

Intolerable Behavior

By Julie Pruitt

A teacher learns tolerance from an unlikely source – her greatest repulsion.

I should have known she was a he. There were clues.

Just the fact that her (I mean his) name was Andy should have been a tip-off. But, he looked like a girl. Besides, many girls these days have boyish-sounding names to me: Taylor, Stevie, Jo, Cameron, and Toni, to name a few.

I guess I should have paid closer attention to the mischievous grins that ricocheted from face to face whenever I referred to Andy as “her” or “she.” Yet, I missed the meaning of those glances. I never once questioned that he was anything but the girl I saw before me each day in class. From his painted toenails to his well-coifed array of attractive hairstyles, Andy was the epitome of feminine high school beauty.

Daily, he proudly paraded the latest fashions on his lithe frame: skintight miniskirts that clung to tapered

hips; a favorite frayed T-shirt that proclaimed across his faux mounds – “I WANT A BOY WITH AN ATTITUDE!”; and always ... always, the cutest shoes. My favorite was a pair of clogs with little fruity-tutee objects floating inside clear

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heels. Hands down, he was one of the best-dressed “girls” in school.

One day as I discussed some solutions to Andy’s trademark behavioral patterns with another teacher (Andy craved attention and his outbursts frequently disrupted classes), my colleague’s face crumpled into perplexity.

“Uh-h-h-h, we-ell,

uhm-m-m ... didn’t you know?” he fumbled with the words. “Andy’s a boy,” he finally managed to sputter. My dazed disbelief quickly ended the conversation.

Once alone, realization seeped into my psyche. I agonized over how many times I may have leaned too closely to Andy, not knowing he was a male student (I’m perfunctorily proper about such things). I cynically countered my own introspection with, “What does it matter? You’re definitely not ‘A BOY WITH AN ATTITUDE!’”

Howbeit, a new attitude had erupted deep within me.

Abruptly, I found myself repulsed by Andy’s presence in class. Like a well-aimed spitball loaded with duplicity and perversion, his farce hit me square in my righteousness indignation.

I was still fuming a week after learning Andy’s true identity.

“Why didn’t he correct me when I called him a ‘her’?” I ranted at another teacher.

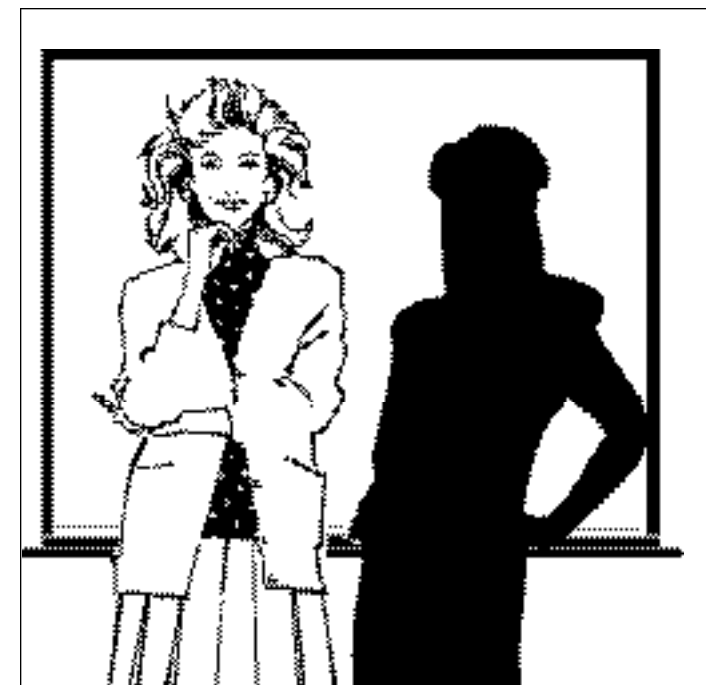
“He didn’t think you said anything that needed correcting.”

That response only fueled my flaming fury; I thirsted for unsullied solace.

I also struggled to remain professionally polite when I worked with Andy in class. Inwardly, I simmered with disgust. The revelation of Andy’s cross-dressing had jarred my self-proclaimed, non-prejudiced teaching style.

Then, stories started circulating amongst the faculty about how his drug-addicted biological mother had tried to kidnap Andy from his current foster home – one of those confidential reports that teachers aren’t supposed to carry beyond counselors’ offices, but often do. My heart softened ... a little.

One morning as I graded papers during a free period, Andy showed up in my classroom.



“Do you have a hall pass?” I asked tartly. It was a procedural question, loaded with nonprocedural cantankerousness.

“No, I just got to school.” (It was almost ten; school started at seven-fifteen.)

“I don’t understand how to do my homework, can you help me?” Andy pleaded.

I was trapped, I in my self-righteous mores with Andy in his flamboyant sexual eccentricity.

I put down my pen and went to where he was seated (not too close). I started explaining how to do the

project. As Andy began demonstrating a genuine excitement for the paper, I also became more enrapt in the one-on-one lesson.

When I returned to my desk to finish evaluating papers, Andy continued to diligently work on his assignment. I couldn’t help but occasionally stop my work and watch his enthusiasm.

In those moments alone with Andy, my

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aversion silently slipped through the cracks of the wax-polished wooden floorboards. Instead of seeing a contemptible gender bender, I unexpectedly saw only a boy who needed someone to care about and accept him.

As time crept toward our next class together, I threw myself into helping Andy complete his project. He was ecstatic with his work – as was I.

Later, when Andy read to the class what he had written, I was as proud as any mother hen. We exchanged beaming smiles across the room as he finished the oral presentation.

The teacher was being taught. Until I had looked beyond the “faults” I had found in Andy (and saw my own instead), my behavior had been intolerable.

Tolerance is a highly touted buzzword in academic communities and beyond. However, true tolerance can’t be completely mastered until one collides head-on with one’s greatest cultural atrocity and vanquishes it ... the perception, that is, not the person.

Tolerance doesn’t mean that one has to like another individual’s lifestyle, agree with it, or even understand it; it simply means one “tolerates” it. Tolerance is such a simple act to accomplish, yet throughout the world, wars rage, murders are committed, and hatred prevails, often, because we simply can’t tolerate one another.

The lesson reminded me of two others I heard repeatedly when I was a child – “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” and “Love your enemies.” Actually, as an adult, I had often sanctimoniously spouted these admonitions to belligerent children. Yet, it was not until I met Andy that I genuinely learned to practice what I preached.

“Human diversity makes tolerance more than a virtue; it makes it a requirement for survival.”

Rene Dubos
Celebrations of Life, 1981