PRINCIPALS WITH CASH

Wendy Wilson

[Assignment: Write a narrative essay telling the story of an experience that changed your view of a person, a group, or an institution. Be sure not to neglect the presentation of a thesis statement that stresses the meaning of the incident.]

(1) I had always looked up to my grade school principal with respect and admiration. He was kind-hearted and soft-spoken. He never looked down on students, but treated them as thinking, rational beings—which was frequently more than they deserved. I had no reason to believe that he ever administered unjust punishment or any punishment without due cause. He always approached the misdemeanors of students with fairness, patience, and a gentle hand. But one incident in the sixth grade classroom altered my perspective of him and reinforced my belief that adults are not exempt from making mistakes.

(2) The episode took place when we were having our annual Thanksgiving lunch shortly before the holiday vacation. That year, the cafeteria was not used so we ate our lunches in our classroom and our teacher ate with us. The PTA had prepared a Thanksgiving meal which we grabbed in the hallway and took back to our room. But on this particular day our teacher was needed elsewhere and a substitute never arrived to fill his place. Apparently, we were believed to be mature enough to refrain from any type of foul, adolescent behavior in the absence of an adult.

(3) We were able to live up to this expectation for about five minutes. Quickly we came to the conclusion that we were being left unsupervised. Not long after, I became aware of turkey whizzing over my head with corn and other assorted side dishes soon following. Everyone sacrificed his/her appetite to join the festivities, some purely out of self-defense. Escape was available to no one.

(4) Our shrieks of laughter must have suggested to our principal, whose office was unfortunately located close to our room, that the students across the hall were not eating their meals passively. He walked bravely into the midst of warring sixth graders who were armed with turkey and pumpkin pie; his arrival brought an abrupt stop to the whole event. He stood authoritatively in front of the room looking rather perturbed. Then, he demanded to know who had thrown the first piece of food. I was baffled by his request because although the food slinging had been ignited by one person initially, others had quickly joined in. I could not see why he was so eager to pin the blame on one person and I could tell by the puzzled expressions on my peers’ faces that they felt the same way. But the principal insisted to our blank
and unresponsive faces that he must be informed of this evil individual's identity. When he finally realized that this approach was ineffective, he introduced a new tactic. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a green piece of paper.

(5) "I will give the person who tells me who started the whole fiasco this ten dollar bill."

(6) We sat stunned, motionless. Our reaction was provoked by the mere sight of ten whole dollars and by the realization that it could be obtained without much effort. However, we were all quite aware that the person being sought was none other than the class bully and knew, as well, the implications of someone coming forward. Unthreatening in appearance but sharp with his tongue, the bully was more a master of cruel words than of physical violence. His devastating good looks and admirable athletic talents contributed to his popularity and ability to persuade. He was capable of making life a wretched experience for anyone who dared to offend him by convincing others that the offender deserved to be ridiculed and ostracized. This mistreatment would usually last a whole week--or until someone else became worthy of such abuse.

(7) Nobody took the bait which I believe was best for all concerned. The principal realized he was aboard a sinking ship but he refused to give up until the very end. "Doesn't anybody want ten dollars? It will buy a heck of a lot of candy bars. Any takers? It can easily be yours. All you have to do is give me one little name." His pleas were ignored. Eventually he gave up and walked defeatedly out of the room with the money still clenched in his hand.

(8) The principal's approach to the whole situation left me bewildered. I was disappointed by the measure he took to achieve his goal and by the goal itself. First, his active pursuit of one person was unreasonable. Then I wondered whether he had used bribery on the spur of the moment or if he made regular use of this method. His complete ineptitude in handling a rather simple affair disheartened me. My high opinion of him lessened that day, leaving me wondering if perhaps my expectations of adult behavior needed adjusting. In my innocence and awe of the adult world, I had assumed that adults, especially principals, were unfailingly wise. Such easy faith now seemed unrealistic.