

Bill Rea ? Whose class are you in, kids?

We are now into the week I used to dread as a kid, and I'm willing to bet I'm in good company.

Labour Day weekend is coming, and after that, the start of school for another year. Hard times when you're a kid, isn't it?

My late mother was a good and solid woman, but she was capable of being a touch sadistic, if she could get a laugh out of it. I think ahead to tomorrow, the Friday heading into the holiday weekend. At about 3:30 in the afternoon that day, she would make a point of telling me that summer vacation was over. I would get Saturdays and Sundays off from school anyway, and Labour Day is a statutory holiday, therefore not really part of the two-month long break.

And in later years, my older brother would make a point of making that same point to me, because big brothers have to find things to rub their little brothers' noses into occasionally.

While it's been more than 30 years since I was facing the start of school for another year, I still feel empathy for the kids, and always at this time, I find myself wondering where the summer went.

I remember the new school year was always a little hard to face, especially in the early grades. I usually knew who my teacher was going to be, and there was always a certain amount of apprehension. Were they going to live up (or down) to what I had been told? In Grade 1, I drew a rather young woman with a couple of teaching years behind her, and she and I didn't hit it off too well the first couple of days. She spent the bulk of the morning recess the second day yelling at me, and since I was a very shy, high-strung kid in a new school (my family had moved that summer), it was a rather rude introduction to the world of reality. Things improved from that rocky start, as she grew rather fond of me, and I her. She represents basically a happy memory.

My Grade 2 teacher was somewhat more seasoned, and she threw detentions around at a formidable clip.

In Grade 3, I drew a rookie, and I think she missed her calling. I guess she thought she had what it took to teach, but from what I recall, she would have made a fine prison warden. She was also the only teacher who ever sent me to see the principal. It was about this time that many of my male classmates were learning how to belch, and she had a problem with us practising in class, even gym class, as I learned the hard way.

The next year landed me in the class of another veteran, and I recall many of my classmates wondered if she was playing with a proverbial full deck. It was kind of frustrating being under the wing of someone whose sanity you questioned, even if you were just a kid. Despite that, I remember she always had control of her class. There was very little fooling around, although I also remember that she had few notorious trouble makers to deal with.

My memories of her have improved as the years have gone by. It was the last happy school year I would have for a while.

The opposite could be said about the guy I had the following year. My first male teacher was a religious fanatic who enjoyed beating up children, and these were the days when teachers were allowed to do such things. He did it with a certain amount of gusto, although he reserved it strictly for the boys. I remember one occasion when I was being victimized by his violence, much to his amusement, and my humiliation.

I learned some years later that my parents had been advised by others who knew of this guy to keep me out of his class. I was also told my parents seriously considered this advice, with my father settling the issue by realizing I was going to have to deal with difficult people in life, so I might as well start getting used to it. Some years later, he acknowledged that had been a mistake. It was the first and only time I ever heard him use profanity to refer to one of my teachers.

There was also an understanding in those days that parents were careful when it came to opposing teachers, because they were in a position to take it out on the kid.

To make matters worse, as the school year was winding down, this teacher made a point of dropping hints (in front of the class) that I was about to fail the year.

Of course I didn't tell my folks about that! In those days, one of the last things a kid wanted was to face the wrath of his or her parents on the verge of flunking. But the hints continued to drop, and I well remember the night when I finally broke down and told my parents what I was being told day after day.

Despite the concern about taking on teachers, my parents (after I had gone to bed) decided something had to be done.

Thus it came to pass that my mother was in the office the next morning, face to face with the principal (the same guy who had dressed me down a couple of years earlier for belching in gym class), demanding an explanation. I saw my mom take on many people over the years when her dander was up. I'm sure there were some store clerks who dreaded her approach. I suspect the principal needed some Roloids when she was finished with him.

She told me I had passed when I got home from school that afternoon. The best part of the episode came a couple of days later, as the class was heading home at the end of the day, and the teacher announced that everyone had passed.

Had he been called on the carpet? I suspect so.

An interesting sidebar to all this was there was a young woman who was teaching at the school, and there were indications there was something going on between her and the guy who had told me I was flunking. It was common knowledge that they would stroll together toward the nearby park during lunch hour ? I saw it lots of times.

And this woman became my Grade 6 teacher, and I know I was not her favourite student. I have sometimes wondered if she took it out on me for getting her colleague in trouble. That was not a terribly happy year.

I drew a fun teacher in Grade 7; a kindly and whimsical old gent. The problem was he was nearing retirement and was well beyond his prime.

The guy I had in Grade 8 was arguably the best of the bunch. There was a school reunion about six years ago, and I was delighted to get the chance to talk to him again.

I have two cousins and a sister-in-law who are teachers, and I suspect they are wondering little menaces they're going to have to deal with this year. Do they dread the start of the school year too?

I guess this week is a tough time for the other side of the equation too.

