

Audio Transcript of Allan Quigley Recording

Section 5: Big Bill and the Day I Decided to Stay in the Field of Adult Literacy

Hi.

We heard about Big Bill and his wife Dolores in section five. How Big Bill wanted to work in construction but, being unable to read, when he had to read on the job he would just quit—often after punching the boss in the nose, whom he would refer to as “that idiot.” I learned months later, as Bill told me himself, with a good deal of anger: “I was 15 in grade 4 and the teacher told me ‘I was stupid’ for the last time. I slammed the door and quit.”

I also talked in section 5 how, as time went on, Bill and I would leave the classroom and go on our “walk abouts” so he could practice reading the signs in the shop windows. He would slowly “sound out” the letters to make words.... Towering over me and bending down to say the words in a near whisper so passersby wouldn’t recognize him and wonder what he was doing?

In section Four I talked about the wild ride Tom and I took with Big Bill to a Pulp and Paper mill, and how Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau was responsible for all the problems in Bill’s life.

But this last story involving Big Bill is probably the best example I have ever experienced of transformative learning.

Actually, here was transformative learning not only for Bill, but for me.

Bill and his wife Dolores were in the very first class I ever taught in adult literacy and basic ed in that northern Saskatchewan town back in 1972-73.

Bill was about six feet tall and at least 250 pounds, thus the nickname, “Big Bill.” In the early 70’s, we were allowed to smoke in our classroom. At least in our case. We were in a high school, but since the government was renting a room and these were adults, the principal allowed smoking to take place as long as we picked up after ourselves.

So, I remember how Bill sat at the very back of the semi-circle I had set up in the room. He chose to sit about as far away as he could get from me. His wife, Dolores, sat much closer in her desk.

Big Bill barely fit into the student desk. Had to squeeze in. He wore a checkered hunting cap at all times and chain smoked.

Dolores was placed at about grade nine. But the placement test I did with Bill didn’t take long. He told me the minute I approached with the test, “I can’t read.” I looked at him and he added: “Never could.”

I was not sure what I should do. I wish I had had the Intake Inventory that appears in the index, or had some idea of our formula, the VVSE formula on motivation seen in section 4, but the best I could think of was to ask if he could stay after class so I could work with him one-on-on?

He thought for a minute, then said, "We'll see."

The next morning, a Tuesday, he came up to my desk after class and said:

"Did you get your moose yet?"

Hunting was the main activity in that area, and it was now moose hunting season.

I said, "No." I didn't mention I never hunt.

Then he said, "Well, I got two this year." And he took off his cap and proudly showed me the moose blood on it.

After that awkward ice breaker, he said:

"I just wanted to tell you I will be quitting this Friday."

"Quitting? Why?"

"Because I *can't* read. The wife dragged me here."

He took a puff of his cigarette and added: "She has tried to teach me but we always get into a huge fight. I told her I'd stay to Friday. So, just wanted you to know."

As he turned to get his jacket, I said something like:

"Are you sure you can't read?"

"Nope. No way. This is all a bunch of bull crap." Only he didn't say "crap."

With this, he strode out the door.

It was obvious that Bill was filled with anger. Thinking back to the VVSE formula seen in section 4, it was obvious Bill didn't value this course much. As for volition, I had no idea. But imagined it was low to none. Dolores had forced him to come.

I managed to talk with Dolores the next day, just the two of us, and she told me he could not read. He could recognize things like stop signs and sight-recognize some words, but he could not actually read.

With considerable anxiety in her voice, she said this class was her last hope for Bill.

As mentioned, their family of four had moved as often as five times a year with their furniture tied to the roof of their car as Bill tried to hold construction jobs. But, as she said, "Bill can't read and always quits. He gets so mad..." Adding, "I don't think we can go on like this."

After a long night thinking of how to deal with this, I decided to take an approach that is not in this Guide. Or any textbook I have ever read. Maybe this approach was some form of nurturing, as I recommend doing at the beginning of every learner's program, but, right or wrong, I acted on pure instinct. As we often do in tutoring and teaching.

Here's what I thought. Bill was a big tough, angry guy. I would challenge him. Man-to-man. Maybe a macho challenge would get him to stay. Nothing to lose. He was determined to quit.

The next day, Wednesday, I asked if he could stay after class.

