



Mom hates it when I act stupid.

I know, right? They're so annoying.

## FOREWORD

### **PUBLIC EDUCATION SEEMS TO BE IN BAD SHAPE.**

COVID-19 exposed long-standing ills ranging from entrenched inequality for students to teachers' job dissatisfaction, which has only increased lately because of rising vitriol and politicization surrounding teachers and public education. Public education is always in critical condition, but the patient seems to be in worse shape than usual.

So it's time to step back and remind ourselves of some basic truths. To begin with, *teaching is a noble profession, one where adults continually and as a matter of routine touch children's hearts, minds, and souls.* This may seem obvious, but it is startling that something this profound isn't really publicly acknowledged very

often. Second, most people get into and stay in teaching because something compels them to do so, not because teaching as a profession makes complete sense. As one marcher's sign declared during the 2019 strike by United Teachers of Los Angeles: "I'M IN IT FOR THE MONEY, said no teacher ever." Something else we seem to ignore is that good teachers love being around children and love the relationships they form with children. This book celebrates these facts and reminds us what they look and sound like.

The book is a collection of conversations between me and students and between the students themselves. I taught sixth grade in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and the genesis of the idea of writing down what students said was a fairly horrible event. I sat in my classroom during a conference period, which is a "free" period where teachers plan and correct papers and never have enough time to collaborate. I walked my team teacher, the teacher who taught math and science to the students I taught English and history.

"I was just in the Dean's office. Joyce got suspended," the teacher said.

"Makes sense."

"Her mother came to pick her up. Mom went up to her and said, 'Let's go, bitch.' Joyce said to her, 'Least I ain't the bitch that had the bitch.'"

That made me stop grading; even for the often harsh and bleak world that was LAUSD's Horace Mann Middle School at the time, this was noteworthy.

"You want to shock America, just write down what happens at this school," I said.

Said my team teacher, "You want to shock America, put web cams in the hallways of C block." 'C block' was the name we used for the "C" building (we were in "A" building), where the seventh

and eighth graders had their classes, and it tells you what teachers thought of it.

Some of what's in this book is a reconstruction of things that stuck in my head, but much of it is conversations I scribbled down when I had the chance. The students spoke with a mixture of slang, newly learned English, Spanglish, and what many linguists call African-American English and Chicano English, languages that have their own rule-governed grammars. For those who love the ever-changing diction of English and its neighbor languages, listening to precisely how students say what they say is always entertaining. And because many of my students cursed as a matter of routine, there are f-bombs aplenty; to soften it or to write f--- would be to lie.

I was privy to and part of these conversations because for years I kept my room open to students at nutrition (recess) and lunch, and sometimes before school, and present and former students came into my room to get away from the madding crowd. I had few rules during this time other than, "Don't be an idiot and don't irritate me." I would chat with students, catch up on e-mails, and get ready for the next class—all the while listening to what the students were saying as they drew on the white board, played Foosball (a departing teacher gave me a full-sized Foosball table), graded papers for me, did their homework, played on their Chromebooks, or just hung out. Some days there might be a dozen students, some days two or three.

Other times I chatted with students as we lined up outside my classroom. At my second school, where I spent most of my years, I was always fortunate not to have a classroom in a hallway, so there was no rush to clear the hall and get students into class. As the children settled outside the classroom and took their time getting in line, I'd chat with them, catch up on their lives, listen

to their complaints or observations, or answer their questions. At my second school there was also a lot of informal conversation during the dispersal of Chromebooks (web-only laptops) at the start of the day—first homeroom—and the collection of Chromebooks at the end of the day—second homeroom. Some of the conversations I overheard while walking down the halls or while outside on the yard.

These conversations will help readers see the world through the eyes of today's urban, economically-disadvantaged children of color, the population I taught. The conversations will remind everyone that education is not really about dispersing information: It's about relationships between students and teachers.

