

My First Day of High School

I was never fond of school and despise compulsory activity. As an adult, I often have difficulty reconciling the obligations to myself with the statutory servitude of the “*free world*.” I have had several career success and failures forcing the acceptance of my ideas and beliefs. I want to provide a good life for my family but cannot stomach the political playing field that must be navigated in order to get ahead or survive. When reflecting on my experiences in public school I often yearn to go back in time. If only I could infuse the young Sean with my current fortitude to compel others to take me seriously.

I have always enjoyed learning. Reading, writing and drawing are still my favorite pastimes. However, I despised the institution of public school. The inspirational teachers were rare. To reach them I had to endure the insufferable hacks who had no business instructing children in their myopic lies about history. Worse, the approach of shouting ever louder when a student did not understand the logic of a lesson was ripped straight from British colonialism. Nevertheless, I was looking forward to my first day of high school. As a Navy brat, I developed a talent for making friends. I love exploring new places and meeting different people. When I reached my 18th birthday, this would translate into wanderlust. While others focused on their careers and educations, my sights were set on the horizon. My mind begged to know what I was missing out on. Thus, my first day of high school would be an adventure that I embraced with wide-eyed innocence.

Whitman had two middle and four elementary schools in the days before condominiums replaced most buildings. However, the high school was regional. It shared its name and students with Hanson Massachusetts. Homeroom was not too bad. Mr. Ballard’s stiff brown suit and Joe Friday haircut belied his humanity. Most of the other students were either from the other middle schools or Hanson. I took my seat and thought I heard someone say “*dirtball*.” I was not sure whom it would have been directed at or if I even heard correctly, so I ignored it. We were given our schedules and dispersed when the bell rang.

Each class was smaller than the last. Although the number of students remained large, the walls seemed to be closing. More names carried over the teacher’s discussions. “*Dirtbag, Scumbag, Faggot, and Queer*” resounded more in each period. There was no mistaking it; I was the target of the jeers. Whenever I turned to look at the perpetrators I was met with laughing faces. Granted, my hair was a tangled mess of bushy waves, curls, and cowlicks. Did this warrant all the names and accusations of less than adequate hygiene? The air was thick with menace. Every taunt ricocheted off the suffocating walls. Insults hissed just behind my ears. The teachers did nothing to reprimand the offenders. Some faculty members even chuckled. No one would come to my aid.

I walked a gauntlet of humiliation between each class. Balled up paper was hurled at me from every angle. Kids turned and laughed in my face. The heckling raised crescendos of anguish. I did not respond. I did not cry. I did not stop to fight or ask them why. I only faced forward and walked. Regardless of the surface calm, inside me brewed a contempt that would fuel my actions for the next three years. As I walked towards the gym class, I saw the coaches. Their large

muscles and crew cuts would be of little comfort to me. They chuckled as I walked into the gymnasium.

The stadium seats were open. Kids were filing in to occupy islands of corduroys. I grabbed a seat towards the front. I barely knew anyone. The few that I did recognize ignored me. The shrill tweet of a whistle silenced the din. I was relieved for a moment when the taunts had dissolved. The coaches discussed the militaristic nature of the class. We would line up at the beginning. They would bark out the row call by last name first and first name last. We would shout “*Here*” in response. If anyone did not have a uniform (*standard issue gym shorts, tee shirt, sox and sneakers*) that person would instead call out “*N.U.*”: no uniform. The names began to punctuate the coaches’ instructions. Then came the cavalcade of snorts and laughter.

“*You got gum in yer hair dirtbag,*” a lone voice above the din shouted. I felt around my bushy mop. I found the chewed wad clinging to my thicket of curls. More gibes filled the air. “*Idiot, Moron, Get a Haircut, Scumbag,*” now joined the chorus. Oxygen could not move into my lungs. My hands shook. My legs were sweating. “*Am I urinating?*” I wondered. One of the gym teachers beckoned me forward. His large banana hands grabbed my puny arms and turned me.

“*Yep, you got gum in your hair,*” he said letting go of my arm. When I righted myself, I saw that he was stifling his laughter. “*Go to the nurse’s office and have her cut it out.*”

“*Do I need a pass?*” I asked. My voice cracked just above a whisper. My chest was pounding. I felt fire inside my face. The large sneering smirk before me seethed hatred through my veins. I would not turn to face the bastards behind me. Instead, I focused on the white 200-pound gorilla, with a whistle around his neck.

