

Having a Bad Day

Have you ever noticed that when things go wrong, it's never just *one* thing?

I'm a student teacher in the middle of my first practicum, and all these things keep *happening* to me. I don't know why. I'm a good person. I really am.

I'd done pretty well in my college courses. I'd even managed a little volunteer practice teaching after my first year of classes. I'd learned some things, and taught some okay lessons. The previous summer I'd even volunteered in a day-care. That had been fun. Mostly.

But this one was for real. And I needed things to turn around in a big hurry.

I'd shown up on the first day healthy, happy and eager to learn. As is expected, I'd spent those first few days just helping kids and observing my supervising teacher.

On the fourth day I was to teach my first lesson, in Social Studies, to a class of grade sixes. My supervising teacher and I had planned it together. But I'd woken up that morning with a nasty cold.

I'd been warned about that. First year teachers and student teachers tend to get sick a lot, being in close proximity for the first time to so many kids every day. Something about your immune system not being able to keep up, or something.

So there I was, in front of a class of pre-Junior High students, about to start my lesson ... with a runny nose, red eyes, and a persistent cough.

In fact, my first words were punctuated by coughs. Lots of them.

It was when I sneezed all over the boy in the first seat that I knew the lesson was going to be a disaster.

I know, I know. I was supposed to sneeze and cough into my elbow. The problem was that I had a textbook in one hand, my lesson notes in the other, and I couldn't see very well because I'd forgotten to put in my contacts that morning. I was just deciding which elbow to use when the sneeze took me by surprise.

I probably should have apologized. But I was too embarrassed, so I just kept going as if nothing had happened. But I did surreptitiously pass the boy one of my Kleenexes so he could wipe off his glasses.

I hope it was a clean one.

Somehow I managed to finish the lesson. I had certainly worked hard the night before to prepare it. And my delivery was pretty good ... I knew I was a little formal, and that I had to loosen up when I was teaching. But that was turning out to be a little difficult, considering that I had to stop every sixty seconds to blow my nose.

The used tissues were piling up on the desk beside me as I coughed my way through the last question, and assigned the homework. I had no idea what my supervising teacher at the back of the room was going to say.

She looked at me sympathetically as I sat down beside her. And then she immediately jumped up and moved to another desk. "Don't get too close, Marjorie. I don't want your cold!" But she was smiling.

She continued as I sat there wiping my runny nose. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off, and tomorrow too? Stay in bed and take something. You'll feel much better when you come back on Monday."

"All right, Kate. Thanks."

So I did as she suggested. I loaded up on vitamin C too, just in case, and spent most of the weekend in bed watching reruns of 'Full House'. I'd always loved that show. And *they* never seemed to get sick ...

On Monday morning I was feeling much better, and Kate gave me the morning off to prepare a Math lesson for the afternoon. For the grade sixes again.

Wanting desperately to make up for the fiasco that had been my first lesson, I made sure my plan was perfect. I even wrote out every single question I was going to ask the students. I dug out my sheet of 'positive reinforcement' replies and read them over so I'd have a few to use. (It sounds kind of silly after you've said 'Good job!' seventeen times in one period).

I'd had lessons go bad before, when I'd tried teaching some classes after my first year of college. But those hadn't counted. These would.

I was just getting into the lesson. "What a great answer, Jordie! Now, let's all try some ..."

At that point, the fire alarm went off.

OK, I could handle this, even though Kate had left the room for a few minutes. I grabbed the attendance chart and had the students line up at the door. When they were ready they marched outside.

We made it to our assigned spot in the field, and I made sure that everyone was there. Then we waited.

I didn't know what the problem was, just that there was no fire. I was glad about that. I'd left my laptop on the desk, and it had all my lesson notes and the Unit plans I'd been making in college, as well as my entire collection of Fred Penner songs.

Did I mention that I love Fred Penner? I may have to marry him some day.

We waited and waited. But it wasn't a drill either. We had to stand outside for about thirty minutes while they figured out what the problem was.

Thirty minutes is a long time for grade six students to stand in line without getting into trouble. But somehow we managed it. I only had to use my 'teacher voice' twice. And that was a good thing, because the remnants of my cold made me sound sort of like a bullfrog when I spoke loudly.

By the time we got back into the classroom, the period was over. I'd have to redo the lesson tomorrow.

"These things happen, Marjorie. You have to be ready to expect anything. Be prepared, but be flexible!" Kate was trying to be positive.

That was easy for her to say ... she'd been teaching for five years. I hadn't even taught two successful lessons in a row yet.

I started the lesson again, the next day. It was going really well. I was asking lots of questions, and I was involved with the students and their learning, just the way I was supposed to be.

About half-way through, Kate jumped up out of her desk and ran from the room with her hand over her mouth.

We could hear her throwing up, from all the way down the hall.

I carried on with my lesson, worried about Kate, and more than a little disheartened because the wonderful job I was doing wouldn't get graded without Kate there.

The Assistant Principal showed up at the door just as we were putting our books away. He called me out into the hallway. I didn't like the look I saw on his face.

"Marjorie ... Kate has gone home. She wasn't feeling well." That was an understatement. I'd heard her in the washroom.

"We can't find a replacement teacher anywhere. Would you be willing to act as a substitute teacher for the rest of the day? Uh ... Kate wasn't able to leave any plans for you ..."

“Sure, I can do that, I guess.”

