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Lost Boy

In Peter Pan, the lost boys enjoy living in Neverland, but eventually, the story goes, they all grow up. They go to their offices “each carrying a little bag and an umbrella.” One became an engine-driver; one “married a lady of title, and so he became a lord.” One “doesn’t know any story to tell his children.” They’re not lost any more (or at least not in the same way) except for Peter himself, whose innocence and forgetfulness can only represent the lost part of all of us.

The lost boys, when they lived with Peter, enjoyed the cave and fighting with the pirates. It wasn’t so bad to be lost. But what if a boy was really lost? Instead of living in a jolly underground cave, being sprinkled with fairy dust that enables him to fly, what if he looked like this:

He sat alone at his desk, and I say alone, because although each student has his own space, for this student it was as if he was encased in a bubble. He talked to no one. He passed no notes. He made no eye contact. Occasionally, another student would say something to him. Once a student complimented him on a drawing he had done, and the boy just smiled, a little, tiny, barely-there smile with a hint of superiority. He said nothing. Soon

students started to talk about him as if he wasn’t there, although they said nothing cruel. It was as if he was floating out on a lake somewhere while the rest of the class stood on the shore.

He usually wore the same clothes, mostly black or sometimes the same yellow sports jersey, over and over. He was pale, but not unhealthy looking. In class, he’d draw sometimes, but drawing did not connect him to anyone. He turned in no homework, no projects, no papers. I’ll call him Bartleby. Like Herman Melville’s Bartleby, he would ‘prefer not to.’ He passively resisted any engagement or activity.. Occasionally, he’d put a few answers on a test or quiz. His grade was about 6% and he didn’t seem to mind. I tried talking to him; I urged him to try, I asked him if anything was wrong. This was met with monosyllables and minimal head motions. He was repeating the class. I went to his other teachers and asked them what they thought. They said he was probably just biding his time until he turned 16, and then he’d drop out.

One day, I thought I might be able to spark his interest. I guess I did...in a way.

The assignment was creative writing. We had just finished reading a portion of the Odyssey. I asked the students to write an extra adventure for Odysseus. The only requirement was that he had to triumph over an obstacle. That was it. Most kids came up with Odyssey-derived adventures with monsters or

seductive enchantresses. One person had Odysseus battling alien invaders. I saw Bartleby pick up his pencil and begin writing in his notebook. (Now that I'm thinking about it again, I'm surprised he brought his notebook to class, but he did, every day.) I thought "Wow! Maybe that's it. Creative writing is the thing that will motivate him!" I watched, amazed, as he filled page after page with small, neat, faint writing. I was so excited. I couldn't wait to read his story. Finally, I thought, I've done something right for this kid.

The other kids handed me their stories, but Bartleby didn't. I walked over to his desk and asked him for it. He carefully ripped it out of his notebook and handed it to me, that same seldom-seen little smile on his face.

The following period was my planning time, and the first thing I did was read his story.

In this story, Odysseus was a soldier equipped with modern weaponry. He encountered a variety of obstacles, all of which he blew away in a hail of blood, brains, and intestines. Cows harmlessly chewing grass in a field moored in agony when this Odysseus was done with them; innocent civilians were strangled with their own guts. And these are only the parts I can remember three years later. Of course, the Odyssey itself is quite violent; in class, we had read the part about the Cyclops, which includes a line about the eyeball hissing and steaming when Odysseus

and his crew shove a spike into it. That part always elicits cries of disgust from at least a couple of students. But I found Bartleby's story disturbingly graphic nonetheless. I took it to his guidance counselor, who agreed with me that it was disturbing. I told her about his general demeanor and that I was worried about him. She said that since the story did follow the assignment and didn't threaten harm to the student who wrote it or anyone else, there was really nothing to be done, but she agreed to talk to him. She said she thought he had an unstable home life. When she called him in, she told me later, he barely responded to anything she said.

Life went on as usual for Bartleby in class. Around February, he stopped coming. Apparently, he had just turned sixteen.

I still wonder about this student, this enigma, and it makes me think about the limits of my profession. Now that I'm sitting here, writing about him, I still have more questions than answers. What was he like when he was younger? Why did he bring the notebook to class every day when he didn't seem to care about school? Was it to stop any teacher from hassling him for not having a notebook? Was it a refuge to draw and write in? What did he think of the other kids? Why did he write that story? Was it to shock me? Or was it just what he felt like writing? Was it like video-game fan fiction for him? What is he doing now? Is he happy? Maybe I'm wrong to think of him as lost.

Maybe he knew exactly where he was going

It leads me to other questions too: was it naïve of me to be disturbed by the story? Was there something else I should have tried to do for him? How can school be changed to better serve all students? I look around at my other students, and I observe that school requires a level of conformity; if you're reasonably well-adjusted already, school will be okay for you. If you're not...well, you get lost.