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Rowing the Bus

Paul Logan

Preview

If you could go back in time and undo one thing you are sorry for, what would it be? Such a long-regretted moment is the focus of Paul Logan's essay. While we can never turn back the clock, this story illustrates how we can do the next best thing: we can turn our regrets into valuable lessons in living.

Words to Watch

musty (3): stale or moldy in odor
trudge (5): walk in a heavy, tired way
brunt (6): greatest part
taunted (6): mocked and insulted
gait (7): manner of moving on foot
sinister (7): evil
distracted (9): interested in something else
stoic (13): emotionless
stricken (25): affected by painful emotions

When I was in elementary school, some older kids made me row the bus. Rowing meant that on the way to school I had to sit in the dirty bus aisle littered with paper, gum wads, and spitballs. Then I had to simulate the motion of rowing while the kids around me laughed and chanted, 1

“Row, row, row the bus.” I was forced to do this by a group of bullies who spent most of their time picking on me.

I was the perfect target for them. I was small. I had no father. And my mother, though she worked hard to support me, was unable to afford clothes and sneakers that were “cool.” Instead she dressed me in outfits that we got from “the bags”—hand-me-downs given as donations to a local church. 2

Each Wednesday, she’d bring several bags of clothes to the house and pull out musty^o, wrinkled shirts and worn bell-bottom pants that other families no longer wanted. I knew that people were kind to give things to us, but I hated wearing clothes that might have been donated by my classmates. Each time I wore something from the bags, I feared that the other kids might recognize something that was once theirs. 3

Besides my outdated clothes, I wore thick glasses, had crossed eyes, and spoke with a persistent lisp. For whatever reason, I had never learned to say the “s” sound properly, and I pronounced words that began with “th” as if they began with a “d.” In addition, because of my severely crossed eyes, I lacked the hand and eye coordination necessary to hit or catch flying objects. 4

As a result, footballs, baseballs, soccer balls and basketballs became my enemies. I knew, before I stepped on the field or court, that I would do something clumsy or foolish and that everyone would laugh at me. I feared humiliation so much that I became skillful at feigning illnesses to get out of gym class. Eventually I learned how to give myself low-grade fevers so the nurse would write me an excuse. It worked for a while, until the gym teachers caught on. When I did have to play, I was always the last one chosen to be on any team. In fact, team captains did everything in their power to make their opponents get stuck with me. When the unlucky team captain was forced to call my name, I would trudge^o over to the team, knowing that no one there liked or wanted me. For four years, from second through fifth grade, I prayed nightly for God to give me school days in which I would not be insulted, embarrassed, or made to feel ashamed. 5

I thought my prayers were answered when my mother decided to move during the summer before sixth grade. The move meant that I got to start sixth grade in a different school, a place where I had no reputation. Although the older kids laughed and snorted at me as soon as I got on my new bus—they couldn’t miss my thick glasses and strange clothes—I soon discovered that there was another kid who received the brunt^o of their insults. His name was George, and everyone made fun of him. The kids taunted^o him because he was skinny; they belittled him because he had acne that pocked and blotched his face, and they teased him because his voice was squeaky. During my first gym class at my new school, I wasn’t the last one chosen for kickball; George was. 6

George tried hard to be friends with me, coming up to me in the cafeteria on the first day of school. “Hi. My name’s George. Can I sit with you?” he asked with a peculiar squeakiness that made each word high-pitched and raspy. As I nodded for him to sit down, I noticed an uncomfortable silence in the cafeteria as many of the students who had mocked George’s clumsy gait^o during gym class began watching the two of us and whispering among themselves. By letting him sit with me, I had violated an unspoken law of school, a sinister^o code of childhood that demands there must always be someone to pick on. I began to realize two things. If I befriended George, I would soon receive the same treatment that I had gotten at my old school. If I stayed away from him, I might actually have a chance to escape being at the bottom. 7

Within days, the kids started taunting us whenever we were together. “Who’s your new little buddy, Georgie?” In the hallways, groups of students began mumbling about me just loud enough for me to hear, “Look, it’s George’s ugly boyfriend.” On the bus rides to and from school, wads of paper and wet chewing gum were tossed at me by the bigger, older kids in the back of the bus. 8

