

To 'pay it forward' offers way to show appreciation

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Every Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday Mr. Bensley would come to my last class period and when it ended, take me to the gym for my "work out". It became a joke among my classmates—they would say things like, "Bensley's gonna turn you into his personal muscle man!" And there were other types of "put downs" too — the kind people that age always seem to come up with to make themselves appear stronger and more important than somebody else. It was quite uncomfortable and embarrassing for me. And it went on all year, until school ended in the summer. My own family supported Mr. Bensley and told me that I had to do exactly as he said. So, of course, I did.

Maybe I did improve a little in gym class. I don't remember. Gym was never a subject I was good at. But I admitted that Mr. Bensley, in his own way, had shown me that he cared. It was unusual for teachers to care about students who didn't like them or who gave them trouble and refused to do what was asked of them. Not being a very good liar, I probably more than once, without using any actual words, let Mr. Bensley know how much I resented what he was making me do. But we never talked about it—we just persisted, with me doing what I was told to do till the year ended and I could finally be rid of Mr. Bensley.

Two years later, when I was in ninth grade, I took a class in journalism and became a writer for our school newspaper. One of the articles I wrote was a column called "Teacher of the Month". For the first issue of the paper, I was asked to choose a teacher for this honor. Every month after that, students would submit teacher's names and we as the editorial board of the paper would decide together, based on the nominations, which teacher would receive the honor. My job was to interview the teacher and write the article. I felt a sense of my own power over that column, espe-

cially over the one in the first issue of the paper. There were several teachers I really liked and wanted to choose as the first "Teacher of the Month" for the year. I don't remember all my reasons for doing it, but after not too long a period of soul searching, I decided to nominate Mr. Bensley as the first "Teacher of the Month". The strongest factor may have been my knowing that nobody liked him and guessing that nobody would ever nominate him.

I went down to the gym and told Mr. Bensley that he was going to be the "Teacher of the Month" for September, that I was writing the column, and that I wanted to interview him. He looked at me strangely and after sitting silently for a few seconds, said, "OK. Do you want to do it now?" And I said, "Sure. Let's do it." I had not prepared any questions yet because I was conflicted inside and also a little scared, but I figured that I could probably do the interview on the spot. And anyway, I had a bunch of questions that I wanted to ask Mr. Bensley that had been burning inside me from the time I was in seventh grade. Here was my opportunity to get it all out and, because it was my job to interview him, I could ask him anything and didn't have to let my fear get in the way.

I found out that day that Mr. Bensley had been a soldier in the United States Army during the Korean War before he became a gym teacher. I found out that he had met a Japanese woman while stationed in Korea and married her. I found out that because he had a Japanese wife, he was "put down" by many of his fellow soldiers who had fought against the Japanese in World War II and had strong anti-Japanese prejudices. I also found out that he and his wife had lived in three different communities after he was discharged from the army and that in each one, they had suffered rejection and prejudice because of her Japanese background. As a Jewish child who grew up in a

Yiddish-speaking home with immigrant as well as Holocaust history, I was saddened and touched by Mr. Bensley's story. The fact that his wife was Japanese also had a personal connection for me. The only relative from my mother's family who survived the Holocaust had fled Lithuania before the Nazi occupation and had survived in Shanghai, then under Japanese occupation. The Japanese government, although allied with Nazi Germany, had protected approximately 25,000 Jewish refugees in Shanghai. Of course I knew how Americans at that time felt about Japan and how those feelings got translated into prejudices towards Japanese people. But my own family's experience with the Japanese cast a different light on this. Mr. Bensley had suddenly become a person to me rather than a tyrannical, mean teacher. I thought about what he had done when I was in seventh grade and how I had felt about it then, but as I listened to him tell me his story, my anger melted away, and with it the questions I had wanted to ask him. I silenced myself, and humbly admitted that I may have been wrong about Mr. Bensley.

At the end of the interview, the only thing Mr. Bensley asked me, or rather, stated to me was, "You were not the person who chose me as 'Teacher of the Month', were you?" And I quietly responded, "Yes. For the first issue, I was given the chance to choose whoever I wanted for the interview. And I chose you. I'm glad I did. Thanks for the interview." That was all we said. No other words were exchanged between us.

When I wrote the story about Mr. Bensley as "Teacher of the Month", I included the part about what he had done to me when I was in seventh grade and stated that when I was forced to go after school to the gym and do calisthenics I resented him. I also said that I realized that what he had done was to show me, in his own way, how much he cared about me, even though he proba-

bly knew that I would never become one of his "athletes". In the article, I thanked him for taking an interest in me just because I was a person and said that this quality was what made him an ideal choice for being our first "Teacher of the Month".

Writing for me has always been an outlet—a way of getting my feelings out into the open. I guess, even when I was in middle school, it was that way.

We may never have the opportunity to thank someone who has helped us or shown us kindness at a time when we needed it. And sometimes even when we can show it, the amount of appreciation that we are able to show feels to be inadequate.

What I take away in reflecting on what I learned from my encounter with Mr. Bensley in Middle School is that there is a place that all of us can put time and energy and effort into as a way of showing appreciation for help we have received. This is the idea of "Paying It Forward"—helping other people who need our help, especially those who are unable to do anything for us in return. The Talmud says that every action we take in the world has effects that are felt in places hidden from our view. The world was created in a way that positive energy generated by performing acts of kindness has an effect on things that happen in places we are unable to see and unable to touch. This is because good deeds always generate more good deeds. There is much to be said about "Paying it Forward."

Temple Israel in Athol will screen the film "Pay It Forward" on Saturday evening, Nov. 8, at 6 p.m. This film has a powerful universal message for everyone. The film screening, including an introduction and discussion afterwards, is open to the entire community. For more information, please contact Temple Israel at (978) 249-9481.

(Rabbi Robert Sternberg is the rabbi at the Temple Israel in Athol.)

Paying back and paying forward

By Rabbi Robert Sternberg
For The Gardner News

All of us have had experiences in life in which kindnesses have been extended to us or where we have received unexpected help when most needed it. Often, under such circumstances, we have had to remain on the receiving end of a supportive relationship without being able to do anything in return for the kindnesses shown to us. It feels good to be on the "giving end" of an act of kindness. But it is difficult for many of us to be on the "receiving" end.

I have an interesting memory of one of my seventh grade teachers. Mr. Harlan Bensley, my physical education instructor, was considered hard-nosed and tough. He was a strict disciplinarian and a formida-

ble presence in the school. Most students were afraid of him and the majority did not like him. I was not athletic at all, not good at playing most sports, and, as hard as I tried, I did not perform very well in gym class. Mr. Bensley decided that he was going to "toughen me up". He told me that I was required to go to the gym after school three days per week and "work out" under his supervision, doing push-ups, sit-ups, and other exercises. The more I did this, he said, the more of these exercises I would be able to do and the better I would get at doing my work in gym class. He told me that I had to agree to do this in order to pass his class. Being a typical seventh grader, I resented having to do all this extra work, especially for a subject I did not enjoy.

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