

# 6 CHAPTER

## SAVING THE WORLD

*Don't know much about history,*

*Don't know much biology.*

—SAM COOKE, “WONDERFUL WORLD”

God does have a sense of humor, no question. After watching me terrorize teachers for years, the Almighty dropped a teaching job right into my lap. And you say you don't believe.

The year was 1971, the month September, and every weekday morning at exactly six thirty a.m., Rod Stewart's voice would blare from my clock radio:

Wake up, Maggie, I think I got something to say to you,  
It's late September and I really should be back at school.

Well, I was back at school, all right. Specifically, Monsignor Edward Pace High School located in the shabby, tough Florida town of Opa-locka, just north of Miami. (To this day it consistently scores among the highest rates of violent crime in the USA.) This was not the Villages, if you know what I'm saying.

The job happened because the powers-that-were at Pace had a relationship with Marist College and were looking for cheap labor. That would be me. Along with my trusty college roommate, Joe Rubino, I signed on to teach English for less than five thousand dollars. Beginning of story.

Teaching held a good amount of appeal to me. Back in the Woodstock days, I felt I should do something worthwhile with my life; I wanted to help folks. It never occurred to me to sell stocks or insurance. That would be working for the *man*. While I saw nothing particularly wrong with working for the *man*, I knew my father had not benefited from doing that, and, again, I wanted to help improve society. Really.

Plus, there was the strong appeal of south Florida. Rubino and I had done the spring-break thing our senior year, hunting for Connie Francis on the beaches of Fort Lauderdale. We never did find Connie, but there were many, many Connie wannabes on display. All I'll say is this: after I'd spent three years in Poughkeepsie, New York, the sun, surf, and female denizens of south Florida looked mighty fine indeed. So we packed up our gear and headed south.

The first sign of trouble was our assigned "accommodations." Because we were working for slave wages, the principal at Pace set us up with a low-rent apartment near the school.

"You guys are gonna like this," he told me on the phone. "Convenient to everything, and there's a pool."

By "convenient to everything," I guess the guy meant to the half dozen drug dealers who lived in the complex. If you were after weed or cocaine, these accommodations were, indeed, convenient. The pool was there as advertised, but a rusty refrigerator had taken up residence at the bottom of it. This wasn't exactly *Surfside 6*.

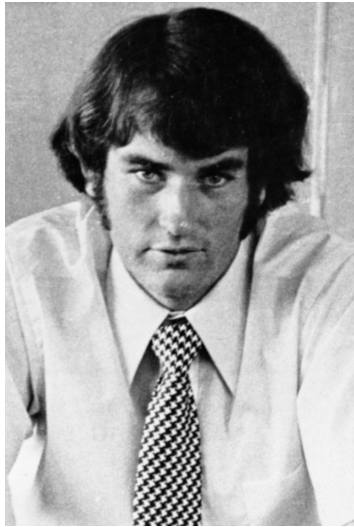
We lasted less than thirty minutes in our new digs.

Checking out of the Horror Apartment Complex, we quickly found alternative housing with fewer active felons on the premises. But, incredibly, the principal was rather put off that we had exited

his recommended lodging. His annoyance should have signaled me that we would not be dealing with a rational guy at the school helm, but it went over my head.

## Hey, Teach, What's Up

As I write, I am looking at myself in the 1972 edition of *The Torch*, the Pace High School yearbook. There I am, sitting in front of a class, hair covering my ears, pork-chop sideburns, and a firm, steely look. I



was no Sister Thomas, but believe the photo: I brooked no nonsense. If a kid clowned around, he or she was sharply warned. Second time, an appropriate sanction was swiftly delivered to the miscreant.

Early on, I was tested, as most young teachers are. In my case, I was just twenty-one years old when I began teaching, and one of my assigned classes was senior English. That meant most of my students were seventeen and eighteen years old. Do the math.

One day a blond girl called me Bill in front of the class. This was against school rules, since all teachers were to be addressed as Mr., Mrs., or Miss. In my mind, the girl had intentionally misbehaved for two reasons: attention and the thrill of it all.

I had prepared myself for this. Before the school year started, I had mapped out a game plan to handle what was sure to be some challenging behavior. I was the new, young teacher on campus. Even in my callow youth, I knew boundaries would have to be quickly established or chaos would ensue.

