



On the deliberate disregard for the needs of the group *and* an impulse at variance with them

In the summer of 1995 Norman had just completed his sophomore year in college as a physics and philosophy major at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. He was looking forward to his third season as a camp counselor at the YMCA on Lake Allatoona near his home town of Woodstock, GA. He would be teaching team sports to a group of five- and six-year-olds. It was perhaps his confidence in working with these kids that convinced him that he could take off two weeks in the summer to work at a science camp in downtown Atlanta, called Sci Trek, where he would be working with seven- and eight-year-olds. It was a job he felt fortunate and flattered to have, as all the other camp leaders were school teachers; but a friend of the family knew of his passion for science and put him in touch with the camp director and he was hired. He was scheduled to teach two topics across two weeks: the history of scientific measurement and the science of sports. Both of these topics were proposed by him and approved by the camp director. The science of sports did not seem especially challenging or even that interesting compared to the history of scientific measurement, which Norman thought would supplement his physics education while he could not be in class.

So, in advance of this camp, he spent many weeks reading the entire history of measurement, going back to ancient Greece, anything from temperature to time to distance and weight. He delighted to notice things like how the same piece of elastic could be used to measure the circumference of something or the weight of something else, based on how far it stretched the elastic. Give the weight a pull and you had a rudimentary clock by counting the number of times it bobbed up and down. In theory, the frequency of the bobbing would change with temperature based on the effect of heat or cold, so you had the makings of a

temporal thermometer! Norman amused himself at the thought of cutting the elastic off a pair of underwear in front of the students, to illustrate his point about the potential for scientific measurement anywhere.

Did I mention that the campers were seven- and eight-year-olds? And that there were about twenty of them? And that these kinds of lessons were to go on for eight hours per day for the entire week?

On day one Norman entered the classroom with weeks worth of study under his belt, fascinating anecdotes, and a missionary zeal to inspire the next generation of scientists. Within fifteen minutes of talking about the history of scientific measurement, however, many of the kids sat dumbfounded but still at attention. They had been amused by the underwear bit, but mostly because it was underwear. The less obedient kids gradually rose from their desks and began walking around the room. One spotted the manual odometer Norman had brought and began playing with it (the odometer was a wheel with a counter attached to a long rod, so you could push it around to take land surveys). Others thought this looked fun and wanted to take turns. As nothing else seemed to hold their attention, Norman thought it might be interesting to go outside and measure some greater distances with the odometer and perhaps use trigonometry(!) to calculate distances that would be hard or impossible to measure, like the height of a flagpole. Norman was again wrong. Some of the kids wanted to see how fast they could push the odometer or chase the person pushing it. Most of them just wanted to play outside. The high school student who had been assigned to assist Norman with the kids commented that he regarded Norman as a hero of science but probably the students needed materials and activities that were more at their level. And thus here was the crux of Norman's first failure of leadership: he had not paid the slightest thought to what an eight-year-old's "level" might be. If asked, he would have of course acknowledged that an eight-year-old mind was different from his own twenty-year-old mind, but he would have assumed that an eight-year-old would have found fascinating the same questions and ideas he himself found fascinating. Such a mind needed only to have ideas explained in slower, simpler terms. This was a failure of empathy or perspective-taking not in the sense that

Norman didn't *care* about those kids--he cared deeply--but he had not formed an accurate theory of how their minds worked. This was a common challenge for Norman back then and remains so to this day. Specifically, it has to do with his ability to predict the intellectual interests of others. He generally assumes that other minds have similar questions about the world to his own mind and that these questions are worth pondering at any time and any place. At the very least he believes that once a question is raised, other minds would, or should, find it as interesting as he does. When other minds do not take an interest, Norman assumes that they are just not that curious, which he interprets as a character flaw and either visibly or internally registers disdain. What this case with the summer science camp illustrates, though, is that curiosity, assuming it is generally more of a virtue than its opposite, can take multiple forms and probably many of Norman's intellectual interests are idiosyncratic. It's also the case that curiosity can be stimulated under the right circumstances and right time, as in the case of the high school student.

The sequel to this failure of leadership runs as follows. It is not clear how Norman completed eight hours with these kids on the first day. By the time he got home from camp, he was dejected and helpless. Today was supposed to be the *introduction*, followed by the "deep dive"(!) on the remaining days. He now had fewer than twelve hours to find a much simpler--and more interesting--way to talk about the history of scientific measurement. After going down many fruitless paths of thought and experimentation, Norman could see no way to do this, at least no way that seemed authentic and passionate coming from him. Everything felt dumbed down and, he imagined, would make the students only dumber and less serious. In a panic, he decided that the only thing for him to do was quit the camp. His desperation convinced him that there was a kind of nobility to this approach: he would not be like all those phonies Holden Caulfield derided. He would not pretend to be something he clearly was not, a teacher of science to eight-year-olds. His absence from the camp would make him kind of a passive catcher in the rye.

In order to perform this role Norman drove sleepless to Atlanta the next morning at sunrise, in order to arrive at Sci Trek before anyone else and communicate, in a note, his intention to quit the camp, this being before the days of the text message. By the time he got back home, the camp director had been calling his house to demand that he return because, as she said, he was leaving her in a "lurch." This was the first time he had ever heard this word outside of the Addams Family, so he did not know exactly what it meant; but he knew it was something bad and it stung to hear the director continue to use it. But Norman pushed back with his Holden Caulfield rationale that his heart was not in this anymore and thus to go through with it would make him a phoney and likely kill any genuine interest the kids would ever have in science. He actually said that! And he said that the kids deserved a real science teacher. It was one of the lamest "it's not you, it's me" break-up speeches in human history. The camp director was furious and nonplussed, but gave up. Norman later learned that he had been replaced by that same high school student who had been his assistant and admired him. It's not known whether he did anything on the history of scientific measurement with the kids.

True to the prompt, this sketch reveals a failure of leadership in two forms: Norman willfully abandoned his charges in order to escape confusion, humiliation, and the panic caused by his poor preparation. His poor preparation was itself caused by his tendency to assume, and impose, his curiosity onto others. One remedy I have found to avoid replicating this failure is to work hard to build relationships with people who share my intellectual interests. These days I'm terrifically fortunate to have many people to choose from, so this is a pretty easy remedy. The remedy that takes more work, but that is perhaps even more rewarding, is that I spend a lot more time asking others what *they* are curious about and even taking great satisfaction when their curiosity rubs off on me.

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