### **A Note On Names**

To protect students' privacy, I have changed their names. When it doesn't make things more confusing, I use "S1" or "S2" to indicate a student or "FS" for a female student or "MS" for a male student when it seemed to me that gender influenced the conversation.

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Hey mister! My baby brother's only two, and he can already put up the middle finger and say, "Foo you!"

## OVERVIEW

**THE EMOTIONS TEACHERS FEEL AND FACE EVERY** day range from humor to horror. Students say things which compel teachers to call the police and which make teachers laugh out loud. Two moments from my career sum this up.

*It's the morning before the first day of school, and, as I'm writing vocabulary words for the first unit on 5"x7" index cards, a female student I had for sixth grade the previous year walks into my room.*

**FS:** Hi, Mister. Anything I can do for you?

**Me:** Hey [student's name], great to see you! Uh, well, sure, you can copy this list onto these cards. [smiling] Print neatly, okay?

**FS:** [flatly] Sure, Mister.

*[I give her the materials, and she starts to do that.]*

**Me:** I'm glad you stopped by! How was your summer?

**FS:** Oh, I don't know...

*[As she works for a moment in silence, I sense that something is not right. I go over to where she's seated and crouch down across the table from her.]*

**Me:** *[student's name]*, what's going on? *[She starts to cry. I take her hands.]*

**FS:** *[after a moment]* Well...last week my stepfather tried to take my clothes off, so I grabbed a knife and threatened to stab him and stab myself.

**Me:** Oh. I'm so sorry that happened to you. You know what, stay right here and finish that for me, but then don't go anywhere, okay? *I go directly to the main office, find the administrator who is the dedicated reporter for suspected child abuse, and tell her; as she heads to my room I call the Los Angeles Police Department and start filling out the required forms.*

Or, the time I'm ushering students into the classroom at the start of the day as the last bell rings.

*A female student has been outside the door talking to friends from a different class, and upon hearing the bell, she sprints to the room but stops abruptly when she sees me.*

**FS:** Mister! You got a haircut! Finally!

That's teaching: the horrifying and the endearing.

For what follows, it will help if the reader knows a little about me and my classroom. I don't know if I was an especially effective teacher, and I don't know what my style was exactly, but "Mr. Henry's Ten Commandments," posted at the front of my room, summed up my philosophy.

## **Mr. Henry's Commandments**

- I. Read, Stop, Think, Respond
- II. Make Yourself Look Good And Sound Smart
- III. Read It Over Before You Turn It In
- IV. Once It's Good, Make It Interesting
- V. Remember That You Came Here Today To Make Mistakes
- VI. People With Power And Money Rarely Help People With Bad Manners
- VII. Don't Stop Somebody Else From Being Great
- VIII. Read Something Every Day
- IX.  $\text{Effort} \times \text{Ability} = \text{Skill}$
- X.  $\text{Skill} \times \text{Effort} = \text{Achievement}$

That was my philosophy, which evolved over time, of course. And who were the students? Well, at the start of every year, as an introduction to the concept of chronology for History class, I had students do a personal timeline, which would later be the basis for a personal memoir about one event. I had them write the three best things and three worst that happened to them and place them on a timeline. The worst things ranged from “watching my father shoot my mother” to “broke my skateboard,” and the best things ranged from “got a puppy” to “my brother got out of prison.” In other words, teachers in inner-city middle schools typically teach children who have had wonderfully commonplace upbringings and children who have had devastatingly horrible things happen to them.

That being said, here's a broad sampling of what children say and do away from their parents.





- You eat spicy chips now?
- You barely noticed? I've been eating them forever.