He thanked me and left. There was no way I was going to say no. Student teachers should never say no to anything asked of them while they're in a school. Besides, he was keeping track of all the volunteer stuff I'd been doing, and was going to write me a nice reference letter when I eventually applied for a job somewhere. If I could just survive the next few years.

And I was pretty sure I could handle it. I'd been a substitute teacher for several days when I'd volunteered here before.

The next class was Grade 3/4/5 PhysEd. Kate's plan book just said 'Activity'. Apparently it was all in her head, or in some other book that I wouldn't be able to find. But it didn't matter. I took a few moments to locate the folder of PhysEd activities on my laptop that I'd prepared for one of my college courses, and managed to find something that would work.

We'd practice volleyball skills.

I wasn't sure whether these kids were ready for volleyball yet, but I knew they'd love it. We'd practice serving first. Everybody could have fun with that. The net was even up, in the gym.

I had them all line up on one side of the net, and demonstrated a few serves for them, both underhanded and overhanded. I didn't figure that any of them would be able to hit the ball overhand, so I went to stand between them and the net, ready to retrieve their feeble first attempts.

Did you know that volleyball could be dangerous? I never knew that.

My mistake was turning my back on them.

One of the grade five boys was quite tall, and apparently he had a wicked overhand serve. Or he just got lucky that first time. I never found out.

His serve hit me in the back of the head. I was only about fifteen feet away from him, and I discovered something else about volleyball that I'd never known before.

Volleyballs are hard. Especially when they hit you in the back of the head.

I'm repeating myself, I know. I must have been quite woozy for a while. I vaguely remember some of the girls in the class helping me to sit down. They're so cute. And they were really worried about me. One of them brought me an ice pack.

Eventually I found myself sitting in a chair in the office ... the ones where the bad kids get to sit. There were no bad kids there at the moment, which was a good thing, because there were donuts.

The Assistant Principal offered me the box. I kept it.

Two or three donuts later I felt up to facing the last class of the day. I was the grade six class again. I took the easy way out. They cleaned their lockers for forty minutes.

Clean lockers are a good thing, right?

The next morning my head was feeling much better. When I walked into the school, I smiled. Kate was back.

“Kate, are you feeling better?”

“A little, Marjorie. But I wanted to be here ... I’m supposed to be helping you. Next week you need to be able to take on a bigger teaching role ... but what are we going to do today? Did you ...”

I smiled at her. I knew I’d be here today, even if she wasn’t, and I’d prepared the next Math lesson. Maybe she could evaluate me. I told her.

“Great! Of course I’ll evaluate you. The one yesterday was going so well, at least, until I had to ... uh ... leave. How did the rest of it go?”

I told her that it had been a wonderful lesson. No sense in false modesty, right.

“That’s fantastic, Marjorie. OK, we’ll see how you do today!”

I was hoping that my string of bad luck was over, but that wasn’t the case.

I’d overplanned today’s lesson, just the way I’d been told I should. It’s way better to have more than you need, than to finish a lesson ten minutes early with nothing for the kids to do. My plan was seven pages long, including all the questions.

At noon I went out to my car to retrieve my lunch, where I’d forgotten it. My sandwiches were frozen solid. It was cold out.

On the way back to the front door, I slipped on a patch of ice and twisted my ankle.

I lay there for a few minutes feeling sorry for myself. Why was this happening to me?

Maybe it was a test. Maybe God wanted to see how I would handle adversity. Who knows.

Anyway, I picked myself up off the ground and hobbled into the school. My ankle really hurt.

“Marjorie! What happened?” It was the Assistant Principal. Why wasn’t he in class? This was embarrassing.

I told him that it was only twisted. There wasn’t any swelling. Remarkably, he was able to find me a pair of crutches. So I hobbled back to the classroom and ate my frozen sandwiches.

When Kate showed up I showed her the crutches. “What am I going to do?” I tried not to whine. I don’t know if I was successful.

“You can teach on crutches, Marjorie. The kids won’t care.”

“But how can I keep track of where I am in the lesson ...?” I showed her my seven pages of notes and questions. I’d done it on my laptop, and all the questions I was going to ask were highlighted in pale yellow. I’m so organized!

“Just read it over a few times. You’ll remember all the important stuff.”

That was easy for her to say. She’d been teaching for ...” But I was starting to repeat myself again.

“OK, sure. I’ll do my best.”

What else could go wrong? I didn’t want to find out.

But the lesson went remarkably well. I got the class involved right away, even though I had to hobble around the room from place to place. And I only fell over once.

I’d never been on crutches before.

The grade six girls were really good about helping me up. I really couldn’t fault them for giggling. I would have too, except that my ankle really hurt. But I did manage a smile.

“OK, let’s go over what we learned today!” I proceeded to ask students at random various assessment-type questions, to make sure they had learned something. Apparently they had.

Afterwards Kate sat down with me and went over the lesson. She thought it had gone really well too.

“I really liked it when you pretended to fall over, Marjorie. You really got the kids on your side!”

I think she was teasing me. But I wasn't going to say anything, just in case.

I'm happy to say that the rest of my practicum has been without incident. Except for the day when I wore a new blouse and forgot to take the tag off ... nobody noticed ... everything has gone as well as I could have hoped.

Near the end of the practicum I even managed to teach for most of a whole day. I even did recess supervision.

Have you ever noticed that when things go wrong, it's never just *one* thing? In my case, it had been a lot of things. But Kate gave me an 'A'. And the rest of the staff got me a small trophy that said 'Most Accident-Prone Student Teacher'.

I think the Assistant Principal must have put them up to it.