Understanding that discipline is useless without respect (I think I got that from the Sidney Poitier movie *To Sir, with Love*), I coolly appraised the young girl who had just used my given name.

"Miss Jones [an alias], why don't you explain to the class why you addressed me by my first name when you know that is a breach of etiquette?" I kept my voice calm but authoritative. The "breach of etiquette" line threw her.

"Uh, I don't know," she replied.

"So let me get this straight. You decide to break school rules, taking time away from the class, and you don't know why? Am I understanding you?"

Panic swept across the girl's face, which was deeply reddening. Every kid in the class was staring at her. What started as an attempt to diminish the inexperienced teacher had somehow gone horribly wrong. She sat there mute.

"Okay, Miss Jones, here's what's going to happen," I said sharply. "You are going to write a five-hundred-word composition explaining your actions here today. This will be due tomorrow. If you behave yourself, I'll keep your work private. If you do not, I will read it to the class. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Mr. O'Reilly."

"Good."

That was it. Word of Miss Jones's smackdown spread throughout the Pace campus like fire ants on spilled maple syrup. After that I

had little trouble in the classroom. Every student in the school immediately understood that, when Mr. O. was involved, humiliation might be just one stupid comment away.

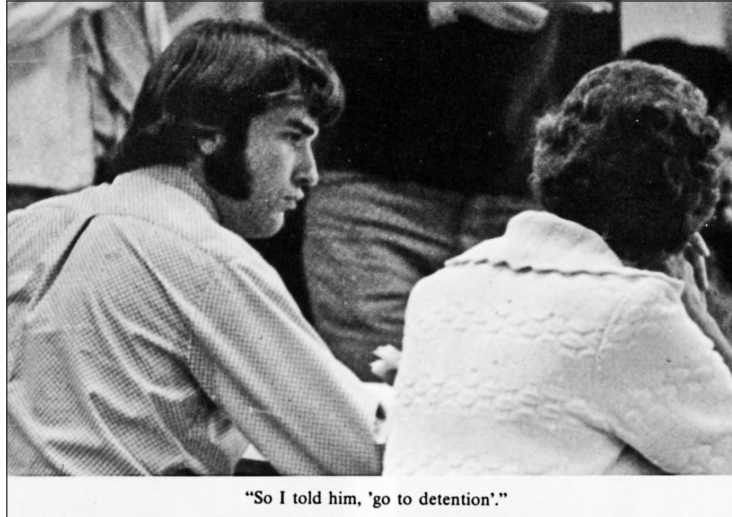
You see, I understood something many adults never get: the worst thing you can do to a dopey teenager is embarrass him or her in front of their peers. You can yell and scream at kids all day long and accomplish nothing. But holding students accountable for their actions publicly has a major inhibiting effect. Not too many kids (or adults, for that matter) want to become an object of public derision.

One caveat here: this doesn't work on the psycho kids. However, Catholic schools tend to weed them out pretty fast and send them on their way.

Now, there's no question that I had damaged Miss Jones's self-esteem, and today the "enlightened" educators who are embedded in the American education system would probably chastise me for insensitivity. But listen up: I don't care. In the two years I taught at Pace, my methods were effective with hundreds of students, most of whom actually learned some things. Meanwhile, many of the other teachers at Pace presided over undisciplined classroom environments that wasted time and accomplished little. I actually cared whether my students were learning. That's why I allowed Rod Stewart's raspy voice to disturb my slumber. I believed it was my responsibility to create an atmosphere where kids could learn important things without disruption. If a teacher can't or won't do that, the students get hosed.

I realize that might sound self-righteous, but that's how I saw it. I was getting paid to do a job, and no defiant kid was going to stop me. Period.

Even so, I didn't want to damage any kid. Shortly after her indiscretion, I spoke with Miss Jones privately. She cried, and I felt bad. But I explained that what she did was unacceptable, and if she continued that kind of behavior, her life would be the worse for it. Did she get the message? I'd love to tell you that the incident changed her



How I was remembered in the Pace 1972 yearbook.  
Definitely not *To Sir, with Love*.

life and she went on to do great things. But the truth is, I don't know how Miss Jones turned out. She was a strange kid. Something was definitely bothering her, and she wasn't the confiding type, at least not with me. Life isn't Sidney Poitier winning over Lulu and the other British toughies on the big screen. Still, never again did Miss Jones, or any other student, disrupt that senior English class, and by the end of the school year, most of those people scored well on the exam I gave them. And, trust me, the test wasn't easy.

