

# Learning Lessons

What do you do when you discover that your favorite high school teacher may be looking at a long stretch of jail time?

**R**OBERT PARKER WAS THE best teacher I ever had at Hightstown High School. I always thought of him as a man of real integrity. He could be sarcastic and intellectually gruff, but he didn't nod and smile at us in a patronizing way, like so many of the other teachers at school. His toughness was offset by his appearance, which was not at all intimidating. He was a tall, thin guy with a right hand withered by rheumatoid arthritis. But with Parker, it wasn't the way he looked, it was the way he talked.

He would curse in class and always sounded like someone smart enough to earn a lot more than public school teacher money. He'd tease us about our spoiled suburban lives and say less than kind things about Ronald Reagan. He also gave extremely funny grades—my paper on the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and World War I received a 97.2—which made me see that he didn't take himself, or the notion of formal pedagogy, too seriously.

We students were impressed with Parker, and so, apparently, was the district. After spending nearly two decades covered in chalk dust—he'd been teaching in the East Windsor school district since 1975—he took a job in the administration. In 1998 the district hired him as director of technology and instruction, which paid \$108,000 a year. In my mind, Parker the teacher always wore the same outfit: shirt, tie, and down vest—all that he could afford, I assume, on \$25,849 a year, his salary in 1984, the year he taught me. When Parker became an administrator, I'd sometimes see him wearing a herringbone jacket.

Last May I learned that Parker, who's 59, stands accused of selling 75 of the school's computers and stashing about \$100,000 of the proceeds in his own pocket. If convicted, the best high school teacher I ever had could spend many years in jail.



These dramatic developments have been upsetting. But when I think about Parker, I recall that it was his exploitation of drama that made his students pay attention in class and remember him even decades after graduating.

Consider the way he taught us about the (yawn) Crimean War. Instead of reciting statistics about the hundreds of soldiers slaughtered in the nineteenth-century conflict, he staged his own manic reenactment. He gave us each an index card listing the role that we were to assume. He played a tape of some bombastic music or bomb sounds—at

this remove, no one is quite sure what was playing—and enjoined us to read from Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*. Michele O'Dwyer, a member of the class of '87, recalls Parker's jumping around and "encouraging us to shout and to 'feel the war!'" By the end of the class, remembers Deena Klein, another classmate, "he had sweat dripping off his nose."

I mention the sports coat because I saw a recent photo of Parker in a Trenton courtroom. It was a miserable picture. His face was furrowed, his chin was down to his chest, and he was

wearing a blue blazer. That he was not wearing the herringbone coat of memory made me suspicious. Was my recollection faulty? And what did memories have to do with his guilt or innocence?

EVERYONE I SPOKE WITH REMEMBERS Parker as a mesmerizing speaker. Kevin Akey, my high school English teacher who is now a friend, reports that back in the '80s he was team-teaching a unit on World War I. One day Parker overheard a conversation about the Great War that Akey was having with his teaching partner. "He maintained the only reason we entered the war was to save J. P. Morgan's fortune," Akey says. "'Baloney!' we said. 'Fact!' said he. So we invited him in to present his theory to the class, with the idea that the students could challenge his assertions and conclusion." After Parker's presentation, in November, Akey says, he and his co-teacher "had a difficult time reestablishing our intellectual credibility with the class. Come June and final exams, the students still believed Parker's version of why we entered the war."

Bonnie O'Donnell, another former student, remembers Parker as an "authentic person who was really in the room with us." John Wagner, who also taught me history in high school, says, "I found him to be very wellread and extremely analytical, and I appreciated his insight on issues relating to history, sports, and any variety of political and social concerns."

Of course, not everyone was thrilled with everything Parker did. Several former students seemed unimpressed with the way Parker, unhappy with one student's research paper, nailed it to a classroom wall ("Not only was the paper nailed, but it was torn, burned, and dirty," says Michelle O'Dwyer). Jason Gold remembers the day one classmate showed up unprepared to give an oral presentation. Parker sent him to the front of the room, where the student proceeded to make an ass of himself.

