

# THE TAO OF WOW

## WORKING OUT CREATIVE GUILT.

I was 13 when I robbed my school's stockpile of camera equipment and earned a one-way ticket to "Boys Town." Thirty-three years later, I remain vexed by the pathos and irony of this sorry episode and haunted by the look on my beloved seventh-grade filmmaking teacher's face when she discovered the thief was her favorite student. There are many good teachers, but Miss Newman was something special. Just 28 at the time, she possessed a torrid *joie de vivre* and selfless devotion to the unique aspirations of each soul. The look was pure '60s: burgundy bob, koo-koo smile, gams for days, and more jangling bling than a K-Mart bracelet tree. Inexplicably, she held an unwavering conviction in me, and I craved her approval, which was typically peppered with metaphysical chestnuts like, "The toughest tissue on your body is scar tissue," or "We're all renting." She even had one just for me: "Never lose your *wow*."

She was my Auntie Mame in go-go boots, and I had a big schoolboy crush on her. What to do with such a tonic of love, trust, and positive reinforcement? Destroy it. With extreme prejudice. I had grown obsessed with an exotic French-made Beaulieu camera, then the Stradivarius of super-8 sync-sound, variable shutter, macro zoom—plus, it

just looked wicked cool. I'd gaze for hours at its titillating trade ads, figuring how I could cobble together the sticker price, which rivaled a Bentley. So I hatched a fiendish plan: I'd swipe Miss Newman's trove of school film equipment—I'd be last to be suspected—then launder it for the Beaulieu.

On a bright Friday morning, after stealthily doing the dreadful

cops. They whispered to Miss Newman, and I watched her face fall, a mix of shock and confusion, and (most heart-breaking) betrayal. Before a stunned classroom, I was unceremoniously whisked away. It was the last time I saw her.

That day launched my juggernaut of despair. I was no longer merely a bad student, chronic truant, and all-round incorrigible. I was a convicted felon. Further transgressions ensued, and I was exiled to a faraway "adolescent treatment facility." For two years.

Upon graduating École Wayward, my D+ GPA failed to arouse NYU Film admissions. So I petitioned for an interview with its dean, the legendary Haig Manoogian. Possessing not much more than the vim and verve Miss Newman had inspired, I ranted about

all things film until Manoogian surrendered and admitted me on the spot. Her force was with me; I got in on sheer *wow* power. I made short films, one winning an award at Cannes, which led to a summer apprenticeship in Hollywood, which led to my first job, wife, kids, and so on. Then one day, in a moment of exquisite banality, I was helping my seven-year-old son with his camera when he asked how I got started. "A teacher helped me," I explained, and changed the subject.



deed, I sprang from the equipment closet, shocked, *shocked!* We'd been robbed! As law enforcement swooped in, I carted the loot to a pawn shop and bought my dream camera. (Ever the cunning criminal, I helpfully provided the pawn broker with my name, address, and—just in case—phone number. Evidently it came in handy.) For a blur of a weekend, coveted camera in hand, I filmed.

Monday morning, the classroom door opened to a grim-faced school principal and two

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That was it. I was tired of the monkey on my back. I wanted her to know that her presence on this Earth mattered, and I turned out okay. That this passing blip on her radar, a kid she probably never thought of again, had not forgotten her and remains forever grateful.

What happened to her? Was she even alive? Who was this woman who held such amazing power that it gripped and changed me so deeply and continues to sustain me? I put on my detective hat. She was alive, all right. With a vengeance.

Her bio read like Dickens: Born to her father's mistress but raised by his

wife in the shadows of Gary, Indiana, steel mills. Mom hired as maid to Detroit billionaire Max Fisher, who provided an education. Fulbright scholar. Ph.D. Assisted Mother Teresa in Calcutta. (Yes, Mother Teresa.) Professional ventriloquist. Creator-star of kid's puppet show on local NBC. Profiled in *People* magazine. NASA Teacher in Space finalist with Christa McAuliffe (and was actually holding McAuliffe's daughter's hand as *Challenger* exploded).

Enough. I picked up the phone to

make the fateful call.

As the pilot announced our approach into Detroit, I wondered why it took

me 33 years to get here. Maybe, like Dorothy, all I needed to know about making movies was in my own backyard. Simple lesson from an extraordinary teacher: Care so much it makes you want to live forever. We hugged each other tightly. She had not forgotten me. Yes, it hurt her, but she'd long ago forgiven me. Now I needed to forgive *me*, she admonished. She took my hand. We both grinned and walked in silence. She was Miss Newman again. I was 13. All I could say was, *Wow.* **WB**