

# *The Alphabet of A Second Grade Commuter*

by David M. Freed

I'm a second grade commuter and I really don't know why. The neighborhood school was good enough for kindergarten and first grade, but not good enough for second grade. They say I need special attention because I haven't learned the alphabet quite right. Therefore I must go to a new school. The bus ride involves a transfer at the bus garage because no school bus goes directly from my home to the other school. Diesel fumes and rain is my usual experience at the garage, but more than these, I know I'll never get a good seat. That would be a luxury for those who go to other schools. I must discover how to read in this place, so they say, but it seems marbles and a good thumb-shot is what really counts. (Steelies and Clearies are the best). Far from home and potential-after-school-friends, boy, this is a queer place!

"Flunker" is my new title now that I'm back in the neighborhood school. Apparently second grade doesn't count if you went to another place. I must do it again. Why? I really don't know. But one thing is clear: marbles and a good thumb-shot counts for nothing. What counts is history. Not American history, but whether you "passed" or "flunked." One person has designated himself as the historian for my peers: never lets them forget that I flunked second grade. Has a gang around him all the time, and harasses me with my past. Dad says I shouldn't fight, and I do my best, but I have grown tired of being the butt of their jokes.

Too many months and years of torment. I love my Dad, but its time to fight. "Tormentors! Meet my fist!" The Historian still has his gang around him, but I have size, and he knows my first target will be him if it comes to a fight. Now they know how hard I can kick and I have replaced the old reputation with a new one. "Watch out for Freed! If he gets mad, he'll punch you!" The reputation isn't quite true, but I use it to shield myself from others of my age, who hurt outsiders with words. It is better to be a feared outsider than a peer to be tormented.

Finally feeling good about school. I'm in 6th grade and I have the same teacher I had last year. I like her. She's beautiful and young and I learn a lot from her. (Ever notice how ugly most teachers are, with frowns on their faces, as they look at your school work). But the contentment doesn't last. They say they have too many students for each teacher and therefore I must leave and join another class. Why me? Why must I be put in this new class with a new teacher who is stupid. Maybe because I tore off my friend's shirt pocket when he pushed over my desk in 5th grade. But he started it. Why not move him?

At the bottom of the pile again: that's what it means to be a 7th grader in junior high. No one here really cares whether I flunked second grade or not, but being a loner for so many years has left its mark, and I find it hard to cultivate new friendships. As for the few friends I have, they are branching out and I see them less often. There is, however, one good thing about this school. I discovered it the first day in my science class. The science teacher (and football coach) was noticing my size and before I knew what was happening, I was putting on football pads for the first time. This strange game of running head-on into others would soon become my niche in school: a way of belonging. As for academics, the first year was challenging, but 8th and 9th grade were a breeze, and I never learned how to be competent in academic work. It didn't seem to matter anyway, for school work has always been my purgatory, so why worry about it. My real ticket to success was sports: as a player or maybe some day as a coach. I would leave the academics to others who could spell and express their thoughts on paper.

Its been about five months since I became a Christian, but in that short period of time my life has been radically changed. Though I embraced my faith in God with joy, I'm finding the implications of that decision a bit unnerving. God is trying to pull down my high places, to remove the gods of my heart, but I'm resisting the call. For its my "ticket to success" he wants: my football. He's telling me not to play in high school. But I protest, "Its the only thing I'm good at, Lord. Why that?" But the uneasy feeling persists and I can find no peace in the game. For the next two years of school there is a battle raging: between self-determinism and God-determinism. He's calling me to be a teacher, but I'm protesting, "God, that is not the path for me. There is nothing but defeat in that direction." Nevertheless, despite the bitterness of academic pursuits, I seem strangely pulled towards that calling which seems the most absurd for me. Its during my senior year, when I finally relinquish football altogether, that God begins to teach me the means of grace. And miracles happen.

I don't belong here. College is for those who have developed the skill of thinking. I can't write and 90 percent of the work involves writing. Oh God, where are you? I have searched the scriptures for a promise that would pertain to me, yet I am at a lose for inspiration. Why should I go on, my God? What hope can I have in the future?"

I'm so close, so close to that goal of graduating from college. Only two more quarters. But I just can't go on. Something has died in me and my soul is dry rot. I'm so weary of life's questions and I have been defeated soundly this time: there can be no miracle to deliver me from this maze of failures. It seems each time I make it over one hurdle, God ups the ante by intensifying the old difficulty, and then adds a new one on top of the old. Some people call such things, "challenges:" so be it, but if there is no valleys of rest between the peaks, who can find the courage to climb one more mountain? Anyway, I hear God's voice say, "The world needs those who have graduated from the school of hard-knocks and still believe in my loving kindness. You are to graduate from that school. Your soul must be prepared for the weight of glory by suffering defeat." All I can do is weep, and say, "Yes Lord, but grant me a resurrection of hope."

I have a new job. I'm working with emotionally disturbed children, and I actually enjoy it. Maybe because I understand, in part, some of their foundational frustrations. Foundational in that they can't get anywhere beyond or behind those frustrations, which seem to define their absolute Being (at least in their eyes). But I'm in danger of exposure, of being revealed, for as I try to teach them remedial language skills, I find myself in need of it. For at twenty-six, to my great shame, I can't recite the English alphabet without stumbling. Something within me freezes up, I feel uneasy, and self-doubt flogs my mind. So I hide behind an adult body, though I'm still that second grader who can't learn his alphabet quite right. Why, I ask? After all, I have learned both the Greek and Hebrew alphabets. I could even read simple sentences in both of those languages. Why is the alphabet of my native tongue so allusive to my mind? An answer eventually comes, called "negative learning," but it will be years after knowing the explanation before I could tell anybody this weakness of mine. Why so long? I really don't know. But one thing is clear: marbles and a good thumb-shot counts for nothing. What counts is history.

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