The majority of Pace High students came from working-class homes with parents who sacrificed to pay private-school tuition. Ethnically, it broke down this way: fifty percent Hispanic, forty percent white, ten percent black. Cubans dominated the campus. I liked them from the jump; most were hardworking, respectful, and grateful to America for saving them from Castro.

In fact, I had more trouble with the Pace faculty than I did with the kids. Hard to believe, I know. By now you have probably picked

up that I have a small problem with authority except when I am it. Then authority is okay.

Many of the faculty and administrators at Pace were “small picture” people. That is, they were clueless about what the kids were doing and thinking and concentrated on enforcing picayune, largely meaningless rules. For example, some faculty members actually busied themselves measuring the skirts of the girls. Each female student was required to wear a standardized sky-blue-colored uniform. However, some of the young ladies were hiking up hemlines in an apparent attempt to imitate Goldie Hawn. Some teachers used rulers to measure the proper skirt length. It was almost surreal.

Meanwhile, a number of girls left the school in a family way, if you know what I mean. But there was little talk of dealing with that or the substance abuse occurring on campus.

Since most students at Pace had little money, glue was the substance of choice that year. Cretins would enter the bathroom stalls, smear it on rags, and inhale. Glassy-eyed, they’d stagger into the classroom.

I cornered one of the leaders of the “rag brigade,” a skinny wise guy, and basically told him that, if he didn’t knock it off, I would hunt him down off school property and we’d “discuss” things. Apparently, he got the message, and the cheap-high crowd toned it down. By the way, I *would* have hunted him down.

Of course the principal, a corpulent, middle-aged Catholic brother, and most of the teachers had no idea that glue was in vogue. No, they were too busy measuring the skirts of the girls.

It was tough, but I ignored most of the insane faculty-driven minutiae, because there was nothing I could do about it. The principal and his disciples had their agenda, and it wasn’t going to change because some wise-guy New York teacher thought it was nuts. But one time I did listen to the Isley Brothers and decided to “fight the power.” By the way, that strategy rarely turns out well.

## Do Not Try This at Work

I've told some parts of the following story before, but in a different context. Here the point is that we in America waste far too much time endlessly discussing stupid stuff. If something is wrong, fix it. Don't discuss it to death. As actor Eli Wallach stated in *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, "When you have to shoot—shoot. Don't talk."

As in many Southern states, high school football is big in Florida. On late summer and fall Friday evenings, thousands of kids attend games and do what many kids do in the dark: attempt to misbehave. There's the usual drinking and smoking and cursing out the opposition, the kind of stuff that's been going on for generations. But at Pace, as our Spartans took the field in red-and-gold uniforms, there was another huge problem: hot pants!

The garment.

Even at these night games, the average temperature in Miami that year was about eighty-eight degrees, with humidity at the suicide level. I mean, it was brutal. So the kids dressed accordingly. That is, they wore very little.

The attire situation caused great fear and loathing among the faculty at Pace, and I saw their point: wearing halters and short-shorts, some of the girls looked like Carmen Electra. Not exactly the image a Catholic high school wants to project, with all due respect to Ms. Electra.

Because the bold, fresh guy has always been a simple man, my solution to the problem was exceedingly simple: tell the girls that halters and hot pants were banned at all school events, and if they violated the rule they would be punished. If they didn't like it, tough. Go roller-skating.

Simple, right? Easily done. "But noooooo," as the late John Belushi was fond of saying on *Saturday Night Live*. The hot-pants deal had to be discussed and debated and parsed at faculty meetings over and over again. It was insane.



Finally, I reached critical mass. A woman teacher named Isabella (alias) stood up and said, "I want to ask the faculty to tell us what is appropriate attire at a 'Foosball' game."

Immediately, my hand shot up, and my roommate, Joe Rubino, put his head in his hands, something he had practiced quite often.