It became clear that my friendship with George was going to cause me several more years of misery at my new school. I decided to stop being friends with George. In class and at lunch, I spent less and less time with him. Sometimes I told him I was too busy to talk; other times I acted distracted^o and gave one-word responses to whatever he said. Our classmates, sensing that they had created a rift between George and me, intensified their attacks on him. Each day, George grew more desperate as he realized that the one person who could prevent him from being completely isolated was closing him off. I knew that I shouldn’t avoid him, that he was feeling the same way I felt for so long, but I was so afraid that my life would become the hell it had been in my old school that I continued to ignore him. 9

Then, at recess one day, the meanest kid in the school, Chris, decided he had had enough of George. He vowed that he was going to beat up George and anyone else who claimed to be his friend. A mob of kids formed and came after me. Chris led the way and cornered me near our school’s swing sets. He grabbed me by my shirt and raised his fist over my head. A huge gathering of kids surrounded us, urging him to beat me up, chanting “Go, Chris, go!” 10

“You’re Georgie’s new little boyfriend, aren’t you?” he yelled. The hot blast of his breath carried droplets of his spit into my face. In a complete betrayal of the only kid who was nice to me, I denied George’s friendship. 11

“No, I’m not George’s friend. I don’t like him. He’s stupid,” I blurted out. Several kids snickered and mumbled under their breath. Chris stared at me for a few seconds and then threw me to the ground. 12

“Wimp. Where’s George?” he demanded, standing over me. Someone pointed to George sitting alone on top of the monkey bars about thirty yards from where we were. He was watching me. Chris and his followers sprinted over to George and yanked him off the bars to the ground. Although the mob quickly encircled them, I could still see the two of them at the center of the crowd, looking at each other. George seemed stoic°, staring straight through Chris. I heard the familiar chant of “Go, Chris, go!” and watched as his fists began slamming into George’s head and body. His face bloodied and his nose broken, George crumpled to the ground and sobbed without even throwing a punch. The mob cheered with pleasure and darted off into the playground to avoid an approaching teacher. 13

Chris was suspended, and after a few days, George came back to school. I wanted to talk to him, to ask him how he was, to apologize for leaving him alone and for not trying to stop him from getting hurt. But I couldn’t go near him. Filled with shame for denying George and angered by my own cowardice, I never spoke to him again. 14

Several months later, without telling any students, George transferred to another school. Once in a while, in those last weeks before he left, I caught him watching me as I sat with the rest of the kids in the cafeteria. He never yelled at me or expressed anger, disappointment, or even sadness. Instead he just looked at me. 15

In the years that followed, George’s silent stare remained with me. It was there in eighth grade when I saw a gang of popular kids beat up a sixth-grader because, they said, he was “ugly and stupid.” It was there my first year in high school, when I saw a group of older kids steal another freshman’s clothes and throw them into the showers. It was there a year later, when I watched several seniors press a wad of chewing gum into the hair of a new girl on the bus. Each time that I witnessed another awkward, uncomfortable, scared kid being tormented, I thought of George, and gradually his haunting stare began to speak to me. No longer silent, it told me that every child who is picked on and taunted deserves better, that no one—no matter how big, strong, attractive or popular—has the right to abuse another person. 16

Finally, in my junior year when a loudmouthed, pink-skinned bully named Donald began picking on two freshmen on the bus, I could no longer deny George. Donald was crumpling a large wad of paper and preparing to bounce it off the back of the head of one of the young students when I interrupted him. 17

“Leave them alone, Don,” I said. By then I was six inches taller and, after two years of high-school wrestling, thirty pounds heavier than I had been in my freshman year. Though Donald was still two years older than me, he wasn’t much bigger. He stopped what he was doing, squinted and stared at me. 18

“What’s your problem, Paul?” 19

I felt the way I had many years earlier on the playground when I watched the mob of kids begin to surround George. 20

“Just leave them alone. They aren’t bothering you,” I responded quietly. 21

“What’s it to you?” he challenged. A glimpse of my own past, of rowing the bus, of being mocked for my clothes, my lisp, my glasses, and my absent father flashed in my mind. 22

