Breaking the Box

Sometimes in life facts are fluid, and needed changes are met with fear and uncertainty. No one wants to break the neat mold of a life chosen for them, stir the pot, and step outside the box. In the short story “Gryphon” by Charles Baxter, fourth-grader Tommy is the narrator, and his views of the world outside the classroom are forever changed by the eccentric substitute teacher, Miss Ferenczi. Throughout the course of the story, Tommy learns valuable lessons not normally found in a classroom. Charles Baxter is known for throwing characters out of their comfort zones, and Tommy definitely finds himself in this predicament.

The story started on a normal Wednesday. Mr. Hibler, the students’ assigned teacher, fell ill during class. The students were quietly snickering and placing bets on whether the unfortunate teacher would show up the next day. Carol Peterson, the resident delinquent, was known for blowing her nose on notebook paper, but “in times of crisis she spoke the truth” (Baxter 246). Tommy decided to preserve his dime and refuse Carol’s bet. The next day, Carol was proved right when the students were greeted by the eccentric Miss Ferenczi, who swept through the door demanding full attention. From her purple purse to her blue-tinted glasses, Miss Ferenczi looked like an alien. “Mars,” whispered one boy (246). An alien indeed, Miss Ferenczi was totally unexpected – a paradigm of everything that Five Oaks was not.

Upon her arrival, Miss Ferenczi immediately took control of the class by giving them permission to stare “…for a few more seconds until the bell rings. Then I will permit no more
staring. Looking, I will permit. Staring, no” (247). The difference of looking and staring is very prominent in this story. Miss Ferenczi, as an abnormal force, may have been subjected to staring her whole life. To say that someone is “staring” implies a level of rudeness, while “looking” has more of an innocent agenda. In the classroom, Miss Ferenczi was not concerned with keeping Mr. Hibler’s lesson schedule. She skipped over the Pledge of Allegiance, and when challenged by a female student, Miss Ferenczi quipped, “You must know it very well by now, and we certainly need not spend our time on it” (247). She also introduced the theory of “substitute facts” while drilling multiplication tables. Once again challenged by a student, Miss Ferenczi cited, to the defense of another student, that six times eleven equals sixty-eight. Though the students were appalled when she started to explain the concept of substitute facts, Miss Ferenczi was quick to respond. “Do you think that anyone is going to be hurt by a substitute fact? Will the plants on the windowsill be hurt? So, what’s the problem” (248)? The students were so uncomfortable with such a small infraction. Miss Ferenczi was trying to make them realize that there is so much more to life than living in their little cookie-cutter world. It was okay to be different. They could exercise their independence and no one would get hurt.

A teacher can change the lives of her students and create memories and examples of compassion in leadership that will last a lifetime. Jack Thode from Cedar Falls, Iowa can attest to this, as he recalls a special project his fourth grade teacher led:

“My favorite project this year was when we adopted a family during the holiday season and we gave them a lot of stuff like food, clothing, toys, and household items. Our teacher, Mrs. Lockhart, took a van full of stuff to the Salvation Army. The lady said, "How many families is this for?" Mrs. Lockhart told her it was all for one family. The lady started crying.” (Educational Leadership 48-51)
Jack’s real-life teacher is demonstrating what Miss Ferenczi teaches, the old adage: actions speak louder than words. Jack is not going to remember the fourth grade math or spelling tests, but he will remember the example of love and selflessness that Mrs. Lockhart was trying to get across. When educators realize the power they hold in a young person’s life, they can use that to transform the lives of the students they teach and make their children feel valuable.

Like Mrs. Lockhart, Miss Ferenczi’s love for her students was apparent in the way that she taught. When taking a spelling test, Tommy was having trouble spelling the word “balcony.” Miss Ferenczi noticed his distress and in the middle of proctoring the test, stopped, placed her hand on his shoulder, bent over, and whispered in his ear, “I don’t like that word either. It’s ugly. My feeling is, if you don’t like a word, you don’t have to use it” (249). Obviously, in life, one has to sometimes use words they don’t particularly care for. However, this marks the defining moment for the main character, Tommy. From the moment she made physical contact, Tommy became entranced with Miss Ferenczi, and his mental process started to change.

