

# A MONTH OF MONDAYS

Spiritual Lessons from the Catholic Classroom



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FOREWORD BY PATRICK HANNON, CSC

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PUBLICATIONS

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*For Mark,  
In gratitude for rainbows  
All the days of my life*



## FOREWORD

### JUMPING OUT OF OUR OWN SKIN

BY PATRICK HANNON, CSC

Andrew Simon was a student I taught years ago at Notre Dame High School for Boys outside of Chicago, Illinois. He sat in the fourth row second seat in my freshman Introduction to Literature and Composition class. He stood four feet ten and weighed in at a scrawny ninety pounds by my reckoning. He wore thick-rimmed glasses and slacks that exposed white socks tucked into oversized penny loafers. I recall our first encounter. He came rushing into my classroom a minute late on the first day of class carrying all of his textbooks. He found the last open desk, dropped his books with a thud on the desk top, slid into the seat, retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his sweaty brow, and said, “Jesus Christ, it’s a frickin’ mile from the gym to here!” Only he didn’t say *frickin’*. He opened his notebook, retrieved a pen from his shirt pocket, clicked it open, licked the tip, and wrote the date at the top left hand corner of the blank page. With that he took a deep breath, exhaled, looked up, and stared at me.

Burdened with Asperger’s Syndrome—a high-functioning form of autism—Andrew was an awkward boy. He was prone to odd ticks and sudden outbursts and peculiar habits of being. He rarely smiled. Watching him as he sat in class, a thoughtful observer would note a level of concentration rare in a thirteen-year-old. It was as if he had harnessed every last bit of energy in his body for the sole purpose of keeping himself from jumping out of his own skin. And sometimes he simply failed at that task. One day, for instance, Tom, who sat directly behind Andrew, began poking Andrew’s back with his pen. Tom hadn’t an ounce of guile in him; he had simply drifted off into some daydream and was absentmindedly poking the

nearest warm body. The class was quiet at the time. And then Andrew leaped out of his seat, swung around to face a startled Tom, and said in frantic voice, “Smith, if, if, if you don’t stop poking me with that frickin’ pen, I’m going to kick your, your, your...ASS.” Only he didn’t say *frickin’*.

Andrew Simon’s classmates loved him. I loved him. Everyone loved him, and for all the right reasons. He was exasperating and entertaining. He was thoughtful and provocative. He tantalized us and amazed us. He challenged us and stretched the boundaries of propriety and dared us to accept him as he was. In short, Andrew Simon was for his classmates and me an instrument of grace. I had only one conversation with my freshmen about Andrew early on, and it was in his absence. I spelled out for them the particularities of Asperger’s and simply asked them to be patient with him. Patient they were. In his own way, Andrew the student became Andrew the teacher, drawing out of us skills and competencies we always had hoped we harbored. The Andrew Simon Lesson Plan—no less real or understood for being unspoken—brought every person in the class, myself included, to a deeper experience of our own (often hidden) fragile humanity, to a crossroads where compassion and hope and understanding intersected.

Andrew was one of the brightest students I ever taught. On my challenge, he read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for crying out loud, and then offered me a ten-paged, typed, written critique of it! But what I remember now is what he extracted from me, his teacher, and from his classmates. He brought out the best in us. Even as I attempted to instill a thirst for excellence in my students, he planted in me the desire to be good and loving.

But he probably never knew it. Andrew was too busy trying to keep himself from jumping out of his own skin.

To me, this is what teaching is all about and why you simply must read every story in this book. Karen Eifler, a teacher of teachers (and thus a student at heart), gives us here a glimpse of

## INTRODUCTION

“**Y**ou’ll be telling the stories for all those amazing teachers who never get to tell theirs! Who ever thinks of grammar school and middle school and high school kids as occasions of grace?” So said my friend Father Pat Hannon when he challenged me to put this collection together.

