

“TEACHING WITHOUT TEACHING ...” said the young Zen disciple. “Is that truly possible?”
“Yes,” replied the master. “When the student learns without learning.”
There is more than one way to gain knowledge, and that insight alone is enough to get things going. I sat in the class with what seemed an acute case of acid reflux. This was English 101, and I was a college freshman. The bushy bearded Professor Fulton had a reputation for being aloof and tough, which spelled a major problem for me.

PROVIDENCE

For some unexplained reason, I couldn’t grasp English grammar. Somehow, I had squeezed through high school with my grammar block intact. But now the syntax was about to hit the fan. After a few classes, I saw the chalk on the blackboard: this professor expected me to know grammar basics, which wasn’t altogether unreasonable. He wasn’t sympathetic to my plight as my first and second assignments came back with the F seal of disapproval.
I was certain that I would fail this course, and passing was a prerequisite for graduating. Providence had other plans. A month into my freshman year, I was in a serious car accident. The other driver had run a stop sign and broadsided my tiny Fiat, which rolled over and over and over. I lost consciousness after the third tumble. I woke up in a strange bed, a bed with railings on either side.
I was in the hospital. My doctor informed me I was lucky to be alive and that there would be a long recovery.
“What about college?” I asked the doctor.
“Not this year, son.”
I leaned back against the pillow in total disbelief. I would have been disappointed or even depressed, but the pain was my immediate problem. I passed out—most likely from shock, and the news of losing my first year in college didn’t help me, either.

*It is not more surprising to be
born twice than once; everything in nature is
resurrection.*
VOLTAIRE

SAME TIME, NEXT YEAR

Nearly a year later, I was back in English 101 with a new group of freshman. This time I had the dapper Professor Edwards, who also had a reputation for being hard on his students. It was inevitable. Before the end of the period, the professor was handing back our first blue book assignment, a short story, along with our grades. I had been dreading this moment, and here it was.

Professor Edwards walked along the aisles, handing the blue books over to each student. I looked at him, and he looked at me with a gleam in his eye. I stared at the cover of my blue book and saw something I had never seen on one of my English assignments. There it was in red pen—a glorious A for content, and alongside, an F for grammar that reflected my lack of understanding the rules of punctuation. But I already knew that. More important, he had acknowledged that I had something to say.

DECIPHERING THE SEMICOLON

I remember leaving the English class, and as I walked across the campus to my demanding biology course, a miraculous thing was taking place. I suddenly began to understand where and why to place a comma in a sentence. Punctuation marks and fragments of code swirled overhead like asteroids around Saturn. I wasn’t thinking about punctuation; somehow, the rules of grammar were surfacing into my awareness from some unknown abyss. By the time I reached my biology class, even that ‘bane’ the semicolon made sense. What had been a frustrating puzzle a mere hour earlier was now becoming clear, with seemingly no effort on my part. The gates had opened into grammar heaven, and this time I had my foot in the door. I knew I could get grammar now. Nothing could stop me! For future reference, this is the feeling you want to remember whenever rejection appears and tries to write you off.

Within two weeks, I was no longer intimidated by grammar. I now understood the rules because for the first time I could see what was wrong with the punctuation of a particular sentence. After all, you can’t fix something if you don’t know what’s wrong with it. I not only made peace with grammar, but also wrote my way to the highest grade in the professor’s English course. My enthusiasm spilled over as I scored exceedingly well in biology, too, and, with my newfound power over the written word, I went on to make the dean’s list. With one smart action of rejection tempered with acceptance, Professor Edwards had unleashed the confidence that I needed to lift the veil of grammatical confusion—my nemesis for far too long. Without saying a word, the professor, in Zen-like fashion, had done his job. He taught without teaching.

NEAR DEATH EXPERIENCE

I have written this elsewhere: you can easily forget an intelligent action, but you will never forget a smart one, for smart flows from infallible intuition. Artists—listen up: keep the lesson of this tale close to your palette. Although my auto accident seemed like bad news at the time, let’s dig deeper beneath the surface of pain and disappointment. Providence was busily at work behind the scenes of this drama and dharma.

As fortune mercifully played out, I had dropped my mother off at her job minutes before the collision. As the passenger riding in the shotgun seat she would have been most assuredly and instantly killed. I had escaped an early departure from this world with a concussion compounded by a banged up body.

Although I tried boning up on grammar during those long months of convalescing, my attention span was frayed and didn’t serve me. But not only was I alive, I had confronted a near death experience in that crash. While there was no telltale light beckoning me at the end of a tunnel, I did note that the universe has a sense of humor. When you believe you are about to die, you discover the authentic realm within.

There is more. If the ‘unfortunate’ accident hadn’t happened, I wouldn’t have met Professor Edwards, the teacher who freed my self-confidence to learn, process, and master the rules of grammar.

Remember, a tempered rejection from an enlightened soul will open up opportunity as surely as a period punctuates the end of this sentence.

The dumbest people I know are those who know it all.

MALCOLM FORBES

My mother, Adele, would often remind me of a Jewish proverb: When a fool throws a stone in the garden, ten wise people cannot find it.

EDEN