

The Great Disconnect

In the southern suburbs of Lille, France, the mid-week evening practice of the Ronchin Kangaroos men's amateur basketball team had just come to an end. A tall American player, at 34 and nearing the end of his inglorious basketball career, clad in a sweatshirt, sweatpants and high-top basketball shoes, was trudging wearily home, head down, through the narrow streets of Ronchin past its simple, almost identical, two-story dwellings, with their red-tiled roofs, tiny front yards and neatly trimmed hedges. Though the summer sunshine wouldn't totally disappear until after 10 p.m. this far north in Europe, many of the neighbors were already beginning to roll down their window blinds to darken their children's bedrooms, to ensure their cherished privacy and to provide a measure of security from the ever-present threat of theft that plagues one in metropolitan French life.

Thinking of the meal that his wife undoubtedly had waiting for him, and of their two small children they would soon be putting to bed, he glanced up for a moment and caught sight of two dark-haired men standing next to a stylish Renault 25 parked on the sidewalk some fifty yards ahead. Their otherwise unremarkable appearance caught his attention, however, when he noticed that the closer he came to them the farther they slowly edged away from the car.

Not wanting to attract their attention, he fixed his eyes across the street on the 6th floor apartment where his wife and children were waiting. Strolling just a few feet from the men, he casually greeted them with a "bonsoir" and, crossing the street, made a studied attempt to appear unconcerned as he ambled through his apartment building's parking lot.

As soon as he turned the corner of his building and was out of their sight, forgetting his fatigue and in a burst of adrenalin, he flew through the building's front doors and bounded up the five flights of stairs, two steps at a time, not wanting to wait for the elevator's arrival. He quickly unlocked the apartment's front door and, without calling to his wife in the kitchen, strode rapidly to the window overlooking the street he had just left.

Indeed, as he had expected, he saw the men trying to break into the car. Without waiting to explain further, he called to his wife and told her to call the police and tell them there was a car theft in progress at the base of their building. He burst through the door and down the stairs without hesitating to ask himself if this was wise on his part or how, without a weapon, he was going to stop them. His only thought was that what they were doing was not right and that he couldn't just watch them do it.

By the time he turned the corner of the building and entered the parking lot, the men had already gotten into the car. Undoubtedly looking rather foolish, all he could do was

raise his hand and point at the men as he walked rapidly in their direction. Upon seeing his recognition of their attempted theft, the man in the driver's seat worked all the more frantically to hot wire the car and to make good their getaway.

Still not knowing what he would do, the American crossed the street and approached the vehicle. Just as he reached out his hand to grasp the driver's side door handle, the car's engine roared into action and the Renault screeched down off the sidewalk and into the street. However, just as quickly, the car veered back up onto the sidewalk and smashed into the low wall in front of its owner's house, as the criminals had not had the time to free the anti-theft steering wheel lock.

There was utter silence and then, slowly the car doors opened. The two men climbed out and ominously began to walk back toward the stunned American. Suddenly, the front door of the home burst open and a young man carrying a club appeared in the doorway. The American, seeing he now had some support, yelled in rapid-fire and somewhat slurred French:

« Ils étaient en train de voler votre voiture ! »

It was just the second week of his seventh grade French I class, but already the tall, self-conscious and painfully skinny 12 year old boy was petrified of doing anything to kindle the wrath or attract the disdain of Mr. Carson, Denby Junior High School's notoriously strict and humorless French instructor. As was his routine, clipboard in hand and moving steadily from seat to seat, Carson was bent over the desk of the girl sitting in front of the boy, checking to see whether she had completed last night's written verb conjugation assignment. Even from that distance, the boy could detect the stale odor of cigarette smoke that clung to the wizened teacher's grey suit – a chalk-dusted outfit that never varied from day to day. The boy trembled as he suddenly wondered if he had rightly recalled that it is the “-ir” verb conjugations that ended in “s”, “s”, “t” in the singular instead of the “-re” verbs. The verb conjugation charts that Carson had scrawled yesterday in yellow chalk across a green blackboard danced dizzily through the boy's fear-addled mind.