What you will encounter here are thirty snapshots of grace in action, enough to fill “a month of Mondays” for busy teachers, administrators, and catechists. Each story is preceded by a verse from Scripture or other sacred texts, to serve as an anchor for a contemplative reading of the day’s tale. While I’ve changed their names, out of respect for privacy and to allow quiet space for their continued miracle-working, these true stories are rendered to provide living illustrations of my favorite image in poetry, from Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “As Kingfishers Catch Fire”:

*...Christ plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.*

Ours is a God of surprises, sometimes even playfulness, and the teachers celebrated in these stories are ever aware of God’s capacity to unleash grace on them, sometimes in a trickle, sometimes in a flood, always through the students, parents, and colleagues who move through their classrooms.

Each story invites teachers to reflect on the miracles they themselves will be working that day and the faces and limbs of Christ they will encounter that day in their classrooms, even on Mondays.

Karen Eifler  
Portland, Oregon  
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## A FEW THINGS LEFT TO LEARN

*Let no one despise your youth,  
but set the believers an example  
in speech and conduct,  
in love,  
in faith,  
in purity.*

1 TIMOTHY 4:12

**R**aw meat. That's how eighth graders usually see a new teacher, especially one with no experience, like me on that February Monday when I took on the very first class that would become "mine."

I'd gotten the job offer a week earlier from the interim principal, who was only hours into her own new role. Miss Wood had been the eighth-grade teacher there since the earth was cooling and enjoyed the respect and trust of the school and parish community. She was really going to need both as word trickled out that the old principal was suddenly gone (and why) and that Miss Wood was now in charge.

Like many parochial schools, tuition only paid part of the bills; students and their parents were constantly selling wrapping paper and cupcakes and doodads to pay for frills such as current textbooks. The most recent fundraiser had been wildly successful. Even two weeks after it was over, classroom closets housed the lingering aroma of the mountains of chocolate bars students had hustled, netting over ten thousand dollars.

Now, ten thousand dollars, stacked in mounds of mostly singles, is a lot of money. Enough, as it turned out, to finance a one-way plane ticket to Mexico and plush accommodations for



the previous principal, who took the candy money, along with an assumed name, and set up a new life for himself on a sunny beach south of the border, creating an immediate job vacancy.



God speaks to people in a multitude of ways: a burning bush, a rainbow, a rushing wind, the gentlest of breezes. Or, in my case, through grand larceny. Because it turns out that teaching is exactly what I am supposed to be doing, and I got to start doing it because Miss Wood became principal over the weekend and needed someone to take over her eighth graders on very short notice. She knew of me because I had conducted a one-day Confirmation retreat for her class, and she had been impressed that they could not make me cry in the course of our eight hours together. Not crying was apparently the main thing she was looking for in a candidate to finish out the school year in this toughish Los Angeles Catholic elementary school.

That I could also play six chords on the guitar meant the brand new principal had also just gained a liturgical music leader for the school, and when she found out I had once purchased my college roommate's calculus book back from her as a favor, I obviously had the credentials to teach math for grades six through eight. (Catholic schools are notorious for drawing out gifts and talents that people don't know they have.)

I got the job and took the week between the job offer and first class bell to read everything I could on classroom management. In my newbie mind, I was getting off to a strong start and making Miss Wood's classroom my own.



The pedagogical literature in those days was adamant that teachers had to project exactly who was boss from their initial contact with their students. Dressing professionally was key, according to the books, and I agonized in selecting clothes that communicated authority and business tempered by just the tiniest dash of approachability. In the mirror I practiced the withering Teacher Look I would eventually patent.

I put *The Trouble with Angels* movie on infinite loop and prayed to channel Rosalind Russell's Mother Superior from that film. Same with Sidney Poitier's Mr. Thackeray in *To Sir, With Love*.

I made my list of non-negotiable rules.

The bulletin boards were masterpieces.

I was ready; bring it on, Monday!



Monday brought it on, all right. I was the first person on the premises, radiating the loftiest of expectations in my pacing up and down the playground on high heels I had to force not to wobble. I could feel the eyes of hundreds of children burning into me, and I was pretty sure I saw several of the older boys rubbing their hands together in anticipatory glee at the torture they would soon be inflicting on “The New Teacher.” But I almost felt sorry for them; I was that ready.