After the spelling test came lunch. Miss Ferenczi chose to eat in the classroom with the students as opposed to eating with the teachers. Tommy spoke out in class for the first time, saying, “You don’t have to eat with us. You can eat with the other teachers. There’s a teacher’s lounge” (249). Miss Ferenczi mentioned that she spoke with the other teachers earlier that morning and observed that “there was a great rattling of the words for the fewness of ideas. I didn’t care for their brand of hilarity” (249). It is probable that Miss Ferenczi felt like an outsider even among the other adults. Miss Ferenczi’s lunch of stuffed fig, smoked sturgeon, and raw spinach was as unique as she - unique and different, but extremely healthy and well-rounded, also like Miss Ferenczi.
Miss Ferenczi’s next lesson revolved around the Egyptians. She started with Mr. Hibler’s preplanned lesson about pyramids, and slowly incorporated her own ideas and stories into the lesson. The core lessons are very rigid and the symbolism of a lesson about pyramids perfectly exemplifies this. Pyramids are very hard and stoic compared with the sweeping, twisted branches of the deciduous oak that she drew on the board the first day of class. The construction of the pyramids was grueling work. The limestone blocks that were stacked on the outer layer would sometimes weigh up to fifteen tons. The blocks would have to be hauled up high to complete the top of the pyramid. It was not an easy task (Koslow).

When speaking of her visit to Cairo, she baffled the students by saying that she saw a beast that was half lion and half bird – a gryphon. That revelation caused some conflict on the bus home. Tommy’s friend started to doubt Miss Ferenczi, and while Tommy knew there was no such thing as a gryphon, he felt the need to defend her. Tommy made up a story about a scientist in the Swiss Alps who was combining the genes and chromosomes of a human and a hamster, to make a “humster” (251). In this moment, Tommy started to break the mold and challenge the expectations set before him.

Another case of Tommy jumping to Miss Ferenczi’s defense comes from the tarot card incident. Miss Ferenczi brought a pack of tarot cards to class to tell the students’ futures. The children were instantly intrigued and when asked who wanted to go first, “bad” Carol raised her hand. Miss Ferenczi examined her cards and deduced that she most likely would not further her education and would have “an early marriage. Many children…something bleak and dreary…perhaps just the tasks of a housewife life” (255). The whole class took turns with Miss Ferenczi and the tarot cards until she got to a boy named Wayne. When Wayne drew his cards, he drew the much feared “death” card. Miss Ferenczi does not look at the death card as being a
form of physical death. Instead, she reasoned, “you will undergo a great metamorphosis, the greatest, before you become an adult” (255). Miss Ferenczi knew the sort of oppression generated in the community, and in that explanation of Wayne’s cards, she hoped to open the eyes of the children and introduce them to the possibility of a greater purpose.

Tarot cards began in Italy and were not originally used to predict the future, but to entertain the nobles (The Tarot Realm). Miss Ferenczi’s goal was to entertain, not to predict, the lives and deaths of a classroom of fourth graders. However innocent her intentions, Wayne got scared and told the principal. Miss Ferenczi was fired, and Tommy was distraught. The foreshadowing of Miss Ferenczi’s departure was apparent in the analysis of Wayne’s cards. Ironically, Wayne himself was the one that brought about his own change by getting Miss Ferenczi fired. Normality threatened to seep back in, but not if Tommy could help it. At recess, he saw Miss Ferenczi drive away, and then he spotted Wayne’s smugly bragging that he had told on Miss Ferenczi to the principal. Taunting Wayne made him lunge at Tommy, and the two fought before Wayne burst into tears. “She was right,” [Tommy] yelled. ‘She was always right! She told the truth! You were just scared, that’s all’” (256). Even after she had left the premises, Tommy still defended Miss Ferenczi to the very end.

Tommy’s evolution in this story is quite remarkable. Toward the beginning of the story, Tommy talks and plays with his friends in the back of the room, but he isn’t engaged during class. The fact that the boys chose to play in the back of the room, as far away from the teacher as possible, indicates a disinterest and boredom associated with school. Thus, when Miss Ferenczi makes her entrance, looking very alien-esque, it piques the boys’ interest, and they choose to come forward. When Tommy walks to his seat toward the front of the room – toward Miss Ferenczi – it symbolizes the relationship that is about to form between them. Tommy’s
passionate response shows the reader that Miss Ferenczi was more than just a substitute teacher. She was the example of a non-cookie cutter adult in an extremely molded society. She did not fit in the Five Oaks community, which did not want her there. Tommy was wise enough to see the potential for change, and he ran with it. Miss Ferenczi exemplifies the type of educators and individuals required who will leave behind social molds and find their own engaging path that will, in turn, engage and encourage others.
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