Seeing the American had reinforcements, the two thieves pivoted and ran off in different directions. The first, tall and athletic-looking, sprinted toward an alley that wound between two rows of houses. The second, stubby and rotund, began waddling vigorously toward the parking lot that the American had just crossed. Aware that he himself was no speedster, but having the advantage of still being clothed in his basketball attire, the American began the hot pursuit of the second of the criminals.

No more than halfway across the parking lot, sensing that he would lose this footrace, the chubby would-be thief suddenly veered behind a parked car and yelled at his oncoming, foreign pursuer:

« Ne venez pas plus proche ! J'ai un pistolet ! »

Miss Majors, the French II teacher, fresh out of college and as pretty and cheerful as Mr. Carson had been gruff and intimidating, was a welcome change from the boy's fearsome disciplinarian instructor of his first year at Denby. Still uncoordinated, as he approached the six-foot mark as a mere 13-year-old, the boy nonetheless had begun to display the confident swagger of a junior high school veteran who had already passed this way once before. He adopted a relaxed slouch while seated at his desk and stretched his oversized, black loafers under the chair in front of him, watching two of his nervous classmates perform yet another memorized dialogue before a smiling Miss Majors.

Though always a bit tense when asked to perform before his fellow students, the boy was comforted by the awareness that he was particularly well-suited to perform a memorized skit with a partner. He had an acute ability to visualize inwardly the words on a page, studied for even just a few minutes before class. This ease at recalling the printed word gave him a special facility with the weekly vocabulary tests, listing new words in French in alphabetical order and followed immediately by their English translation.

He liked French class – not because he was enamored with French culture or had experienced the language's usefulness in authentic interaction with native French speakers, but because it was a certain "A" on his report card. Succeeding in French class was something he could do more easily than most of his comrades. It only required some last minute concentrated memorization, followed by a reproduction of charts and lists on a piece of paper or the recitation of lines of memorized text he could easily see in his mind.

Now the American had to make an important decision. Did the man really have a gun? As the thief turned and continued his flight through the parking lot, the American's thoughts turned to his wife and two small children, possibly looking down on him from their apartment six floors up. In a reflection that took no more than a second, he reasoned that the man *might* have a gun, that the car's owner still had the vehicle and that insurance would undoubtedly pay for its repair, that his own young family needed him and that it wasn't worth it to take a chance.

Yet, no sooner had the American come to this conclusion than a flash of anger passed over him, sparked by the thought that the criminal was likely just bluffing and that he

was getting away without any consequences. The American recommenced the chase, but almost immediately tripped over his size 14D Converse All-Stars and fell flat on his face on the unforgiving asphalt, very possibly having been tripped by an angel who, in light of the man's self-destructive impetuosity, was saving him for more important future purposes.

The real hero in the story was his American wife who, with but one year of formal French training behind her, somehow came up with enough vocabulary and sufficiently coherent sentence structure to convey what was happening and where to the police, though they arrived two minutes too late to apprehend the thieves.

Mr. Kaprinoff, with his worn copy of "Le Roman de Renard" in hand, looked disconsolately over the sea of bowed heads. Not deeply interested in explaining why Maître Corbeau should be carrying a piece of cheese in his beak in the first place or how the fox would trick him into letting it drop, the instructor's ninth grade French III students did their utmost to avoid any eye contact that would encourage him to call on them for a response. After a despairing « Allez, mes élèves ! » failed to shame them into action, the frustrated Mr. Kaprinoff launched into a chiding tirade in English about how raising their hands and talking was the only way the students would ever learn to speak French.

The boy felt no compulsion to posit a response regarding crows, foxes, cheese or the dangers of succumbing to flattery. Long before his teacher had finished reading the poem, the boy's thoughts had strayed to more personally motivating subjects, such as Kathy Stovall's beautiful long, black hair or how many hours remained before the next dreaded installment of his freshman basketball team's "conditioning hell week".



Sharing the Prodigal Son story at the opening of a new ministry center in Ronchin.

The American's use of French was never again a matter of immediate life or death, but more commonplace contexts for him still carried high stakes. As an assistant pastor of a French evangelical protestant congregation, his duties rarely included preaching, but he had the chance to do so on several successive Sundays one summer when the head pastor had gone on vacation. During those weeks, the focus of his messages was societal drift with reference to issues of morality and family structure over the preceding forty years and how the new status quo contrasted with biblical teaching. Several months after he spoke on the blessedness of children, a young French couple with three children invited his wife and him over for dinner and told him that his message had led them to decide to have another child (who is now a young woman

with her own family). Another of his sermons, on the topic of the sanctity of marriage, led a young African couple, in France to study medicine, to cease merely living together and to commit themselves for life through marriage.