The girls were subtler, as they always are. Most of the action came from their eyes, a slow up and down as they took my measure. I was ready for them too.

The morning bell rang; time to commence my teaching career. I had also been working on my Teacher Voice, so it was loud and clear as these, the first words I ever spoke in public as a professional educator, roared out of my mouth on the playground: “Boys, grab your balls and line up now! I mean it!”



God would be with me in the days and weeks to come, helping me understand I still had a few things to learn about teaching. I still do.

## GOD BLESS MRS. BIGELOW

*Listen carefully, my son,  
to the master's instructions,  
and attend to them  
with the ear of your heart.*

## PROLOGUE TO THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

**M**rs. Bigelow wasn't just the world's best kindergarten teacher; she was a pretty fine theologian—the best kind. She taught about God subconsciously, and with every fiber of her being.

The first two words Mrs. Bigelow always taught the little souls who showed up in her classroom for forty-seven years were “Look!” and “Listen!” She might not literally have used the exclamation points, but they were always in her voice. Because in her gentle way, Mrs. Bigelow was always reminding children to keep their eyes and ears open. Every year, her students saw miracles, heard miracles, drew their distracted parents into the world of miracles.



Echoing Mrs. Bigelow at home one day, Conor Flynn let out with an exuberant “Look, Mom!” as he showed her a caterpillar. Conor helped his mother behold the velvet as she ran her finger over the caterpillar's back. So very soft it was, wriggling on Conor's palm as he held it out reverently, insistently to her. It took the mother back to another velvet, the kind that had first covered her newborn son's head, and she let her hand linger on the hair of

this rambunctious five-year-old version of that miracle. How long would it be before he would pull away from that motherly gesture, or be embarrassed when she held his hand crossing the street?

For now, however, thanks to Mrs. Bigelow, Mom was reminded it was important to “Look!” and so she did, stroking Conor’s head as he gently did the same with his caterpillar.



“Listen, Dad!” Courtney Flynn, Conor’s twin sister, insisted, as she and her father sat on their back porch swing one balmy summer evening sucking their Popsicles (red for him, purple for her). He did listen, and, sure enough there were the blasted crickets. Dad added “buy bug spray” to the mental list of chores requiring his attention. All he needed was an infestation of crickets in the basement.

But Courtney heard things differently. “Listen to that music! That kinda sounds like a symphony warming up before a concert, doesn’t it, Dad?”

Jeezaloo, thought the dad, when did this little mite they’d propped up next to a sack of sugar for her “Baby’s First Christmas” photo get big enough to require her own Popsicle? Wasn’t it just yesterday they had been splitting one (loser got the side with the chunk missing)? And now he was teaching her how to avoid Popsicle “brain freeze” and that reds and purples really, truly taste better than greens and oranges—same as with Skittles and M&M’s.

If he wasn’t careful, pretty soon her little scuffed-up legs would be long enough to touch the porch floor, and his daughter would be swinging herself and not need him to do it for her. Worse, Courtney might even go from wearing her mom’s high heels at playtime “Dress Up” to wearing them for real to a school dance. Or to her own wedding.

And so the father took his daughter’s hand, snuggled in a bit

closer, and listened to the crickets as she instructed him to. They listened as Mrs. Bigelow had taught her, and—sure enough—for a while he could hear their symphony.



Mastering letters and numbers and how to line up quietly and play nicely with others are the absolute bedrock skills of “doing school,” but sometimes we teachers forget that our sophomores are able to read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and our Honors Math students can solve vector calculus problems only because a heroic early childhood teacher, or perhaps a team of them, labored before us to help little ones crack the code of looking and listening.

To feel velvet on a caterpillar’s back, to hear music in a cricket’s hum—these only happen when the Mrs. Bigelows of the world insist that the first lesson we must learn is to *Look!* and to *Listen!*