Thinking back, the most attractive part of Parker as an educator was his unwavering irreverence, a trait that surely appealed to a lot of teenagers. I didn't learn the phrase *question authority* until I began college, but it might well have been Parker's motto. Michelle O'Dwyer recalls a day when Parker, who was team-teaching with an English teacher named Ron Conry, couldn't get the class to stop talking. In the middle of a lecture he asked Conry, "Hey Ron, you still have that boat?"

"Yeah, Bob, I do," Conry said.

"Great day for clammin,'" Parker replied. "Let's go."

The two then trotted out of the class, discussing where to clam off Sandy Hook. About fifteen minutes later, they returned to business as usual. "But as I recall," O'Dwyer says, "we never misbehaved again."

Among his students, Parker had a reputation for risky behavior, and he apparently took that predilection with him when he became an administrator. Akey, who is now East Windsor's coordinator of teacher technology training, says that Parker, in making professional presentations, would sometimes insert bogus assertions. "I knew he was bullshitting the audience when he made references to professors Scharnhorst and Mercantini," he says. "He would quote their research findings to the audience, but no such professors ever existed. The Scharnhorst was a German battleship in World War II, and he just made up the name Mercantini....He risked our combined professional reputation for the thrill of pulling the wool over their eyes."

Did other East Windsor School District employees have similar stories? I tried to talk with all the major players in Parker's current drama, but few of them wanted to cooperate. "Absolutely not," said Pat Brown, the retired assistant superintendent in East Windsor, when I asked if she would talk with me about Parker. Parker's lawyer, George Yuska, had little to say, explaining that Parker's case was still pending. David Shafter, East Windsor's business administrator, was emphatic: "I will not discuss Mr. Parker's situation with anyone," Shafter said, "until such time as his case is adjudicated." Parker himself, in a quick and awkward phone conversation, said that he couldn't talk about the allegations, though he proceeded to say that the case "goes under the category of getting royally screwed."

So what is Parker's defense? In published reports, Yuska suggested that Parker's method of selling computers, in which he was paid by checks made out to him or to cash, was condoned by the administration. (It supposedly cut down on the holdups caused by creating purchase orders.) In addition, Yuska claimed that the money from the computer sales went back into the district. David Witmer, who was superintendent from 1995 to 2003, the period during which Parker is accused of selling the computers, disputes

that assertion. "We never would permit anything of this type," Witmer says, "and we always sold obsolete items by sealed bids only."

Doris Galuchie, the spiky-haired assistant Mercer County prosecutor handling the Parker case, says of his defense, "In a way, it would be proving a negative. It just didn't happen." Then she gestures toward a stack of white papers as thick as a phone book and says that she took statements from more than 50 people and found "no evidence to support that defense."

Parker is accused of official misconduct and a single count of theft, covering the sale of the 75 computers. He faces five to ten years for each transaction. While both sides prepare for a possible trial, the prosecutor's office has offered a plea bargain, though neither side would disclose the terms. The prosecutor's office would not elaborate on possible motives for Parker's alleged misdeeds.

For his former students, the Parker case raises questions that they might never have considered. For starters, how could a superlative teacher become an administrator accused of official misconduct? What I do know—and didn't know when I was in high school—is that people are motivated by all manner of contradictory circumstances. Maybe we shouldn't be so surprised to hear shocking allegations about people—even governors—we thought we knew.

I'm reminded of something that Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's*, describes in his book *Gag Rule* as "the American fear of being found out." Lapham writes, "To a greater or lesser degree, we are all impostors, self-invented people, con artists afraid that somebody will call our bluff, see through our disguise, send for the IRS agents or the police."

Bob Parker, who always taught us to be skeptical, to have a healthy disrespect for official explanations, would, at this unhappy juncture, perhaps ask the people considering his fate to suspend their skepticism. I only hope I'll never have to see a picture of him in an orange jumpsuit.

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*Ken Gordon lives in Newton Centre, Massachusetts.*