One year, the first warm spring day brought French adolescents outdoors, to fantasize about their role in the next World Cup, with any appropriately spaced tree trunks serving as makeshift goal posts. For his part, the American, homesick for his own national sport, found himself playing catch in a vacant lot with a fellow ex-patriot from Minnesota. A small group of curious French teenagers approached them and asked if the two men would teach them how to play baseball.



Introductory ceremony prior to a game between a Parisian and a Dutch team on Ronchin's international field

From that humble beginning sprouted, grew and flourished a baseball club of over 100 French young people and adults, competing against similar clubs nationwide and even internationally. The American's vocabulary in French expanded to include all of the arcane terms specific to his beloved sport and he found joy in the myriad relationships with French young people and their families that sprang from that simple beginning.

All French clubs, sporting or otherwise, have the legal status of “*associations*” and are required by law to conduct an annual “*assemblée générale*”. One year, as director of the club, the American was called upon to address a roomful of over a hundred players and their parents, one of whom was the mayor of the town.

Cognizant of the tendency for French men to be somewhat passive in the home and less than deeply engaged in the daily activities of their children, the American chose to tell them of the story of a very significant event from his youth. His father had grown up without a male role model to teach or encourage him, among other things, to play baseball. Consequently, the American explained that, when as a 12 year old boy playing Little League baseball, he had learned that his team's season would conclude that next Saturday with a father-son baseball game, it was a foregone conclusion that his overweight and non-athletic father would not be present. Much to his astonishment, at the cost of much personal embarrassment and discomfort, his father, red-faced and struggling to make any kind of contact with the softly thrown baseball, not only came but attempted to play.

As ridiculous as his father must have felt, the American told the Frenchmen, who were listening to the story with rapt attention, « *Pour moi, mon père n'a jamais été moins ridicule que ce jour-là quand, ne voulant pas que je sois le seul garçon n'ayant pas son père présent au match, il m'a démontré toute l'ampleur de son amour pour moi.* » (“For me, my father was never less ridiculous than on that day when, not wanting me to be

the only boy not having his father present at the game, he showed me the whole extent of his love for me.”)

The next Saturday at his team’s practice, having had a week to ruminate on the message conveyed in that story, though knowing nothing of how to catch or throw a baseball, six French fathers showed up wanting to help the American direct the practice.

On one memorable occasion, after he had been elected president of the French Baseball Federation’s “*commission fédérale sportive*”, giving him the responsibility to organize and supervise competition among the federation’s 11,000 youth and adult baseball players, the American was called upon to intervene in a highly sensitive situation. The previous week, he had been obliged to suspend two young French-speaking North African men in their early 20’s who had carried knives onto the playing field in the midst of a near *mêlée* between two first division teams in the city of Nice. The next week, as the same teams were to meet again, the Federation flew the American down to this beautiful Mediterranean city to talk with the two players and to seek to ensure that the game would take place in a peaceful manner. Thankfully, the assignment went off without a hitch.

On another occasion, when the American invited his teenage players to play a series of games against high school teams in his native Michigan, where they would be lodged by American families, his mastery of French was put to the ultimate test. His first baseman was the son of his region’s prefect – a governmental authority selected by the president of France to rule over the north of the country. As the American was planning to host the prefect’s son in his own home during the three week stay in the States, *Monsieur le Préfêt* invited the American to his family’s elegant quarters in the imposing Prefecture located in the heart of downtown Lille. The prefect wanted to get a sense as to whether this American was a safe and worthy individual to serve as his son’s host while in America.



La Préfecture du Nord (Photo by Philippe Lagneaux)

Several weeks earlier, the American and his family were among the crowds lining the streets to watch the arrival of Princess Diana of Great Britain as she came to meet with the prefect to discuss the plans for the upcoming construction of the Channel tunnel between France and England. They watched as Lady Di, clinging to the prefect's arm, gracefully mounted the long flight of marble steps to the entrance to the Prefecture.