"Yes, Mr. O'Reilly."

I slowly got to my feet and said, "I believe, Isabella, that appropriate football game attire is a helmet, spiked shoes, padded shoulders and thighs, and tight pants to keep the pads secured."

Silence. Then a few muffled guffaws. The principal shot me a look that would have made Hannibal Lecter envious. Everybody knew I had mocked the faculty meeting. I was off the reservation.

The following day, I addressed the hot-pants issue in all my classes, and my message was sage and pithy. I simply stated that any girl who dressed like a cheap tart was foolish and would lose the respect of boys, especially decent guys. I also told the students that boys routinely mocked girls they thought were "easy" and had done so since guys were invented. No further lecture was necessary and there were no threats. I simply asked if anyone had any questions, and nobody did.

Once again, word whipped around the campus. The hot-pants mania subsided, as few teenage girls want to be mocked by teenage boys.

Another victory for the home team, right? Not so fast. Life is full of unintended consequences, and boy, did I make enemies among the faculty. Not that I cared at the time; I did not. I liked most of my students but thought the faculty, by and large, were simpletons. I was wrong. Looking back, *I* was the narrow-minded person, because my arrogance was based on ignorance. The truth is that most of the teachers at Pace were good people; they were just scared to make waves. They needed the job. Not so different from my father.

During my two years teaching high school, I learned an enormous amount about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But

one lesson stands above all the others: you can't save everyone. You can give people opportunities, you can try to help them, but some will not succeed, for a variety of reasons.

Once in a while, I look back at the Pace yearbook and see the kids who washed out in life. Could I have done something different to help them? Perhaps. But I tried as hard as I knew how and have subsequently learned that some human beings simply cannot be saved. It's just life in the real lane.

This insight has shaped my political beliefs and my policy analysis. As we discussed in chapter two, I am big on self-reliance and not enthusiastic about the nanny state. I strongly believe that, in America, each individual succeeds by understanding obligations and doing what is necessary to fulfill them. The government cannot do it for us, cannot drag us through life's daily challenges making sure we're all okay. Those who promise that are charlatans. To repeat what I wrote earlier, if you rely on big government—you'll pay big.

That separates me from someone like Nancy Pelosi, for example, who fervently believes that a huge federal presence can bring prosperity to disadvantaged people and just about everybody else. Speaker Pelosi fervently wants high taxes, a redistribution of wealth through said taxation, and a general welfare system that provides cradle-to-grave entitlements like they have in Holland.

Maybe the Speaker wants that because she, herself, is a very wealthy woman, raised in extremely comfortable surroundings. Maybe she feels some guilt over having that kind of life when others don't. Liberal guilt has been known to happen.

Anyway, I worked awfully hard at Pace trying to wise kids up and succeeded in many cases. But, obviously, not all. Some kids were so emotionally damaged by the time they got to my class that, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't motivate them to be responsible. Their plight usually mirrored that of their parents. Most of the slackers had big trouble at home.

That kind of scenario is one of the most vexing problems facing America. The government cannot legislate decent parenting. Any clown can have a child. There are no tests, standards, or guidelines for parents unless they violate the child abuse or neglect laws. Therefore, some children will be so traumatized by their upbringing that they will cause society big problems that we all pay for, sometimes with our lives.

So what does society do?

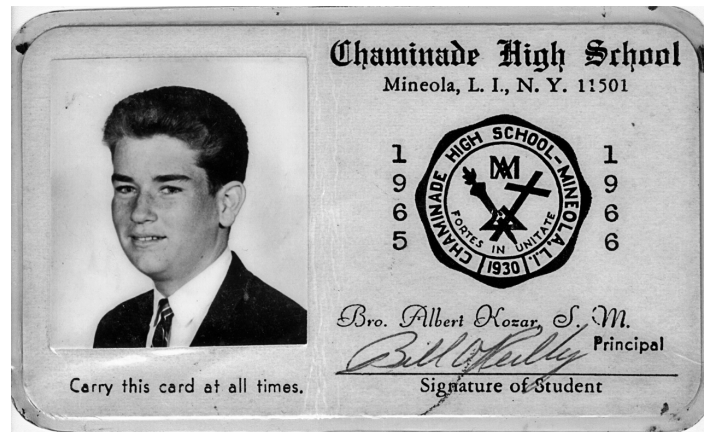
Again, it all comes back to the free will that I believe we all have. Even though a child has it rough, there will come a time when he or she, like all other human beings, is faced with a clear choice: either become a productive citizen or become a problem. Almost every violent criminal I've ever spoken with had a terrible childhood. But if society, out of some misguided compassion, does not hold them accountable for harming others, then the result is anarchy.