“Just don’t mess with them. That’s all I am saying, Don.” My fingertips were tingling. The bus was silent. He got up from his seat and leaned over me, and I rose from my seat to face him. For a minute, both of us just stood there, without a word, staring. 23

“I’m just playing with them, Paul,” he said, chuckling. “You don’t have to go psycho on me or anything.” Then he shook his head, slapped me firmly on the chest with the back of his hand, and sat down. But he never threw that wad of paper. For the rest of the year, whenever I was on the bus, Don and the other troublemakers were noticeably quiet. 24

Although it has been years since my days on the playground and the school bus, George’s look still haunts me. Today, I see it on the faces of a few scared kids at my sister’s school—she is in fifth grade. Or once in a while I’ll catch a glimpse of someone like George on the evening news, in a story about a child who brought a gun to school to stop the kids from picking on him, or in a feature about a teenager who killed herself because everyone teased her. In each school, in almost every classroom, there is a George with a stricken^o face, hoping that someone nearby will be strong enough to be kind—despite what the crowd says—and brave enough to stand up against people who attack, tease or hurt those who are vulnerable. 25

If asked about their behavior, I’m sure the bullies would say, “What’s it to you? It’s just a joke. It’s nothing.” But to George and me, and everyone else who has been humiliated or laughed at or spat on, it is everything. No one should have to row the bus. 26

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. What do you think would have happened if Paul had stood up for George? Would it have made any difference?
3. Did your elementary or high school have bullies and victims similar to the ones in this story? How did they behave?

VOCABULARY CHECK

A. Circle the letter of the word or phrase that best completes each of the following four items.

1. In the sentence below, the word *simulate* means
 - a. sing.
 - b. ignore.
 - c. imitate.
 - d. stop.

“Then I had to simulate the motion of rowing while the kids around me laughed and chanted, ‘Row, row, row the bus.’” (Paragraph 1)

2. In the sentence below, the word *feigning* means
 - a. escaping.
 - b. faking.
 - c. recognizing.
 - d. curing.

“I feared humiliation so much that I became skillful at feigning illnesses to get out of gym class.” (Paragraph 5)

3. In the sentences below, the word *rift* means
 - a. friendship.
 - b. agreement.
 - c. break.
 - d. joke.

“I decided to stop being friends with George. . . . Our classmates, sensing that they had created a rift between George and me, intensified their attacks on him.” (Paragraph 9)

4. In the sentence below, the word *vulnerable* means
 - a. easily wounded.
 - b. courageous.
 - c. cruel.
 - d. physically large.

“In each school, in almost every classroom, there is a George . . . hoping that someone nearby will be . . . brave enough to stand up against people who attack, tease, or hurt those who are vulnerable.” (Paragraph 25)

- B.** Circle the letter of the answer that best completes each of the following four items. Each item uses a word (or form of a word) from “Words to Watch.”
5. When I looked over my teacher’s comments on my essay, I saw that my spelling had received the *brunt* of her criticism. I had
 - a. not made a single spelling error.
 - b. made a great many spelling errors.
 - c. made few spelling errors, but many grammatical errors.
 6. The audience shouted *taunts* at the band, such as
 - a. “You guys rule!”
 - b. “More! More!”
 - c. “Get off the stage and let a real band play!”
 7. We could tell from the woman’s *gait* that she
 - a. had not eaten all day.
 - b. was in a hurry.
 - c. was about to be interviewed for a job.
 8. My dad is so *stoic* that
 - a. no matter how tough his workday was, he always looks perfectly calm when he gets home.
 - b. he loses his temper and screams at parking meters, television sets, and computers.
 - c. he cries over sad scenes in movies, and even touching commercials.

READING CHECK

Central Point and Main Ideas

1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
 - a. Although Paul Logan was a target of other students’ abuse when he was a young boy, their attacks stopped as he grew taller and stronger.
 - b. When Logan moved to a different school, he discovered that another student, George, was the target of more bullying than he was.
 - c. Logan’s experience of being bullied and his shame at how he treated George eventually made him speak up for someone else who was teased.
 - d. Logan is ashamed that he did not stand up for George when George was being attacked by a bully on the playground.

