**Paul Delaney**

Cranes. Interesting inventions, stretching across our cities like the arms of Ted Hughes’ Iron Man. Prague. Rome. Budapest. London. I saw them in these cities, whilst working in British International schools in my present capacity as a children’s author and performance poet. I glanced up at those marvellous mechanical machines, shielding my eyes from the sun.

My lips arched into a wry smile as I remembered…

It’s 1980. I’m at St Helen’s hospital with my mum. I’m visiting a so-called ‘expert’ in his field, some sort of child psychologist. All these years later, I can still see that huge gold watch of his, sitting on his wrist. I read out a passage of prose printed on a little white card. I’m stammering away, spluttering and gasping for breath, blocking sounds, words sticking on my tongue like rookie Olympic ski jumpers, terrified of taking the plunge.

‘It’s obvious you have a serious stammer, Paul,’ the man said, his deep voice resonating around the room. ‘So I’m thinking you need a job where you don’t speak to anybody all day long. I’m thinking of a crane driver, you know, sitting in that little cab all day long. That’s your ideal job, Paul and my recommendation…’

I left that stuffy room, my mum in tow, just wondering…

Wondering about my awful, debilitating stammer.

Wondering about my uncertain future.

Wondering about that pompous psychologist’s remarks,

stabbing my skin like a dozen acupuncturist’s needles.

Fortunately, I had my own ideas about my future, thank you very much, pushed along by destiny’s invisible hands.

In February 1990, Mr Bernard Conlon, my old childhood head teacher and a bit of a ‘legend’ in his day, rang me up. He had a Y5 girl who wanted piano lessons. Andree Hobson, her name still engraved on my head.

‘Could I oblige?’ Mr Conlon asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ I stammered, a cold shiver racing through my spine.

*Stammerers don’t teach,* I thought. *They just end up in dead end jobs…*

‘But I suppose I’ll give it a go, Mr Conlon…’

Long story short #1

Soon I was teaching piano in four local schools, around forty eager pupils all wanting a piece of the action. I realized I didn’t stammer when I spoke to children in their piano lessons. Why? To this day, I don’t know but one day, Mr Conlon, perhaps glimpsing into my future, asked me to teach WHOLE class music lessons. I trembled but somehow plucked up the courage to teach a class of thirty eager and enthusiastic children.

‘You should do your PGCE, Mr Delaney,’ Mr Conlon said, quoting my surname as was his way. ‘I think you’d make a great teacher…’

‘Oh, well, err, yes,’ I replied. ‘I suppose you’re right.’

‘I’ve arranged an informal interview for you. Christ’s College, Liverpool.’

Mr Conlon dropped me off in his white Citroen estate.

Mr Bernard Conlon #knightinshiningarmour.

Again, yet another ‘psychologist’ moment…

‘If I’m honest, I can’t ever see you in front of a class, Paul,’ Tony Earley, the then head of the primary PGCE course said. ‘Obviously you stammer badly so unfortunately, I can’t offer you a place next year. I can never see standing in front of a class and delivering a lesson, that’s my problem, Paul.’

I jumped into Mr Conlon’s car. I delivered the bad news.

‘Oh, did he say that, honestly?’

‘Yes, so don’t worry, Mr Conlon. I’ll think of something else…’

‘Leave it with me,’ was Mr Conlon’s reply as we sped off back to school.

Long story short #2

Mr Conlon somehow pulled strings. Soon, I was back in front of Tony Earley, his two sidekicks by his side. ‘Can you read this story, please’ a woman asked me.

I obliged. Fluently, my voice effortlessly moving into ‘character’ mode.

And you know what happened next…

I received my offer and a year later, I passed my PGCE with flying colours, my teaching practice schools amazed at my piano playing skills. I had several job offers without any formal interviews ever being mentioned. Practising Catholic who played the organ at church on a Sunday.

As rare as fresh dinosaur dung. Even now!

The stars aligned. A job came up at my old school, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Catholic Primary School in Widnes, Cheshire.

I subsequently stayed at that school for fifteen years full time! Five-year part time once I’d decided to follow my heart and somehow become an author and performance poet and yes, in case you’re thinking, *still* stammering.

**Paul Delaney**

Professional organist

‘Real’ Primary school teacher

Children’s author

Performance poet

Full time dreamer

Now travelling ‘to infinity and beyond’ to quote Buzz Lightyear, working primarily as a performance poet in schools all over the UK and Europe.

USA one day, perhaps.

And of course, it all could have been so different…

So dreams *do* come true.

DREAM

BELIEVE

ACHIEVE

As those posters in countless classrooms shout out those words but don’t forget the missing two words in between ‘Believe’ and ‘Achieve’ – HARD WORK!

So if you’re a teacher or a teaching assistant dreaming of a change, a new school perhaps, teaching abroad, moving on up into SMT or an advisory role or perhaps one day becoming a head teacher, DON’T listen to those random, negative voices in your head, otherwise known as your ‘Chatterbox’ to quote Susan Jeffers in her book ‘Feel the fear and do it anyway!’ Don’t listen to other negative people, often just jealous family members or colleagues, knocking you down like modern day Red Barons.

Listen to your heart and the positive, inspiring people around you.

And to quote one of my favourite mystics, Joseph Campbell, ‘Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you where there were only walls…’

So what are you waiting for?

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Footnote: Three years ago, I had the privilege to play the organ at Mr Conlon’s funeral in St Helens, Merseyside. I had a moment that morning. Staring down at Mr Conlon’s coffin, playing away, I gave thanks.

R.I.P. Mr Bernard Conlon 1930 – 2015

For without your vision and above all, belief in me, I wonder where I’d be now?

Driving a crane.

Enjoying the view.

But *still* wondering…

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