My career as a teacher started during graduate school at an institution not particularly noted for its academic standards; however, for me it was a second chance to find a career I would enjoy. My previous occupation had proved to be financially inadequate and further training was required. I decided to return to college and teach English, and this particular school offered extensive training in this field. Two weeks later, we entered our classrooms, fully fledged instructors. What I had expected to be a year or more of training was condensed into two weeks. The term "crash course" was an overstatement.

After our two weeks of training, I expected to have some additional assistance learning the intricacies of teaching, only to find that from then on, we were on our own. I spent the weekend creating my syllabus for a Writing 121 class, and on Monday morning, I set out on my bicycle to ride the two miles to my building. The bike had been a gift from a friend concerned for my health since I was rather portly at the time. The idea of such physical exertion did not sit well with me; however, I acknowledged the kind act and used the bike. The only problem with my means of transportation was that it was a man's bike and, therefore, a bit taller than I was, so my feet could not quite reach the ground. Undaunted, I rode it anyway, finding a way to tilt the bike so as to access the ground more easily.

Being anxious to begin my teaching career well, I set off in time to make it to class with an entire five minutes to spare. I like living on the edge. All went well on my journey, until I came across a traffic light with traffic backed up in all four directions. This required not only a complete stop, but also great balance and agility getting a foot onto the ground. Of course, my foot stuck to the pedal. I, therefore, entertained all of the
inhabitants of the adjacent cars with an extraordinarily delicate and graceful slow motion tilt to the side that ended only when the bike and my rotund little body simultaneously hit the ground. This I did with a force known only to those who carry far more weight on their skeletons than others do. Mortified, I lay on my side, the bike still between my legs, in a puddle of mud. Did I mention that it had rained the previous day? Of course it had! Life is never kind.

Now, my only dilemma was how to retain a modicum of dignity, and just in case some of my students were witnesses, I kept my head down, my helmet tilted in such a manner as to hide most of my face. I lay there for quite some time in an effort to reacquire my equilibrium. When the light had changed and most of the cars had moved on, I slowly rose from my muddy bed and brushed myself off as best I could. My entire right side was a mud slick, but with a tattered tissue, I managed to remove most of it from my burning face, arm, and clothes.

Now, of course, my five minute buffer time had disappeared, so I rushed to the school and into my classroom somewhat disheveled and muddy, my face and arm still stinging from the impact with the ground. I explained, nervously, to my students what had just happened, noticing at the same time that virtually all of the 30 sets of eyes were directed downwards toward their desks. It was a curious phenomenon and one that I had never observed in a classroom before. However, I put this down to first day anxiety and dismissed the thought. Besides, I had other things to worry about. My kneecaps were doing an uncontrollable dance of their own, a fact I tried to ignore, but it was somewhat unnerving to discover that parts of my body could function without my approval or control. Focusing on my work, I decided this odd behavior was the least of my worries.
I started by discussing the syllabus with this strange, quiet group of students. Just my luck, I thought, to get thirty shy kids. For fifty minutes I talked, but no one else did. I tried various activities to draw them out, but to no avail. Occasionally I would notice one individual looking surreptitiously at another, but again, I disregarded this behavior as first day anxiety or shyness. At the end of the period, I breathed a sigh of relief. My first class was over, and I had survived. I can do this! I thought. A couple of students asked questions after the class was over, but no one would look me in the eye. Shyness, I surmised, pleased that they had even bothered to stop and talk. I could now turn my attention to my kneecaps, which were still doing the cancan, as I walked with slightly irregular steps out of the classroom. Perhaps they'll think I'm just slightly uncoordinated, I thought, trying to comfort myself.

On the way down the hall to my new office, I met a colleague who was also new at this job. The relief of seeing someone else in the same position was immense. Jim, who always seemed so together, was a great support for me. I smiled at him and stopped to ask how his first day had gone so far. Jim was at least a foot taller than I and very large-framed. He reminded me of a teddy bear with a beard. With a broad smile, my large, fun-filled friend asked me what I had connected to my right cheek. "Is that your decor for the day?" he asked with amusement. "What are you talking about, Jim?" I asked. He withdrew a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped something from my chin. The blob of mud, firmly secured to my chin might have been considered an overstatement in terms of fashion; however, the multi-colored leaf imbedded in the mud, its tip picturesquely curving upward, countered this effect. In short, I realized that I had just spent an hour of time in front of thirty students with a blob of mud attached firmly to my chin, and not a small blob, a substantial blob of dirty, brown mud. I had not even felt it, and no one had said a word! Now I realized that the surreptitious looks had been those of humor, albeit respectful humor. I knew I would never live this down within the department. My reputation was set for the duration of my training.
The benefit of this incident was that, after making a complete fool of myself on day one, I felt a sense of freedom to be myself. How could anyone do worse? Any subsequent oddities were considered by all who knew me to be part and parcel of my idiosyncratic behavior. Besides, my accident that day was only one of many since my foot often got stuck to the pedal, and I frequently entered my classroom with bits of leaves, grass, mud, and various other interesting items attached firmly to my body parts. What I found particularly interesting was that the students became so inured to my strange and exotic ornamentation that they eventually did not seem to notice. In this way, I discovered that I belonged. Teaching was my calling in life. It was the only career I could think of where I was totally accepted for myself and could continue doing what I grew to love. Over time, my skills developed, and even though one never stops learning to teach, I did learn how to be comfortable in front of my students and to have fun.