

# Strength in Compliance

This is a story about receiving inspiration through an intuition. It came in suddenly and unannounced. Here is what happened.

Bill was a large, strong, handsome, smart, popular, sincere, young man of seventeen years. His father worked in the medical field and Bill wanted to also. Both of his parents were intelligent and successful. Bill wanted to be so, also. But Bill had a problem. He felt that he had come of age. He did not want his parents to tell him to study in school, to be nice to others, and whatever... you know the drill.

Everyone in school loved Bill. He was a teenage guy who listened well, both to other guys and to girls. Bill listened to his teachers. He was accomplished in martial arts and an attentive, participative student in class. What more could his parents want? What were they telling him that he did not want to listen to? Nothing out of the ordinary. Bill just did not want his parents to tell him what to do anymore. So, he decided to take a stand. It seemed that, at this juncture in his life, he would assert his independence by simply not doing his homework. Bill was willing to risk very bad grades and killing hopes of getting into a good college in order to show his parents that he was now making his own decisions.

I was Bill's advanced science seminar teacher. In class, Bill went along with all of my requests; he was compliant and agreeable. If I made a point, he supported it. But something was always unsaid. I felt a passive aggressive resistance behind and at the end of each agreement – as if he were saying, "no", after

saying, "yes, yes, I am with you." What and who he was fighting was to come out Thursday.

On Wednesday, Bill came in without his homework. Ok, he is the new kid. I was thinking, "Maybe he does this a lot - maybe this was an isolated case." I didn't know, so I asked, "Bill, is this going to be a problem? Was this just one assignment you missed or do you have a problem, here?" "I'll get on the stick, Bick. Don't worry." I'm Bick. The pun was funny; but I and the whole class knew this was a diversion, an avoidance of something he did not want to face. You have to understand, we were in a school for emotionally disturbed teens, in a class that had a high level of meaningful discussion - so science discussions often took a psychological turn. We discussed philosophy of science; but it invariably was really the philosophy of ourselves. When the kids spoke to me in seemingly abstract terms, they were really indirectly telling me their life stories. So, now Bill was ostensibly dispelling my concern, telling me not to worry. But I did worry. What he wasn't saying was louder than what he had said. What I heard was, "I've got bigger fish to fry, Bick - I can't and won't do my work, because I have to summon the courage to stand up against ..... (something)!"

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At times, I actually ask inside for inspiration. Sometimes I see that learning and well-being cannot continue by going on with a lesson that is focused on information only. It is in such moments that I begin to think that high school students – especially these students – are looking for transformation. They seem to need to become some new version of themselves. In Bill's case, this new version required a large transformation. It was my conviction that Bill was seeking to obey something higher or better than his former teenage self. I think that he knew something in his heart. But it could not come out. Homework and learning were in the balance. Then, in a flash of insight, it hit me. I was suddenly clear about what to do. What follows describes what and how this intuition came to me. Please understand that what I became able to do for Bill is really not that special. On reflection, I could see that any good counselor or teacher could come up with the advice I gave to Bill. The point is that I did not plan this; nor did I reason it out in the moment. It just came to me. The words I spoke to Bill were coming to me in real time. They were as new to me as they were to Bill.

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I let go of any control of the moment. I watched Bill for the rest of class out of the corner of my eye. I felt something needed to come out. Bill needed to initiate something on his own.

On Thursday it happened. Bill did not know that this was his day. I didn't either. Class started; Sue fooled around with Bill, joking and flirting. He made the rounds - talking to this one, smiling at that one. Bill was being Bill - popular, but genuine. He was the real thing. He actually did care about others. That was what he was showing, but the real question was, "What was he hiding?" Then I asked for the homework. He didn't have it, again. "Ok, Bill, tell me what's going on."

"I'll get it in, Bick. I promise."

"But, why do I feel you won't ... ?"

Bill made a slight pause, the class focused on the silence, then Bill got a very sincere look in his eyes. He looked as if his heart was in his face. "Ok, Bick - ok." You had to be there to know that he was using words, body language, and a big smile to say, "Back off," but the class and I knew, he was using his big heart to scream out, "Somebody come and rescue me - don't let this go!"

"But Bill, I know you want to say something." I had to pursue. He was begging me to push in a little farther. To an outsider, it would probably look as if we were only talking about a homework assignment or two. Even to a trained educator, this could have seemed like an effort to help Bill maintain his grade

point average. But you and I and the class know what was going down. Bill was coming out with something big. "What Bill, ... what?"

"Fine! You see, my parents - my dad - is on me. He thinks it's up to him to get me to do my homework ... and everything. But I don't need him anymore. I can do things on my own, now. He doesn't see that I'm fine on my own. Just 'cause I still live there until next fall, it doesn't mean I'm still a kid!"

"So, you're not doing your homework?"

"Right."

"I see. You're in charge of you."

"Yeah."

"But wait a minute, Bill. I think I have something here that you're missing."

Now comes the moment - the class see's it coming. Bill see's it coming. I know it's coming. Yet none of us sees quite what it is. These are the moments I live for. It's as if time stops, and there is an audience watching, an audience with real members, maybe even multitudes, like a stadium full of fans, and somehow there is quiet all around, and a loud speaker with one microphone. And the mike is right up to your lips.

"Bill, did you ever think that by shooting yourself in the foot by not doing your work that you have given everything away?"

"What?"

"Well, you want to push your dad away and be more on your own, right?"

"Yeah."

"But by hurting yourself, in a radical move of stopping all of your work and maybe throwing away your chance to get into college, aren't you showing your dad how much he still has an effect on you? Aren't you saying, 'Dad, I'm a victim. I'm so affected by your prodding and pushing and coaxing, that I'm going to show you how much you are bothering me by shooting myself in the foot!'" Now Bill is absolutely intent. He looks as if he has just seen a ghost. Only the ghost is his vulnerable self, laid bare for inspection. He is looking right through something - maybe his own self. "Think about it Bill. What would say more to your father, 'I'm on my own, now,' going about your business the way you really want to or doing something destructive that you don't even want to do in reaction to your father? If you weren't trying to prove something to your dad, wouldn't you be doing your homework - and succeeding the way you always have? Aren't you giving all of your power away - giving your power to him? Aren't you saying, 'Here dad, here is my power; I am in your power. I am so annoyed with you that it is causing me to make these crazy moves and hurt myself?'"

Bill is crying now. Big, flawless, popular, outgoing, martial-artsy Bill is crying. I continued, "Wouldn't you say, 'I'm in charge, now!' by doing your work because that is what YOU think you should do? Wouldn't you rather be the bigger man, by listening to him, precisely because YOU actually agree and are therefore NOT afraid that he will take your power? If you *are* really in charge, wouldn't you listen to any advice you could get, whether or not you feel you need it? Isn't any form of non-compliance or opposition for its own sake a shutting down - a sign of weakness? Isn't it an admission that you don't have the power? Aren't you saying that he does? Bill, isn't there a strong

form of compliance that actually means YOU have decided to make your own choices because you are listening to and obeying YOURSELF. And when you think about it, isn't that actually the true self-reliance you are seeking?"

Now the room is crying. There's something about a person with a large body crying. It makes everyone else come to the edge of tears and heartfelt stuff. The room was listening, and an audience in a stadium in the room - or above the room - was listening as Bill said, "Yeah."