When we were alone, I said:

"Bill, here's a bet I want to make with you. I'll bet you 10 bucks I will be able to teach you to read in a week. This means, by a week from this Friday. IF you can't read a week from this Friday, I will pay you 10 bucks and you can go. But, if you CAN read, you owe me 10 bucks and have to stay."

This really got his attention.

He said with a laugh: "You are betting me I can learn to read in a week?"

"That's right," I said.

He was quite stunned. Obviously, his wife, Dolores, had been pressuring him to stay, or at least find some way to learn to read. He had to keep her happy. Bill lit another cigarette and stared out the window for a minute.

Then said, "You know this is all bull crap."

I said, "Well, I don't think so. Neither does Dolores"

I added: "If you want to learn to read, it means you have to stay after class. It means I will work with you every day after class. And if I give you something to work on at home, like over the weekend, you need to work with Dolores to try to learn it."

He said, "I'll talk to the wife." He pulled his jacket on, stubbed his cigarette out and left.

The next day, Dolores asked if she and Bill could talk with me. We went into the school hallway and went over the same plan. Bill didn't say much, except, after having been told by Dolores in that meeting to do it, he finally said, then: "Okay. Ten bucks...right?" In those days ten dollars was worth something. Maybe a pack of cigarettes.

I said, "Right. And we are starting tomorrow. You need to stay at least an hour after class."

Dolores said, "I can visit relatives while you stay, Bill."

He muttered, "This is all bull crap."

Since my short training course back in Regina didn't even consider the possibility of having anyone who absolutely could not read, since training was all about teaching the levels five to ten; and since I had no books at that low level, the only thing I could think of was to write the letters of the alphabet along the top of the blackboard and then search the school library for what we today would call "high-low" books; high interest-low vocabulary. All I could find were

child-level, Dick and Jane types of books, which I expected would be totally demeaning for Bill. And a few cowboy comics, which I was to learn had so many idioms and slang they were not useable. Ironically, too difficult.

So, we made a start that first day with learning the sounds of the letters—the phonics approach. Which I had as a kid in grade one and two.

With Bill squeezed into a desk, sitting closer to me, puffing away on cigarettes, hat pulled down, I asked him to repeat and try to remember the sounds of each letter.

There are, as you know, 26 letters, but each has several sounds. A is sometimes “**aye**,” **sometimes “Ah.”** We got to about letter **D** that first day. Which of course can be “dee” like deer, or “duh” like “done,” or “daw” like “dog.” I was going to lose this bet and, worse, this was probably Bill’s last chance. Maybe this was a bad idea.

Bill would sit there, hat pulled down, sweating, chain smoking, leaving for the bathroom, mopping the perspiration from his face with a handkerchief... But he tried, he really tried.

When Dolores came back to pick him up, she agreed she would do what she could to reinforce what Bill had learned—or had tried to learn.

To digress for a moment, years later as a professor of adult education I was once asked to be an outside examiner for a doctoral dissertation sent from a university in Australia. The dissertation was by a student who was a psychotherapist by trade and was studying adult literacy at the doctoral level. The topic he was investigating was, “fear of reading.” I realized years later that dissertation described Bill. Bill clearly had what was being called “fear of reading.” An internalized belief that a person just can’t read...and, because of this fear, has made a life-time attempt to avoid the printed word. Bill had all the symptoms: sweating, sick to his stomach, having to go to the bathroom. This is as traumatic as climbing onto a plane with a fear of flying.

But, with home-help from Dolores, and looking now at the VVSE formula, his volition clearly was increasing. He tried so hard. His belief in the value of this class rose with every passing day.... He was having success. Genuine success. But would he ultimately be able to read?

Meanwhile, I was a physical wreck. Teaching the class all day, then for several hours after class with Bill was about all I could do. And the pressure was on. We were almost at the end of the week. We ground through the alphabet and I tried to connect them to words.

So, we came to the last day. Friday. We had gone through the multiple sounds of the 26 letters. Even I was confused.

But, and I am not making this up, on that last day, I wrote “DOG” on the blackboard.

Pointing to the corresponding letters along the top of the blackboard, “D” then “O” then “G.” Bill said, “Doog.” Then Doj.” Then moving to “O” it was “AWE,: then “Ohh,” Another cigarette lit and a trip to the bathroom, he said, “JEE” for the letter G.

“Okay Bill, say it all together, fast.” He stared and muttered under his breath, sounding out the sounds then came up with “DOAAWG.”

“YES BILL!” Dog!

Then, boldly, I wrote “CAT.”

