



“No-one would be going home in a body-bag on my watch...”

IT'S OK TO BE A LITTLE ANXIOUS WHEN YOU'RE IN CHARGE OF STUDENTS OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM, SAYS TOM STARKEY – BUT OVERDOING THE RISK AWARENESS CAN MAKE THE WHOLE EXERCISE POINTLESS...

I once travelled overland from Thailand to Cambodia in an unlicensed taxi. Making polite conversation with the driver I commented at how I was shocked by the fact that all the police seemed to be armed. He proceeded to point to the glove compartment:

“357. Magnum. We'll be OK chief. No trouble or they'll be trouble, right? HAHHAHAHA!”

I was slightly perturbed to say the least.

When I was in my 20s, I fell from a second floor balcony whilst I was on holiday. The only thing that saved my life was a shedload of dumb luck (and the shallow end of a swimming pool directly underneath the room that I fell from).

I was more than a little disquieted.

So what is the point of this brief but disturbing autobiographical interlude? Well, the thing is, I thought I knew fear. I thought I was friends with dangerous situations and shook the hand of mortal terror. But I knew nothing. Because that taxi ride from hell and the impromptu 30ft swan dive seemed like rosy, carefree escapades in Cake and Ice-Cream Land compared to my first residential school trip for a secondary school.

In my youthful enthusiasm I had helped establish a 'gifted and talented' cohort with a number of equally shiny-eyed and infuriatingly earnest newbies from the local area. Our first scheme



was to take a select handful of hard-working, high achieving kids from each school to the Oxford Literary Festival to enrich their lives by way of letting them meet a couple of authors, stare at some landmarks and generally shove some culture down their gullets for 48 hours. Friday afternoon to Sunday evening. No worries

Only I did worry. A lot. The coach door closing heralded the crushing weight of responsibility and I was instantly transformed into a combination of Atlas and a sickeningly over-protective parent. Before that point all I had to do was teach them for seven hours and I was home and dry, but now? Now I had to KEEP THEM ALIVE.

FOR TWO. WHOLE. DAYS.

Yeah. I know. I was young and petrified. So sue me. Everything and everyone became a threat. Crossing the road took military planning and execution as every imagined move toward the pavement by my charges was perceived to be a wilful attempt to throw themselves, lemming-like, in front of traffic just to spite me. Before meals I checked allergy lists, dietary requirement lists,

previous health problem lists and the spread sheets of said lists. I drilled and harassed and drilled again and my God, did those heads get counted. No-one would be going home in a body-bag on my watch. No sireee. I looked at my colleagues in disbelief at their happy-go-lucky attitude towards the safety of their own kids. They were letting them (choke!) explore and (gasp!) do their own thing. But they'd be sorry come casket time.

Ironically, it took an actual real emergency to give me a little perspective on the situation. On our first night in the youth hostel there was a fire alarm just after midnight. My every dark fear was realised as I charged down the corridor banging doors and waiting for my kids to emerge and line up in an orderly queue ready to head for the nearest exit (as per drill instruction on What to do in the Event of a Fire, paragraph 7 Sub-section 9D). I waited at the end of the corridor for my students to file out of their rooms in an orderly fashion. And I waited. And I waited. Then I panicked.

A teacher of another school came across me just as I was about to shoulder charge the door of Rm 305 a third time.

'Your lot are downstairs with mine,' he said with no small amount of amusement on his face. 'Apparently they all piled into the one room after we went to bed. Midnight feasts and all that lark. Kids eh? We're all out

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front waiting for you. False alarm by the way.' He clapped me on my aching arm as he left.

The sweet and blessed relief that they were ok hit me and as I made my own way down the fire escape I reflected on what had happened. I hadn't exercised complete control of the situation at all times... and yet by some miracle they were alright. There was something to learn from this.

The next morning I tried to be a little more relaxed and I found myself actually enjoying myself a little bit. I had been so concerned with the bottom line of the kids' personal safety I had almost missed the good stuff. There was talk about books, inappropriate but hilarious questions to respected authors, friendships made and a lot of laughs. Which is sometimes what it's all about. The kids were really good and responded brilliantly to my new, carefree demeanour.

Also, the absolute hammering I gave them as soon as I got downstairs to the fire assembly point the night before meant they were too scared to do anything daft.

Come on. A little bit of fear never hurt anyone.

Thanks for reading.