

Reflections about Being on the “On the Road” with Students:

I am sure she meant well, that her heart was in the right place, this woman who was shhsh-ing kids at the heights of the cavernous Lincoln Memorial a few Friday nights ago now. She was directing most of her shhsh-es toward the ones in the extravagantly coloured plaid ties. She was directing her glares at me, the only other person in sight in a tie. Certainly I must be their failed keeper. She reminded everyone in earshot that there were signs all over the place asking for quiet and respect.

Me? I merely raised my eyebrows a bit, and amidst the general din created by scads of people – young, old, and of all things, a scattering of local teenagers mugging for prom photos – talking and taking pictures, sidled over to a small group of Montcrest students to check in. Could you hear them? You bet! What were they doing that drew the shhsh-ing and the glare? Merely comparing their pictures of the great man and reading aloud the words of the Gettysburg Address writ large near the ceiling over their heads. Merely doing what everyone else was doing who was awed and thrilled to be in that shrine we have all casually thumbed on the tails of U.S. pennies and seen in TV shows or movies.

Seeing and hearing this pretty innocent wonder genuinely expressed, my poppa bear fur started to rise, but a rare moment of tact overwhelmed me and allowed me to refrain from answering this well-meaning woman. I just quietly reminded our kids to watch their voice volumes. I also started looking for the signs. They were there all right, two of them, neatly lettered and about as big as a letter-sized sheet of paper but frankly kind of lost amidst the crowd, the columns, the billboard-sized speech, and of course the giant of a man in the chair.

I have been thinking a lot about this since that beautiful spring night and, on a beautiful holiday weekend Saturday with my afternoon nap foiled by the usual Black and Decker symphony, I decided to reflect on what our Montcrest kids are like when they are on the road.

A little background might be in order. Upon our return from the grade 8 trip to Quebec last week, I had logged my 21st overnight school trip. Some have been just a night away, like the trip to Norval with the grade 5 class that is now about to graduate from high school or the junket to Ottawa with the boys' basketball team this year. Some have lasted a couple of nights, like the many journeys to fall camps with grade 6 students or the basketball tournament in Montreal with the girls' team one year. The longer trips have been to Quebec with the grade 8s and, of course, to Washington this year with the bands and the choir. Although I would never admit to having seen it all, for truly pride goeth before a fall, I have seen a quite a bit – nice hotels and rickety cabins, good food and bad, exhibits both cheesy and charming, guides and animators who connected brilliantly with kids and those to whom young people seemed an alien form of exotica, long bus rides and longer ones. Thus, I think I can comment fairly on the behaviour I've seen on trips.

I have seen a lot of the learning that Mr. Borsten referred to in this space a few weeks ago – learning how to be together in new spaces, learning how to be away from home, learning how to explore what respect, responsibility, integrity, courage, and compassion look like beyond the school’s gates. I have seen our students respectfully listening to guides and responsibly moving through special places. I have seen our students act with integrity by doing their best to meet expectations about tidiness and timeliness. I have seen students muster the courage they need to try new things and even to go away overnight for the first time. I have seen students offer compassionate care, concern, and inclusion to their peers. I have witnessed them overcome fears to compete or participate in athletic, artistic, cultural, or social activities with skill and grace.

I’ve also listened a fair bit on these trips. I have heard much laughter, a few shrieks during scary fireside stories, bus-board band and choir rehearsals, thoughtful questions asked to animators, gamely offered French phrases, and countless thanks given to bus drivers, leaders, wait staff, clerks, and teachers. I, like my teacher colleagues, have gratefully received many compliments about the thoughtfulness, focus, and good manners of our students.

Now make no mistake, these trips, like the roads we travel on, are not without the occasional twists, turns, and bumps. Montcrest students are kids, and they need some reminding and wrangling. They don’t always speak politely, walk two-by-two, turn off the lights at the right time, or make the correct choices on these trips. Sometimes coaching and encouragement need and must be replaced by grouching and limitations.

That said, save for one or two close shaves over the years, the stuff we have to sweat about is pretty minor and our trips are highly successful on so many levels. We expect a lot from our students, we really do, and we get it. I think there are some pretty clear reasons for this. First, from their earliest days at the school, whether in assemblies or on their very first field trips, our students are taught how to be good audience members and travelers. Second, we get great support from parents who offer insights, support, encouragement, and so much wonderful coaching at home. Third, the lead teachers on these trips do a ton of work with students, families, colleagues, school administrators, and tour companies to plan great trips, to organize groupings and room assignments, to anticipate and iron out wrinkles before they appear, and to roll with the punches that inevitably come once the buses begin to roll down Broadview Avenue. Finally, as teachers travelling with students, we get tremendous support and coaching from our administration team and any and all manner of help from our wonderful colleagues in the administration, finance, maintenance, and IT departments – if we call before, during, or after a trip, they always answer.

In closing, I want to go back to Washington and the Lincoln Memorial for just a moment. As I helped sweep our students down the steps of that wonderful

memorial and toward the rendezvous point, I was still thinking of that well-meaning woman, she of the shsh-es and glares. I also wondered what Lincoln himself might have made of it all. Now, I admit that I don't know much about him other than what I have learned from doing a little reading of late, seeing the recent movie, and maybe reading a *Classic Comic* about his life a long time ago. I do know he had a close relationship to his own children, and I think he was a people person. Therefore, here is my best guess. I think he would have been humbled that people – young and old, black and white - were reading the Gettysburg address aloud with wonder. I think he would have loved the fact that kids were happily comparing pictures, sending them to friends and family via *Instagram*. I think there would have been a smile on that craggy visage and a twinkle in those tired eyes that indicated that, all in all, the kids are alright.

- Dan Bailey