As you know, some well-intentioned liberals disagree, arguing for lenient sentences and "rehabilitation," even for heinous child rapists. But that point of view is both dangerous and unfair to both innocent kids and law-abiding adults. The government's first obligation is to protect its citizens, not empathize with those who would harm them.

One student at Pace High School committed a murder. I knew the kid. He had a terrible facial complexion and was subject to bullying beyond belief. Socially, the boy was almost totally isolated. You can imagine the anger that kid held inside himself. But he killed somebody. That's irreversible. No matter what the personality profile, society cannot allow troubled people to inflict harm on others. Period.

That philosophy was shaped by my teaching experience. I was a disciplinarian, as you've seen, but fair. Any student could appeal his or her punishment; I would listen and, sometimes, adjust the sanction. I did that because I remembered Brother Lawrence.

Back in my own high school days, there was class warfare in the



My Chaminade ID card. The tie is a guaranteed clip-on.

hallways of Chaminade, a high-powered, all-boy Catholic school in Mineola, New York. On one side of the aisle were the working-class guys like me, on the other, the rich kids from affluent neighborhoods like Garden City and Locust Valley.

Among Chaminade's host of strict rules was the requirement that students wear jackets and ties every day. As you are now aware, my father was not exactly Oleg Cassini. My closet held a couple of cheap sports jackets and a few clip-on ties. But many of the rich guys were decked out in cashmere sports jackets and nifty blue blazers from Brooks Brothers. I mean, some Chaminade guys even *talked* about clothes. Nobody in Levittown did that.

Anyway, the rich guys looked swell and the working-class guys looked like Rodney Dangerfield and that was that.

Or not. One day, two Garden City guys, looking for trouble, approached me and pulled off my clip-on tie. Being the intellectual that I am, I immediately punched one guy in the head and slammed the other guy hard against a locker, causing big noise. Showing alarming speed, Brother Lawrence was on me, slamming me against another locker.

"Hey, Brother, those two started it," I wailed.

“No fighting in school, O’Reilly. Three days’ detention,” the Brother snapped.

“What about them?” I asked, an edge to my voice.

“I’ll deal with them,” the Brother said. “That doesn’t concern you.”

Doesn’t concern me? Good grief. But that was Chaminade back in 1966. The rich guys got preference. The working-class guys got detention. I did my time but never forgot the incident.

So it was that kind of sensibility that I brought to my own high school classroom. If a kid thought he was getting hosed, I would listen. But BS walked in my sphere of influence, and every kid at Pace knew it.

Looking back, I really didn’t have to do much in the discipline area. Once the tone was set, most of my classes went smoothly. In fact, kids were clamoring to get into my courses. At the start of the second semester of my first year, hundreds of juniors and seniors signed up for my Contemporary Problems class, all of them knowing that the workload would be fairly heavy.

However, as I mentioned, there is an opposing point of view, and the discipline I brought to teaching does not sit well with some liberal people. Dr. Wayne Dyer, for example, has sold millions of books advising folks on how to deal with life in a rather “holistic” way. Writing in *The Bottom Line/Personal* magazine, Dyer had this to say about teaching:

Show faith in (a person’s) ability to make right decisions, and they will generally make them. . . . Education researchers have found that the classrooms of authoritarian teachers tend to descend into chaos as soon as the teacher steps outside. The classrooms of teachers who trust their students will do the right thing and usually continue to run smoothly even without the teacher.

Dr. Dyer does not cite any research he uses to make that dubious claim, but clearly the man has never read *Lord of the Flies* or figured out that it is far easier to do your own thing than to do the disciplined thing. Put another way, it's more fun to be bad than good, more pleasurable to relax than work your butt off. Your thoughts, Dr. Dyer?

