

# Walking on desks broke rules...but I was a good teacher



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COLUMNIST

**F**OR about one year around 1988, when I was Director of Education, I had severe pains in my stomach.

I went to the hospital at least a couple of times during the 12 months I was suffering. The first time the consultant, after giving me a sonar scan announced that the stomach pain was probably down to eating peanuts. The second time no conclusions were reached. It was only when my own doctor visited me at home when I was lying in bed that it was realised something was wrong.

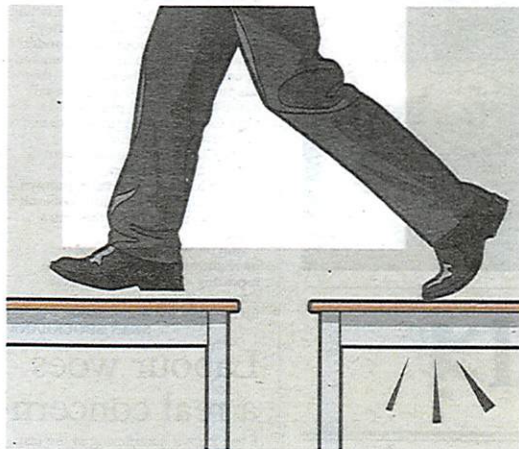
I had been taught by my parents never to upset doctors and teachers – they were too important. So when the doctor asked me how I was, I answered 'Not so bad. Just as the Doctor was leaving the pain was so extreme I swore – "\*\*\*\*\* that hurts!" My doctor, not used to such bad language from me, realised something was really wrong and immediately arranged for me to go to hospital. Within a couple of days I was diagnosed with colon cancer and was operated upon.

Following the operation I received 30 injections of chemotherapy. One slight problem was I hated injections. So I went to a hypnotherapist who 'put me under'. I can still remember the soothing words – "You like needles, you like the smooth way they enter your skin." I decided that I would never miss one session of chemotherapy, no matter how ill I felt during the process.

In order to have a family holiday my wife and I arranged to go to France immediately after one Thursday session, to return the next week. I told the hypnotherapist my plan. I remember him saying "You will have a fabulous time and fabulous it will be." Ever since then I have had fabulous holidays. In fact I am sure that hypnosis is a really cheap way of having great holidays. Go under the trance and a week at Cullercoats will be the 'bees' knees!

Have no doubt the aggressive chemotherapy I received was awful. I would return from the hospital every Thursday morning and be very ill until the Monday morning then return to be Director of Education until Wednesday. The process would then start again.

Occasionally there were low ebbs



and I would sometimes wonder what people would remember of me, if I were to die. Part of me thought this is a good time to die, because most of my friends are still hale and healthy so I would have a good funeral. I even imagined being there 'in spirit' listening to all the wonderful things being said about me. "He never bought rounds." "He was hopeless at football." "His jokes were crap."

However, I did seriously think about what my four children would remember about me, not as a father but as an educationalist. I taught in the period when good teaching was considered one quarter preparation and three quarters theatre. Today it is possibly the other way round.

Education had been my life and I wanted them to believe I had made some contribution to society that was worth remembering. I came to the conclusion that I wanted to be remembered as a good teacher. That was all.

So I wrote a letter to my children. Many years later I found the letter.

This is what it said:  
*Letter from a teacher*  
October 1st 1998

*This week the Prime Minister said that lots of teachers should be sacked. I know you must be wondering if your dad is one of the ones who should have been sacked and if he was a bad teacher.*

**I did think about  
what my four  
children would  
remember about me**

*You know I once loved teaching and I think I was a good teacher.*

*When you were little I used to prepare my lessons every night ready for the next day. I used to get quite excited when I made what we called 'visual aids'. One of my favourites was a giant Roman soldier. I drew a fifteen foot high soldier on large sheets of white paper which I cadged from the local newspaper. The children spent three weeks sticking old bits of leather, milk bottle tops and cloth onto it. It was great! Everyone came to my classroom until I took down the soldier. The caretaker said it made it difficult to clean the walls. We were all very sad when it was put in the bin.*

*Another great lesson I remember was when I read the 'Borrowers' to eleven year olds. I used to walk on the tops of the desks being the 'human bean' who frightened the little people who lived under the floorboards. The pupils would hide beneath the desks and pop up every so often to 'borrow' pens, books, boxes I had left lying on top of the desks. One day one of Her Majesty's Inspectors came in and told me off for 'harming public property' (the desks!)*

*I hope you will be pleased that I continued to walk on the desks after the inspector left the school.*

*Love Dad*

After my operation I returned to work. My fellow Director, Chris Roberts, and I had been loaned a Newcastle Season Ticket by a colleague in the office. On the first day back I asked for my ticket.

He apologised. "I thought you wouldn't make it. So I sold it." I then decided to write him a slightly different letter.

**Les Walton is Chairman of the Northern Education Trust**