Intern Supervisors invariably chose to observe my progress as a new teacher. Since my reading program was going so well, they decided to videotape my class in action and show the video to my fellow Interns.

On the day of the filming, it was initially hard for my students to act naturally when there were strange men in class and all sorts of fascinating machines and microphones scattered about the room to distract attention from reading. Quite soon, though, the class settled down to work, and we almost, but not quite, forgot we were being filmed. When it was over, my students got to spend half an hour watching themselves on the monitor as a reward for their good performance.

The many observers who visited my class that year always came in the morning during our reading time. Every visitor praised my students. The chief wonder of the observers seemed to be the harmony present within the class. One observer told me after his observation that the children seemed to be floating on air. I thought he was crazy, but other observers began making similar statements. The children seemed free and happy, or they seemed to be flowing around the room to some pleasantly arranged pre-plan, and other such odd statements. The reaction from the viewers of the video also had my fellow interns, including Mary, making the “floating on air” or similar statements, as well.

On the afternoon of the filming, once school was out, I watched the videotape from beginning to end. For the first time, I was able to see my class not through the teacher's eyes but through the eyes of one who was there simply to observe.

My class surprised me, and I began to see what the other observers had been talking about. My students were engaged in more activities than I was aware were going on in my own classroom. A wide assortment of reading assignments were being carried out. There was a group of children designing and making puppets for a play that two of the children were creating. Two other children were working on a social studies project, while a few more had gone off to practice passages they were to recite for an audience reading on Friday. Every single student was busy doing something.

There, sitting on (not at) his desk as he always did, was the teacher. He was acting only as a consultant for the many activities going on in the room. The children in the class were running their lives as if he wasn't even there, except when his specific advice was needed, and, what

impressed me more, they were running things smoothly and well without any fighting and without any friction.

No, I didn't quite think that they were "floating on air," but I had never really given much thought before to the fact that nearly all our classroom problems came at times other than reading. During reading, as I was seeing on videotape, everyone was busily engaged in something that was his or hers to do and that he or she could do. There just didn't seem to be time for anything else...like fighting.

As I subsequently examined the patterns of behavior in my classroom more closely, I was not too surprised to find that the more interesting the lesson was, the fewer problems there were within the class. Knowing this didn't help me too much that first year, for I didn't have very many exciting lessons to offer beyond our reading time. However, I resolved to make all my lessons in year two as meaningful and pleasant for my next year's students as reading time had been for this year's class.

### **Year Two**

After Easter Vacation in my second year, my School District decided to give all teachers a minimum day so that they could have an in-service training session on any subject of their choosing. The lower three grades would get out at 12:30, while the upper grades would be released at 2:00. There was a problem with what to do with the lower grade teachers until we upper graders were free. I suggested that the first, second, and third-grade teachers be given time to observe the upper-grade rooms during the hour after lunch, when we would still be teaching, and they would be free. Since no one had any better idea, the observation would take place.

Twelve primary teachers visited my class. They were greeted by the sight of an upper-grade classroom where every child, from the brightest to the slowest, was actively engaged in doing something. The children were working singly or in groups of twos, threes, and fours. The noise level was very low (for the benefit of the observers and not necessarily typical), and there was a complete absence of any fighting or dissension one might expect in an inner-city classroom where there was so much freedom for the students to move about as they pleased.

All twelve teachers were favorably impressed. A second-grade teacher said that she wished she had my class and I, hers. A first-grade teacher said my class was a wonder to behold, there sure were advantages to being a man teacher. A third-grade teacher, also impressed, commented that she could do the same thing if only she had the parental support I obviously had. The most common comment was "I wish I had your kids!"

We had decided to use our in-service training time to learn more about our school-community workers and the various guidance counselors and school psychologists attached to our school. We were also to discuss with these people general behavior problems and what to do about them. One school psychologist was trying to explain image building to us and how self-government in the classroom might help the children accept more responsibility for themselves and their education and feel more a part of the class.

A fifth-grade teacher told the psychologist that he was asking the impossible. Referring to her children collectively as “these kids,” she said, “these kids can’t be trusted to rule themselves. They can’t even be trusted alone in the room for one minute. I have tried to give them a little responsibility, and they just can’t take it. You have to be on these kids every minute or they won’t do any work.” Her talk about “these kids” continued for some time and I wasn’t getting any happier. However, what I couldn’t understand was that nearly every teacher agreed with her about “these kids” even, to my personal shock, all but one of the teachers who had less than an hour before, seen “these kids” refuting every word that came out of that fifth-grade teacher’s mouth.

The teachers I had hoped would draw some conclusions about conditions in their own rooms from what they had seen in mine couldn’t reach any new opinions because they really hadn’t seen anything at all. Oh, they looked, alright, and they were impressed by what saw but they made no connection in their own minds between the children in my classroom and those in their own, even though most of the children in my room had at one time or another been students of the teachers who came to see us. And this same set of teachers had also been responsible for the bad comments that dotted the permanent records of my kids.

My kids were somehow different than their brothers and sisters in the lower grades. Being a male teacher made things easier. Upper grade students had the potential of being more cooperative, and so the excuses in their own minds ran. There were an abundance of reasons why my class was somehow different, somehow unrelated, and somehow irrelevant to the rest of the classes in our school. Once a teacher had convinced himself or herself that my children were in some mystic way unlike his or her own, then he or she was free to enjoy what he or she saw in my room without feeling any personal threat to his or her own teaching or his or her own self image as a teacher. I had hoped the teachers visiting my classroom would make the connection between their students and mine, and see what was true for my students could also be true for theirs. I had set my hopes too high.

## **What To Do, Teacher?**

[www.center.edu/WhatToDoTeacher.shtml](http://www.center.edu/WhatToDoTeacher.shtml)

### **My Classroom – Years One and Two**

If you wish to know what Denese was like as a student in my classroom, the **Denese** section on [page 2](#) of **Chapter 8 – My Children** contains my description of Denese in our first year together. The **Denese** section on [page 5](#) of **Chapter 12 – My Children – Year Two** contains my description of Denese in our second year together.

**(##) = Number of Pages in each chapter**

- Chapter 03 - The Six Weeks In-between (5)**
- Chapter 04 - School Begins (22)**
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- Chapter 08 - My Children (22)**
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- Chapter 11 - The Second Year (23)**
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- Chapter 13 - “These Kids” and Their Observers (8)**