**Justine:** Mr. Henry, Louise got kissed at lunch! It was only on the cheek, though.

**Louise:** But I still have to take a shower!

*I call on Bruce to answer a question, but Diego blurts out the answer.*

**Monica:** [to Diego] Callate! You weren't called on!

**Diego:** I provided assistance. It's called *helping*.

*FS1 comes up to my desk as FS2 sits in the classroom correcting papers for me during lunch.*

**FS1:** Mister, somebody has a crush on me. What should I do?

**Me:** [having no clue] Well...uh...I...uh...

**FS2:** [piping up] Decide if you want to encourage him or ignore him.

**Me:** [relieved] There you go.

**FS1:** Thanks, Mister.

**Me:** Any time.

*Out of nowhere, as the class is working silently on a writing assignment, Juan gets up and walks over to me.*

**Juan:** Mister, can I change seats? Diana is irritating me.

**Me:** No.

**Juan:** But she's really irritating me.

**Me:** Get used to it. Some girl will be irritating you the rest of your life.

**Juan:** Really?

**Me:** Could very well happen.

**Juan:** *[really thinking about it]* Wow. *[After a moment of reflection he gets back to work.]*

**MS:** Mister, are you older than Spongebob?

**Me:** Well, I've been around longer than he has, so, yes.

**MS:** You mean when you were a kid, there was no Spongebob?

**Me:** Nope.

**MS:** Oh, man, you ARE old. No offense, Mister.

**Me:** None taken.

**MS2:** Mr. Henry, how old are you?

**Me:** I'm sixty.

**MS2:** Wow. When you die, I'm going to your funeral.

**MS1:** Me, too!

**MS3:** Me, too!

And soon the whole class agrees that they're going to my funeral.

**FS:** Guess what I heard last night, Mr. Henry?

**Me:** I don't know.

**FS:** Gunshots. At three a.m. It woke me up!

**Me:** Was anybody hurt?

**FS:** I don't know. I went back to sleep.

*We have read the Shel Silverstein poem "A Boy Named Sue," where a man tracks down the father who abandoned him, determined to kill him for naming him Sue.*

**Me:** Okay, let's think of some of Sue's character traits. What words would we use to describe Sue? And read or paraphrase the words from the poem that show you're right.

**S1:** He's determined. It says he traveled from town to town to find his father. He didn't stop.

**S2:** He's tough. It says he got part of his ear cut off, and he didn't stop fighting.

**S3:** Sue weak. He shoulda shot his daddy when he had the chance.

*After a student misbehaves in a profoundly age-inappropriate manner I reprimand him and give the class yet another inspirational talk about the benefits of not behaving in an anti-social manner. I conclude with:*

**Me:** ...and because that leads to something that will land you in jail.

**MS:** [to a classmate] I've been to jail. It's pretty good. You make lots of friends.

*A former student has spent a semester at another middle school, John Burroughs, which has students of a higher economic class. I see her back on campus for the first time.*

**Me:** Hey, Sandy, good to see you. How was Burroughs?

**Sandy:** Those kids all so weak.

**Me:** Weak?

**Sandy:** They be doin' their classwork, their homework, getting' to class on time...That's not me, Mr. Henry.

**Me:** Maybe it should be.

**Sandy:** Aw come on, Mr. Henry.

**Me:** How are your classes this year?

**Sandy:** Bad. I have all the dumb teachers.

*Jovana, who is my Teaching Assistant, grades all my papers, and even has my password to take roll and clean up my online gradebook, comes into my eighth grade homeroom with Doug.*

**Jovana:** Doug! Shut the fuck up!

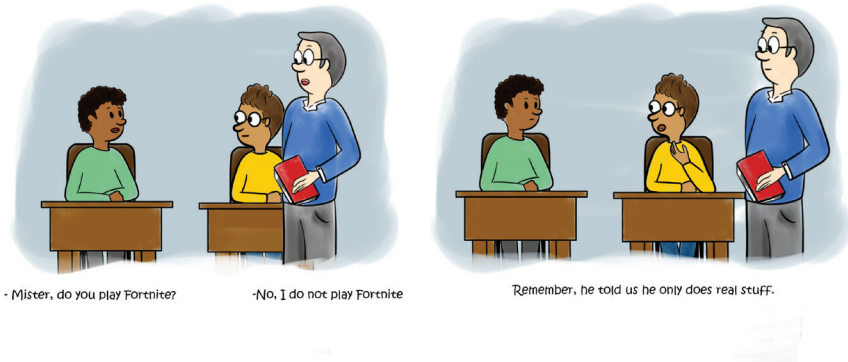
**Me:** Jovana, watch your mouth.