Now it was the American's turn to climb those same steps, after being properly interrogated by the guards posted at their base. He entered the building, climbed two more flights of stairs past marble busts of past prefects, and was greeted by his player's father at the door of their lavish apartment.

Over the next thirty minutes, the American comported himself in the most respectful manner possible and, remembering the lessons drilled into him by his grade school language instructors, sought desperately to employ the most grammatically correct and accurately pronounced French of which he was capable. Apparently, he passed the test as the prefect's approval was granted and his son enjoyed a stay in the American's home in Michigan.

He was now 23 years old and midway through his second year as a French teacher at a sprawling suburban high school north of Chicago, six years removed from his high school AP French class. A year and a half of experience as an educational professional had done little to relieve his feelings of angst before the beginning of each of his daily slate of classes. Each class felt to him like a new test of his ability to motivate lethargic students and to maintain a proper classroom atmosphere. A nagging inner sense of helplessness told him that he was daily failing the test.

His university language teaching methods classes had provided him with a number of gimmicky games and a notebook full of varied exercises to keep students busy and "on track", but they had not even attempted to answer one fundamental question: "How do people learn a language?" Therefore, the young pedagogue now found himself struggling to recall and emulate the techniques employed by tough Mr. Carson, cute Miss Majors and the flustered Mr. Kaprinoff. He had no other models to turn to since, even when he took up the study of Spanish while in college, the Spanish-speaking graduate students who had directed his beginning level courses had not been trained as instructors. They had never felt compelled to ask themselves that same question as to how a language is actually learned. They had merely imitated the same tired approach on which they themselves had learned English – a heavy emphasis on written work from the first day of the first year of study and instruction that reposed heavily on translation and analytical grammar presentations in their native language.

As his students shuffled slowly into the classroom, the young teacher sat anxiously behind his desk in the front of the room, rearranging papers that needed no rearrangement and giving his clothes a cursory brushing with his hands to rid them of chalk dust. Notebooks and textbooks thudded noisily onto the students' desks as they

fell heavily into their chairs and settled into a somber silence that spoke loudly of low expectations regarding what was to come.

Two high school heroes, members of their school's successful varsity basketball team, entered the room with a little more panache than their classmates, but with the same attitude of disapproval regarding what was to follow. Taking advantage of the cover provided by the bell that sounded for the class to begin, one of them turned to his teammate and confided to him, in a whispered voice just loud enough for the teacher to hear, "I hate French class. It's so boring and when will we ever need this stuff anyway?"

Turning his back to the blackboard and pretending to have heard nothing, the young teacher rapidly drew a verb conjugation chart and its all-too-familiar headings: singular, plural, 1st person, 2nd person, 3rd person. He drew in a deep breath, as though about to embark on his sixth marathon of the day, and tried to muster up enough enthusiasm in his voice to elicit at least a timid murmur of a response from his most compliant and compassionate students. He was beaten before he had even begun.

In many world language classrooms, there exists a profound disconnect between the real world potential for life-changing experiences enabled by second language learning and the reality of our students' lack of passion for language study. This depressing disconnect was sufficient to twice cause me, the American in the preceding vignettes, to give up on foreign language teaching by the age of 26.

Whereas my knowledge of French had enabled me to navigate effectively a life and death situation in France, to convey life-changing messages to a few, to be ushered into the presence of the influential and even to cope effectively with the mundane routines of daily life in a foreign country for 13 unforgettable years, somehow those success stories didn't translate into positive experiences and enthusiasm in my classroom. What could explain this perplexing disconnect?

Mr. Carson had believed that, if students could memorize enough charts and rules, and thereby write the new language accordingly, inevitably they would be able to speak it fluently and accurately. Miss Majors felt that, if students could read and understand the sense of the second language, particularly with the aid of a translation to their native language, they could surely learn to recombine memorized phrases to express orally their own creative thoughts. Mr. Kaprinoff relied on the foundation laid by his two predecessors to expose students to literature he found of cultural interest, confident that they would share his enthusiasm and gladly wax eloquent on the topics he proposed. It didn't take long for the struggling young teacher to perceive that their reasoning had been fallacious and their methods ineffective.

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)