History clearly demonstrates that without structure and accountability, human beings have a tough time staying on the rails. And children must be taught this over and over again: an effective person must incorporate discipline into his or her life, and a just society must demand responsibility from its citizens. I learned that beyond a reasonable doubt while teaching at Pace High and have passed it on ever since.

One more story, and I'll dedicate it to Dr. Wayne. Pace High was generally a dumpy place. Two-story classroom buildings, very few amenities. But during my time at Pace, a nice new gymnasium was built, and the bishop of Miami was coming to bless it. The kids didn't care about the ritual, but it was a chance to miss some classes, so they were jazzed. In anticipation of the event, an assembly was called to go over what the ceremony would entail.

Hundreds of kids sat in the brand-new stands, completely ignoring the principal, who was trying to impose some kind of order so directions could be given for the blessing. Becoming increasingly frustrated, the principal stepped to the microphone and sternly demanded silence. The noise got even louder, the laughter and mocking almost deafening.

This went on for about three minutes, and then, as with the hot-pants discussion, I ran out of patience. Armed with my trusty clipboard and pen, I stepped onto the gym floor, glared at the chattering throng, and began to write down names. Almost immediately the noise began to diminish. As I scanned the crowd, there were fewer and fewer comedians performing. I continued to stare hard at the students. They shut up.

Then I stepped back and gestured to the principal.

Of course, this completely showed the guy up, and he knew it. But once again the lesson was there for all to see: without consequences, kids will go wild. Dr. Wayne Dyer may not know that, but I do. By the way, I didn't do anything to the kids who were mocking the principal, because I had made my point. But once again, I had alienated the powers-that-be in the process. Can you say *recurring theme*?

The months flew by at Pace, and every day I learned something new about human nature, child development, and America in general. I was the educator, but I was definitely getting an education as well.

Take the debate about more money for schools. Every time I hear some pinhead politician grandstand about that issue, I seethe. In most places there are plenty of school resources, and if there aren't, chances are the local school board is stealing. The feds are spending record amounts on education, and school-directed property taxes in many places are obscene.

I taught in a relatively poor school. The books were there, and to do my job, I didn't need anything else besides a working air conditioner. My third-grade teacher, Sister Lurana, had sixty kids in her class, and every one of them could read, write, and do math by age eight. Give me a break. Teaching is about presentation and accountability; money and resources are secondary. The U.S. public school education system has plenty of cash. What it lacks are competent, courageous administrators and creative teachers. Yes, better salaries might attract better people. But teaching is a calling, not a business.

Teaching in south Florida for those two years remains a highlight of my life. Yeah, money was tight. To get extra funds, I got a second job as a bouncer in the Wreck Bar at the Castaways Hotel on the northern end of Miami Beach. Actually, I didn't do much bouncing. My job was to make sure the house band, Tommy Strand and the Upper Hand, didn't commit any on-premises felonies, as drugs

and underage girls were known to make appearances in the saloon. To this day, I know every word to Aretha Franklin's hit "Chain of Fools," thanks to Tommy Strand, who sang it every Saturday night.

Those years were hot in south Florida. The Miami Dolphins made it to the Super Bowl in both '72 and '73 and won it the latter year going 17-0, a record that still stands. And get this: Pace High School was located right next to the Dolphins training facility at St. Thomas University. One day, I brazenly sneaked into a Don Shula press conference and actually asked the coach a stupid question. He looked at me like I had spilled ketchup on his shirt.

But after two enjoyable years at Pace, it was time for a change. The administration and I had had enough of each other, so I hit the road. After being accepted by Boston University to study for a master's degree in broadcast journalism, I left south Florida, my roommate, Joe, and scores of other friends. I had mixed feelings about the move. I enjoyed seeing my students learn and become more sophisticated in their world outlook. But I was restless and wanted a bigger stage than a high school classroom. It was time to go.

But before I left Pace, a student dropped the following note in my mailbox:

Mr. O., although this year was pretty bad for me, there was one thing that made up for it. I was lucky enough to have a teacher who cared enough to not only teach the required subject, but also to teach me about life and awareness of others and myself.

I am grateful for having known you.

As any teacher will tell you, that's what it's all about.