

The Tao of Wow

by
 Alan Shapiro

I was 13 when I robbed my school's stockpile of camera equipment and earned a one-way ticket to "Boys Town." 33 years later, I remain vexed by the pathos and irony of this sorry episode, and haunted by the look on my 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 joi de vie and selfless devotion to the unique aspirations of each soul. The look was pure '60's: burgundy bob, koo-koo smile, gams for days, and more jangling bling than a K-Mart bracelet tree. She held an unwavering conviction in me, and I craved her approval, which was often spiced 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 was obsessed with a French camera, Beaulieu, then the Stradivarius of super-8. Sync sound, variable shutter, macro zoom, and it looked wicked cool. I'd gaze hypnotically 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.

So on a bright Friday morn, after stealthily doing the dreadful deed, I sprang from the equipment closet, shocked – shocked! We were robbed! By the time law enforcement swooped in, I had 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 school principal and a couple cops. As they pulled Miss Newman aside, 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.

I was no longer merely a poor student, chronic truant and all-around incorrigible. I was a convicted felon. Further transgressions ensued and I was exiled to a faraway "adolescent treatment facility" for two years.

Upon graduating Ecole Wayward, my D+ GPA failed to excite NYU Film admissions, so I petitioned for an interview with its dean, the legendary Haig Manoogian. Bringing my modest collection of super-8 movies, stills, and an adult helping of Miss Newman's vim and verve, I ranted on all things film until Manoogian surrendered and phoned admissions on the spot. Her force was with me; I got in on sheer *Wow* power.

At NYU I made short films, one which won 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 7-year-old son with his camera and he asked me how I got started. A teacher helped me, I explained, and changed the subject.

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. This passing blip on her radar, and 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 which had gripped and changed me so deeply and continues to sustain me? I put on my detective hat.

She was alive alright. With a vengeance. Her bio read like Dickens: Born to her father's mistress in the shadows of Gary, Indiana steel mills. Mom got work as maid to Detroit billionaire Max Fisher, who provided her education. Fulbright scholar. PhD. Assisted Mother Theresa in Calcutta. (Yes, Mother Theresa.) Professional ventriloquist. Creator/star of kids puppet show on local TV. Profiled in *People* magazine. NASA *Teacher In Space* finalist with Christa McAuliffe.

Enough. I picked up the phone to make the fateful call.

As the pilot announced our approach into Detroit, I thought about how it took me 33 years to learn a simple lesson from an extraordinary teacher: Care so much it makes you want to live forever.

We hugged each other. She had not forgotten me after all. 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 for the street. She was Miss Newman again. I was fourteen. All I could say was, *Wow*.