“Come on Bill.” Just sound it out.”

Focusing on C” he said “Ssaa,” then tried “Kaa” Finally after several sounds and curses, he could say “Teee. Then he stared again and sounded out:“CAAAT.”

“Yes Cat!” I exclaimed, “BILL YOU CAN READ!”

He looked incredulous. I said, “Bill, you figured this word out. You sounded it out! That’s reading!”

He took off his hat. And for the first time, he actually smiled. Even laughed.

“Okay Bill, let’s give one more a try...”

I wrote **MEN** on the blackboard. But this time, I didn’t point to the letters along the top of the blackboard. Or do anything. He just started and said:

“**MMM..MM**”; then “**EEEE**.” ...“**MEE?**” He remembered to try: “**EH, EH**.” “Right. Then, “**Neh**.”

“Now all together.”

He slowly sounded out: “**M-EH-NA**” Then, “**MEN!**” again, “**MEN!**”

“Hey, you got it!” We shook hands.

Then something occurred to me, I asked him, “Bill, how do you find the bathroom in this school?”

“What do you mean?”

“How do you find the men’s bathroom in this building?”

“Well...uh. I just wait to see how goes into which door. If a woman goes in that one, I go in the other one.”

I said, “Come on. Let’s go upstairs and find the bathroom.

The hallways were empty and we made our way upstairs to a floor had he hadn’t been to before. We walked to the end of the hallway.

We stood in front of two washroom doors. One had a sign that said, said Women, the other said, Men.

“Okay Bill, which door will you go in?”

He answered, "I always just wait to see who goes in which door. It's bull crap."

I could see he was getting scared. Losing confidence.

I said, "Bill, You have the same word as you saw on the blackboard down stairs.. Just take your time and sound the words out"

He studied the two of them for a minute, lips quietly moving, then, choosing the one that looked familiar, started in: "MMM-EH-EH...NN...**MEN.**"

"That's it!"

He looked at me with a huge smile. I think watching Big Bill pull the door of the men's bathroom open and go in was probably the proudest moment of my whole career. I stood there and thought of the indignity, how awful it must have been all those years for this grown, proud, man to stand around not knowing which bathroom to go into.

The next week, with no mention of the bet... Bill and I took our after-class walk abouts. While we were in the classroom, some of the other learners would help Bill: Tom, Dolores and one or two others. They also helped find reading materials. They asked him how it was going. And I scrounged what I could from libraries and bookstores.

That winter I learned a lot. A lot. Bill and I connected several times and I heard about his life.

I learned what hard-poverty was really like. About days when there was hardly any food for his four kids. How his young son had night terrors and wet the bed at age 10.

As mentioned earlier, I learned about the dents in his car. Why the roof was bowed in. It was from loading furniture on the roof in a hurry so they could move to a new construction job. One year they moved five times.

I also learned about the pressure from his extended family and town friends to not get "**educated.**" To, in effect, "**Stay like us.**" They apparently would say: "**Hey we are all stupid here.**" And, as time went on, more than one said: "**Who do you think you are?**"

I also learned about a few marital problems he and Dolores were having and, fearing I was starting to cross the line of "professionalism," I advised him to go with Dolores to the local doctor. I don't know if they did.

But, towards the end of the class and good progress from them both, the three of us went to the College in Prince Albert and Dolores signed up for the 11-12 level of adult basic education and Bill would enter the 5-10 program. These would be day classes and the college would help them find a place to live. And, importantly, at least in my mind, they would leave what was a community that had an almost strangle hold on him, to stay and conform.

But Bill had truly changed. He still insisted Pierre Trudeau was to blame for all of his problems, but he was no longer full of rage. Everything wasn't "Bull Crap."

He listened to others and was, frankly, a different Bill. And it wasn't just me who saw this change,

The last day of the program, as I stood at the door and said goodbye to each learner and said "Good Luck, and we shook hands or hugged, Dolores held back and asked if we could talk for a moment in private. We went back into the room and she looked at me and said, "Thank you for saving my marriage." And we hugged.

To end this story, that was the day I decided to stay in the field of adult literacy.

And to add, if there was ever a case of transformative learning, it was Big Bill. And, truly, it was me. To use the terminology of this section, Bill's disorienting dilemma was the realization he was actually capable of reading. For me, it was the realization that adult literacy was a worthwhile field. It was a field where I could maybe make a difference.

And still with this same hope...I will just say:

Thanks for listening.