

## **The New Orleans Taxi Ride**

(New Orleans, Louisiana, 2001)

I enjoy giving presentations on storytelling or storytelling workshops. I especially liked to explain and discuss Roosevelt's "Schools Without Failure" program, and how much children can achieve if given the chance and choice of various styles of education, teachers, and other curriculum changes over the years.

Many of the educational conferences around the country have experts from one area of education or another. Often, the presenters are college educated instructors or professors that travel the "Education Conference Circuit," as Professor Emeritus Charles Reasoner disgustingly termed it. He noted that the same people tour to present the same information at these conferences. They seldom contribute concrete ideas of how to actually improve classroom practice due to the fact that the majority had limited, if any, public school teaching experiences with children. The healthy stipend offered by these conferences for the big-name professors made for a good income.

When public school teachers are invited to speak at these education conferences they usually have to pay for their own travel, room and board. Rarely does the actual classroom teacher receive a stipend to help with expenses.

My good friend, and teaching partner at Roosevelt Middle School, David Mandelblatt, and I had been invited to give a workshop on "Using and Teaching Humor and Laughter in the Middle School to Reduce Violence, Stress, and Enhance Curriculum," for the International Reading Association at the Hilton Hotel Conference Center in New Orleans. David and I had never been to New Orleans before, and were excited at the opportunity.

Because there happened to be a National Jazz Festival occurring in New Orleans at the same time as our conference, all of the hotels jacked up their prices.

To save money, we decided to rent a hotel room in a place about twenty minutes outside the city. The hotel had a shuttle that took us into the city center, where we toured the wonderful historic sites, marveling at the architecture that had so many stories to tell.

We took a boat tour of the bayous, traveling through the marshy, watery channels, past rickety docks and shanty houses hidden in the dense growth. The captain, always on the lookout for gators, lectured us on the environmental crisis afflicting the bayous and its wildlife. “The salt water from the ocean keeps on killing more and more of the vegetation. In thirty years, they expect the ocean to completely have destroyed all this, as well as the City of New Orleans – it’ll all be under water.”

Suddenly, the boat swerved. “There’s one of them gators. Let’s get closer!”

With that, the captain began chucking marshmallows towards the alligator, who obediently responded by following the trail of marshmallows towards the boat. The captain encouraged this marshmallow feeding frenzy with three other gators we encountered, as well as with a bird and a beaver. We discovered an enormous bag of marshmallows behind the steer of his boat! The captain had those gators addicted to marshmallows!

We came upon a beaver, swimming peacefully in the Louisiana waters. Worried about the negative publicity that might result from having one of the gators swallow up a passing beaver in front of his guests, the captain threw a hailstorm of marshmallows in the distance in order to persuade the gator to leave that poor beaver in peace. It worked! The gator obviously preferring a mouthful of sugary squishy marshmallows to a tough and hairy beaver. What would the gator dentist say?

The day of our presentation arrived. We called a taxi to pick us up at 7:30 a.m. to take us to the Hilton Conference Center.

The taxi driver, a broad-shouldered man, with a large, thick head and slouched posture, only nodded his head at my request to take us to the Hilton Conference Center. He didn't say a word to us. The doors closed, and he set off towards the city center.

“Got a real bad headache!” the driver abruptly announced to us. “Real bad – but it's not because I've been drinking – I haven't been drinking. Just got this bad, bad headache.”

He then flipped through radio stations until he finally tuned into a hard-rock channel. His body began vigorously bouncing to the music as the taxi headed towards the freeway.

Up ahead, we saw bumper-to-bumper traffic. It was the morning rush hour.

I turned to David, and remarked in a low voice, “We're never going to get there in time to set up for this workshop. This is not good!”

The thick neck of the driver suddenly became taunt – the head focused in a frozen stare looking straight ahead. With an explosion of speed, the driver shot the taxi into the emergency lane, accelerating to a sonic velocity of close to 90 mph. So as to avoid obvious detection with the police, the driver would slam on the breaks, weaving back into the slow traffic to hide momentarily, and then shoot into the emergency lane again at 90 mph.

I looked at David. David looked at me. This was not funny. We each checked the strength of our seatbelt, tugging on it with some hope that the inventor had anticipated these acts of a maniac New Orleans taxi driver when creating his seatbelt design.

We were afraid to say anything to each other, and, especially, to the driver. This was *not* the type of person you wanted to reprimand – to interrupt – to show you objected to his performance.

Finally, the exit for the Hilton Conference Center came into sight.

Without moving his neck, the driver asked, “Where do you want me to let you out?”

Trying to find my voice after such a terrifying ride, I answered. “Here. Right here is fine.”

It seemed like he didn’t hear or maybe didn’t understand what I said. “I can let you off anywhere. Tell me. Just tell me where.”

“No,” I clarified, “right here would be great – really. Right here.”

The taxi broke to a halt. Relieved, we reached for the doors to exit as quickly as we could.

Finally, the driver turned his massive head around.

We looked at his face – the face of the driver who had just taken us on a 90-mph cat and mouse chase through rush hour traffic. This bulk of a man had but one eye open, the other one permanently shut. Through his three teeth in his cavernous mouth, he requested the fare.

“Twenty dollars please.”

David and I swore that for any future conferences, we would spend the extra money next time to stay in town. Not worth it!

We did have a great workshop!