2. Which sentence best expresses the main idea of paragraphs 2–4?
 - a. The first sentence of paragraph 2
 - b. The second sentence of paragraph 2
 - c. The first sentence of paragraph 3
 - d. The first sentence of paragraph 4
3. Which sentence best expresses the implied main idea of paragraph 5?
 - a. Because of Logan’s clumsiness, gym was a miserable experience for him in elementary school.
 - b. Because Logan hated gym so much, he made up excuses to avoid it.
 - c. The gym teacher caught on to Logan’s excuses.
 - d. Other students did not want Logan to be a member of their team when games were played.

Key Supporting Details

4. When Chris attacked George, George reacted by
 - a. fighting back hard.
 - b. shouting for Logan to help him.
 - c. running away.
 - d. accepting the beating.
5. Logan finally found the courage to stand up for abused students when he saw
 - a. Donald about to throw paper at a younger student.
 - b. older kids throwing a freshman’s clothes into the shower.
 - c. seniors putting bubble gum in a new student’s hair.
 - d. a gang beating up a sixth-grader whom they disliked.
6. Which of the following was *not* a reason Logan was teased?
 - a. He had crossed eyes.
 - b. He wore hand-me-down clothes.
 - c. He had a foreign accent.
 - d. He spoke with a lisp.

Inferences

7. We can conclude that when Logan began sixth grade at the new school, he
 - a. became quite popular.
 - b. began to dress more fashionably.
 - c. was relieved to find someone who was more unpopular than he was.
 - d. became a bully himself.

8. The author implies that
 - a. the kids who picked on George did not really intend to be cruel.
 - b. bullying can lead to terrible tragedies at schools.
 - c. his sister is the victim of teasing, much as he was.
 - d. George grew up to be a confident, well-adjusted person.
9. _____ TRUE OR FALSE? The author implies that as adults, he and George talked together about what had happened at their school.

The Writer's Craft

10. Logan begins his essay with
 - a. an anecdote that illustrates the humiliation he suffered.
 - b. a description of his elementary school.
 - c. a series of questions about the nature of bullying.
 - d. a comparison of his school experience with George's.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Paul Logan titled his selection “Rowing the Bus.” Yet very little of the essay actually deals with the incident the title describes—only the first and last paragraphs. Why do you think Logan chose that title?
2. Logan wanted to be kind to George, but he wanted even more to be accepted by the other students. Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation—where you wanted to do the right thing but felt that it had too high a price? Explain what happened.
3. Logan refers to “a sinister code of childhood that demands there must always be someone to pick on.” What does the phrase “a sinister code of childhood” mean to you? Why do children need someone to pick on?
4. The novelist Henry James once said, “Three things in human life are important. The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind.” Are there things that teachers, school administrators, parents, and other concerned adults can do to encourage young people to treat one another with kindness rather than cruelty?

PARAGRAPH ASSIGNMENTS

1. Logan writes, “In each school, in each classroom, there is a George with a stricken face.” Think of a person who filled the role of George in one of your classes. In a paragraph, describe why he or she was the target of bullying and what form that bullying took. Include a description of your own thoughts and actions regarding the student who was bullied. Your topic sentence could be something like the following: “In my eighth-grade class, _____ was a student who was often bullied.”
2. Because he was afraid that his life would be made miserable, the author decided to stop being friends with George. How do you feel about that decision? Do you think it was cruel? Understandable? Were there other options Logan might have tried? Write a paragraph in which you explain what you think of Logan’s decision and why. Suggest at least one other way he could have acted, and tell what you think the consequences might have been.

ESSAY ASSIGNMENTS

1. From reading this essay, and from your own observations, can you pick out several characteristics that many bullies share? Write an essay that supports this thesis statement: “Most bullies share certain characteristics.” In your essay, mention two or three qualities of bullies. Support your claim with evidence from the essay or from your own experience. In your concluding paragraph, you might discuss what these characteristics tell us about bullies.
2. Some students, like the author and George, are singled out as targets for bullying. But other students are singled out for different reasons, positive as well as negative. For instance, besides “The Target,” a school might have “The Brain,” “The Troublemaker,” “The Actor,” “The Jock,” “The Beauty,” “The Clown,” and other categories. Write an essay in which you describe two or three students in your school that have been singled out and labeled in this way. Explain what about each of them resulted in their unique status.