**Jovana:** Sorry, Mr. Henry. But tell Doug to shut up. He's annoying.

**Me:** *[Doug really is annoying.]* Doug, shut up. You're annoying.

**Me:** *[speaking to the whole class]* So, the next writing assignment is what we call a personal memoir. It's going to be about one event in your life. One thing that happened to you. Think about the best or the worst thing that ever happened. The best or the worst. The more powerful it is in your mind, the easier it will be to write about.

**Laura:** That's easy. The worst thing I ever did was go back to live with my parents.



*James is a bratty boy and both students and teachers find him annoying. He's fairly aggressive, he thinks he's tough, and he's quick to pick on other students. Carla is an athletic girl whose father, after whom she was named, died the summer before the start of sixth grade. Carla and her father were very close, and she is dealing with the loss with an astounding degree of dignity—and with an underlying sadness that breaks your heart. She is always well-mannered and respectful, and it would be easy to believe that someone told her that the best way to honor her father would be to behave in a way that would make him proud.*

*One day towards the end of a period, Carla stands up, looks down at James in the seat next to her, and quickly and easily flips over his desk. He's lying on the floor, and she kneels down and starts punching him in the face. Students immediately circle around and watch.*

**Me:** *Carla, stop. She doesn't. I'm in no hurry to stop her, and the students are happy to see James get hit. Carla, stop. She doesn't, but it's clear she's getting tired, and James has covered up and really isn't getting hurt, although he does start to cry. I walk over to her and gently place my hand on her shoulder. Carla, stop. She does. Go stand*

by my desk, please.

*As she does so I look down at James and see that he's not badly hurt. You okay, James? He continues crying. Then the bell for lunch rings. Okay, everyone but Carla and James can leave. Don't forget to do your homework. The class slowly starts to file out, and as I urge them to leave I turn to one of the students. Gerald, please ask Mr. Smith to come here.*

*Gerald nods. Mr. Smith has the same students for different subjects, and his room is directly across the hall. James sits in a chair, trying to stop his tears as I go up to Carla.*

**Me:** What's going on?

**Carla:** *[still seething]* He was talkin' 'bout my daddy. *[I believe her completely.]* You okay now? *[She nods.]* I'll talk to you later, all right? Go to lunch. Don't worry about this.

*Mr. Smith walks in. I whisper to him what happened. We sit next to James.*

**Me:** *[to James]* Are you hurt?

**James:** *[sniffing and wiping away the last of the tears]* No.

**Me:** Do you want to go to the nurse?

**James:** No.

**Me:** So you were talking about her father? *[He doesn't respond, so I assume it's true.]* If you want, we can go to the Dean right now, and we can report this. It's clear that she hit you first, so she'll probably get suspended.

**Mr. Smith:** And pretty soon the whole school will know you got beat up by a girl.

**Me:** Yep. In fact, that she really kicked your butt. But if you want to, we can go to the Dean right now.

**James:** No.

**Mr. Smith:** You're sure?

**James:** Yeah.

**Me:** Okay. You can go. *[James starts to walk out.]*

**Mr. Smith:** James. *[James stops.]* Unless you watch it, your mouth is gonna keep gettin' you beat up.

*James walks out of the room. Mr. Smith looks at me.*

**Mr. Smith:** Let me guess: one of those fights you take your time breaking up.

**Me:** Yep. He's such an asshole—and the whole school will find out, anyway. Who knows, maybe he'll learn.

**Mr. Smith:** Let's hope. You see the Lakers last night? Koh-bee!