

A Teaching Story

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I was never much good at detailed lesson plans. For me, teaching was more of a conversation—an ongoing dialogue about stories, real and fictional, and the journeys we share in classrooms and in life. I taught in two high schools, each for sixteen years, and I don't have any venerable lesson-planning books to show for it.

Ten years into my career at the first school, I taught a literature and writing elective to seniors. The students were not A.P. or honors students, but they were pretty involved in the course. In early March, the principal's note reminding me that he would observe the class as part of my bi-annual assessment was neither threatening nor exciting. He was a good man who saw himself as a caretaker for a school that was already functioning well. And I was far too busy to be much concerned about anybody's observation. I planned to teach Ernest Hemingway's *Indian Camp* that day, and I doubt I even mentioned the principal's visit to my students.

Indian Camp is a little story, no more than five pages, and ostensibly simple. A young boy, Nick, accompanies his father, a doctor, and his uncle to an Indian camp in rural Michigan where a pregnant woman is struggling to give birth. They go by rowboat at night, Nick's journey to and from the camp taking only a few hours. He witnesses things he has never seen or even thought about before, but at the end of the night he seems largely unchanged by the experience.

At the beginning of class, I handed out copies of the story and then read it aloud to the students. I had half a dozen questions jotted on an index card, but I didn't really use them. For the first few minutes, the students talked to me about the story. I nodded, sometimes paraphrased what somebody said, and intermittently reiterated some point made earlier in the discussion. As the students peeled away the layers of the story, they began to respond directly to each other. Occasionally, I'd ask a clarifying question: *At what moment did the pregnant woman's husband move? Where is Nick's uncle at dawn when the boy and his father are being rowed back across the water?* But mostly I let the students figure out what happened in the story and what it all suggested about the cycle of life and our personal journeys.

I didn't know then—and still don't know—if Hemingway himself understood *all* of the layers of his simple little story. But collectively, if not individually, the students seemed to understand them. They noticed things (Nick's uncle giving the Indians cigars, for instance) that I had not. They made stronger connections than I did to current social problems such as sexism and racial prejudice. The class could not have gone better if I had *planned* it. The discussion wended from one bright epiphany to another. If I had scripted it, there would have been fewer insights. The students' shared understanding of Nick's nocturnal journey took my breath—and the principal's.

Afterward, the principal raved. He thanked me profusely and complimented me far more than I thought necessary. Though embarrassing, it was all kind of nice—but the principal never seemed to realize that I really hadn't

done much of anything. I'd simply encouraged the conversation. I'd allowed the discussion to meander toward meaning. And, maybe, provided a waystation where the students could share an understanding of our life's journey for a few moments.