

Best Teacher I Ever Had

by David Owen

Extracted from Reader's Digest (Asian Edition), April 1991, pp. 47-48.

Mr. Whitson taught sixth-grade science. On the first day of class, he gave us a lecture about a creature called the cattywampus, an ill-adapted nocturnal animal that was wiped out during the Ice Age. He passed around a skull as he talked. We all took notes and later had a quiz.

When he returned my paper, I was shocked. There was a big red X through each of my answers. I had failed. There had to be some mistake! I had written down exactly what Mr. Whitson said. Then I realized that everyone in the class had failed. What had happened?

Very simple, Mr. Whitson explained. He had made up all the stuff about the cattywampus. There had never been any such animal. The information in our notes was, therefore, incorrect. Did we expect credit for incorrect answers?

Needless to say, we were outraged. What kind of test was this? And what kind of teacher?

We should have figured it out, Mr. Whitson said. After all, at the very moment he was passing around the cattywampus skull (in truth, a cat's), hadn't he been telling us that no trace of the animal remained? He had described its amazing night vision, the color of its fur and any number of other facts he couldn't have known. He had given the animal a ridiculous name, and we still hadn't been suspicious. The zeroes on our papers would be recorded in his grade book, he said. And they were.

Mr. Whitson said he hoped we would learn something from this experience. Teachers and textbooks are not infallible. In fact, no one is. He told us not to let our minds go to sleep, and to speak up if we ever thought he or the textbook was wrong.

Every class was an adventure with Mr. Whitson. I can still remember some science periods almost from beginning to end. One day he told us that his Volkswagen was a living organism. It took us two full days to put together a refutation he would accept. He didn't let us off the hook until we had proved not only that we knew what an organism was but also that we had the fortitude to stand up for the truth.

We carried our brand-new skepticism into all our classes. This caused problems for the other teachers, who weren't used to being challenged. Our

SPEAK LANGUAGES & TRAVEL THE WORLD

Learning a language opens the door to a wider world

www.bilingual-communications.weebly.com

history teacher would be lecturing about something, and then there would be clearings of the throat and someone would say 'cattywampus.'

If I'm ever asked to propose a solution to the problems in our schools, it will be Mr. Whitson. I haven't made any great scientific discoveries, but Mr. Whitson's class gave me and my classmates something just as important: the courage to look people in the eye and tell them they are wrong. He also showed us that you can have fun doing it.

Not everyone sees the value in this. I once told an elementary school teacher about Mr. Whitson. The teacher was appalled. "He shouldn't have tricked you like that," he said. I looked that teacher right in the eye and told him that he was wrong.

Now you tell us about a person, an animal, an invention or something that happened to you in a convincing way and let us decide if it is true or if it is a 'Cattywampus'.

PERSON

1. Where did he live?
2. When did he live?
3. What did he do?
4. Why did he do it?
5. Who did he do it with?

ANIMAL

1. Where did it live?
2. When did it live?
3. What did it do?
4. What did it look like?
5. Who did it eat?

INVENTION

1. Where did they invent it?
2. When did they invent it?
3. What did it do?
4. What did it look like?
5. Why did they invent it?

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

1. Where did it happen?
2. When did it happen?
3. What did you do do?
4. Who did you do it with?
5. What did was the experience like?

SPEAK LANGUAGES & TRAVEL THE WORLD

Learning a language opens the door to a wider world

www.bilingual-communications.weebly.com