“*No,*” he snickered. “*Just go.*” When I walked out the door, I heard the laughter. What I did not hear was any reprimands. No punishments came for the perpetrators of elitist torment. This was the first of many times that I would be banished from class after being assaulted, but the only time the nurse’s office was my destination. The following years would see me escorted by the security officer to the principal’s office, in-school suspension and even being shoved out the door and told to leave.

Tears welled in the bottom lid of my eyes as I walked down the hall. I fought them back before seeing the nurse. I would never give them the satisfaction of breaking me. I entered her office and explained what happened.

“*This is disgusting,*” she exclaimed. “*I will cut this out today, but you need to get a haircut because I will not do this again.*” She continued to berate me. Her tongue lashed at me, kicking a wounded dog in the ribs. Just when I thought she could not hurt my pride further, she unceremoniously grabbed the offending tufts of hair and chopped a large chunk out. As messy as my tangled webs of curls were, it was not hacked up until that moment. I left her office when the bell rang. My shoulders slumped down. My head hung low. I could feel a breeze in the spot she cut. Yet, I did not get a haircut after that. It would be another year before I would consider it.

A couple of months later I would stand before a mirror bawling my eyes out, lopping off large hunks of my hair. After my first day of high school, kids called my house and threatened me daily. People were yelling horrible things from cars everywhere I went. I grew to favor the solitude of the woods. Whitman/Hanson was Lord of the Flies and I was Simon. The last straw came during a gym class where I was cornered by several jocks. They threatened me. If I did not get a haircut by the next day, they would cut it all off with their buck knives. So that night I stood before my mirror: crying, cutting, and cursing.

“You want my haircut, you got it.” The words barely choked from my throat. From there forward my hair was a horrific mess. It was a cross between Robert Smith of the Cure and pre-afro Jimi Hendrix. When that wad of gum hit my hair on that first day, something inside of me awoke. I have always had a fierce anti-authoritarian streak but what came out in those years was a monster. I hated high school and did everything in my power to undermine it. Whereas I could not possibly battle the Neanderthals and preppies without being beaten severely, I knew the faculty could not touch me. A power struggle ensued between the school authorities and me. Until I officially quit and took the GED test, all my efforts went into shattering the façade that the principal and her lackeys exhibited.

My high school experiences resonate deeply within me. Usually, my family, work, and school consume my time. I also enjoy the company of friends, getting tattooed, and carrying on with multiple projects to feed my creative spirit. Yet, occasionally I see kids being bullied in the news or closer to home. The recent video depicting three jocks beating up a middle school kid in Bridgewater has fueled my hostility towards aggressors. Although I have many interesting experiences to write about, this topic has gripped my imagination. The catalyst of my high school rebellion was that wad of gum: the spitball heard round the world. My reaction was to lash out and undermine the authorities that fostered the brutal cross that I was forced to bear. I blamed the jocks for their barbarous conduct but hated the school authorities. In many ways, this still feeds my idealism. I hold myself to be a humanist. I have been called a socialist, Marxist, commie, and even a traitor because I care about the plight of people. I blame the myopic views of Tea Partiers and Conservatives yet hate the corrupt politicians and the corporate autocrats who own them.

I wish I could look back at my high school years with a clear mind or a mature perspective. I do not have it in me to do so. I see my experience as a shared nightmare. I want others to read this and feel my pain and anger—to know what I know. Many schools still shelter bullies and punish the victims. That Bridgewater student was bullied for over a year before the video was unleashed on YouTube. His mother had hired a lawyer to draft a letter to the school when the principal ignored her pleas. Now that school claims a *“Zero Tolerance”* policy regarding bullying. This is clearly a lie.

My belief is that I am being challenged to find an effective way to combat bullying. Tougher laws only encourage schools to hide evidence of their complicity. The real weapon is education. Our children must all be taught the importance of acceptance, compassion, and diversity. When I look at the woods, I see different types of trees with a plethora of colors and shapes. Even within a specific genus, there is exclusivity. Every tree and every leaf have their own unique character. Yet, when I view them as a whole, I am confronted with a beauty whose magnitude is beyond

words. This is how society should be. Individuality should be encouraged because we all contribute to an eternal humanity.