

“Chalk Face”

A. J. Jacobs

My fourth-grade science teacher, Mr. Campbell, was a full-fledged, capital-G Grown-up. How could he not be? He was a teacher, after all. You want further proof? He had a beard. At least he seemed so grown-up at the time. Looking back, he was probably just out of college, maybe twenty-three, his beard wispy and thin.

Mr. Campbell taught us science—geology, climates, eclipses, the usual. Or he tried to teach us anyway. He spent a lot of the time asking us to keep our butts in the seats and refrain from flatulent sound effects. The usual.

One day, we were being particularly rambunctious. But still, I didn’t see it coming. It happened right after Steven Fischer shouted his nonsensical catchphrase “schweeee!” for the fourteenth time. Mr. Campbell snapped. He pivoted from the blackboard, where he was writing the characteristics of sedimentary rock, and whipped the chalk right at Steven’s head.

As soon as the chalk left his fingers, Mr. Campbell’s face changed. He looked confused. He looked scared.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I really shouldn’t have done that.”

What? This was definitely odd. The teacher was apologizing to us. And the chalk hadn’t even hit Steven—it had flown past his left shoulder. I’d seen grown-ups scream and shout and lose their temper. But the saying sorry to kids? And the fawn-like fright?

It was the first time it really sank in that grown-ups are not flawless authority figures. They don’t know what they’re doing a lot of the time (80 percent, in my case). They’re scared of consequences, like a lengthy Time Out from their jobs (Mr. Campbell was lucky, because we never reported his flip-out).

I’ve forgotten what Mr. Campbell taught me about igneous and sedimentary rock formations. But the lesson about adults being screwups? That stays with me. Which is why I believe you should treat grown-ups as you would a fourth-grade kid, with equal parts skepticism and compassion.

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