

The Washington Post

http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/07/24/a-teacher-gets-depressed-a-real-story-in-comics/?tid=trending_strip_5

A teacher gets depressed: a real story in comics

The following is a highly unusual post — not only in form but in subject matter. David Lee Finkle, a middle-school teacher in Florida who draws the comic strip “Mr. Fitz” for the Daytona Beach News-Journal, writes and illustrates the story of his own depression, caused by changes that reform has brought to his classroom and his profession. Many teachers, undoubtedly, can relate to his story.

Finkle is the author of books for teachers on student writing and of three young adult novels: “Making My Escape” as well as “Portents” and “Portals” (co-authored with his son, Christopher). The comic strip can be found online at www.mrfitz.com and at the Facebook page [Mr. Fitz Comic Strips](#), and you can follow him on Twitter [@DLFinkle](#). He blogs at [The Real Mr. Fitz](#), where [this](#) appeared.

By David Lee Finkle

There is an epidemic of teacher depression, demoralization and stress in this country, and for a while I was part of it.

The series of comic strips I have assembled below, is, at least for me, the most important series I have ever done. Drawing it meant I was past the events that inspired it. More importantly, I think drawing it may have helped some other teachers who have felt the same way I did know they were not alone.

When I began talking to people about the series I had planned, I called it “Mr. Fitz Gets Depressed.” I wondered if I could pull it off, because, of course, depression isn’t really

funny. Yet I took comfort in the fact that my cartoonist hero, Peanuts creator Charles Schulz, had made depression and anxiety funny for nearly 50 years. Maybe I could find the lighter side, too. Doing so would actually mean I was over mine.

Before I ran this series, I asked a question on my Mr. Fitz Facebook page. *“This sounds like a downer, and you don’t have to give away who, but how many of you know a teacher who has suffered or is suffering from, a bout of depression because of what is happening to our profession? I’m curious. I have, and I’m addressing it in the strip soon.”* That question resulted in 98 responses, unprecedented for my little Facebook page. Every single one of them was affirmative — yes they knew depressed, stressed teachers. Many of them admitted it was them. And most of them knew people who had thought about leaving the profession.

This series is based on actual events, but underplays and compresses them. My depression lasted, on and off, for nearly five years. Did I think about leaving the teaching profession? Very seriously. What caused me to be so depressed? Well, if you have ever felt a calling to a particular job; have held that job and been allowed the autonomy to work hard, be creative, and see the results of your work changing lives for the better; then had everything change through no fault of your own, then you may have a good idea what I’m talking about.

My teaching career didn’t begin easily — I had a rocky start with an extremely challenging group of students. But once I was up and running, teaching became my bliss. But while things were fine in my class room as I developed my craft, changed schools, began writing a comic strip, won county teacher of the year, got book deals to write

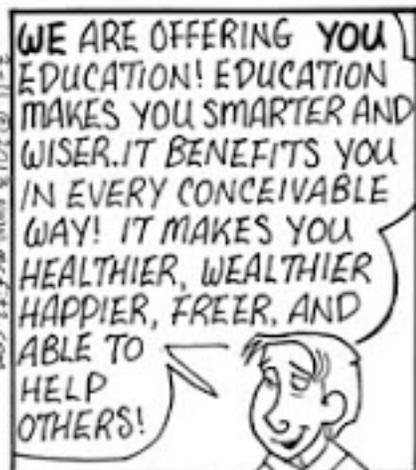
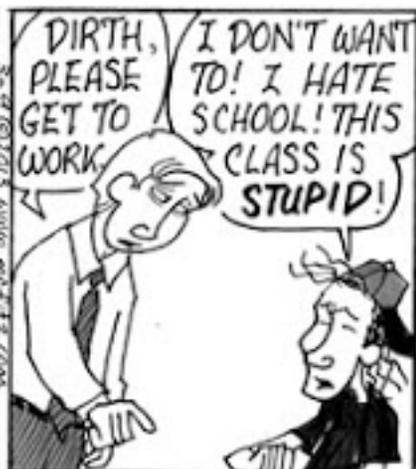
books for teachers with Scholastic, and generally had my teaching validated several different ways, things outside the classroom began to sour.

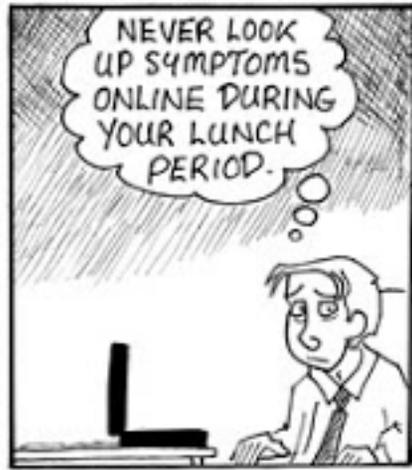
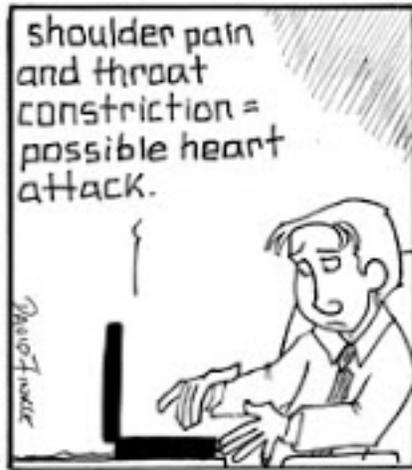
Standardized testing became the sole focus of education. Then came standardized teaching. Curriculum maps were written. Workbooks were distributed. All the things that had made me a great teacher — creativity, coming up with my own lessons and assignments, finding just the right resources to teach what needed to be taught — became liabilities. It was like having the rug pulled out from under me. Meanwhile, we were having our evaluations tied to our test scores. But if I had no autonomy over how or what I taught — how was I responsible for the results? Pretty much every single reform scheme designed to improve schools and teachers instead interfered with my ability to teach. They didn't encourage me to teach better. They depressed me.

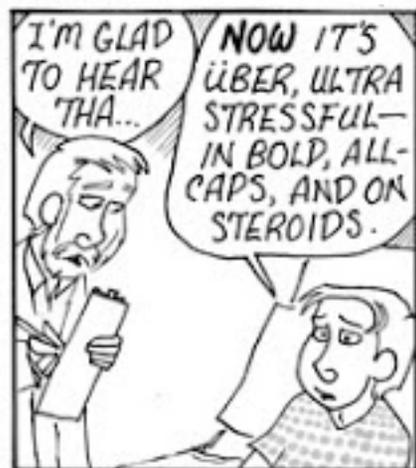
A number of events sent me into a spiral of depression. It seemed that the powers that be wanted to take my calling and turn it into a job. I didn't see any way out of the situation. I didn't want to stop teaching, but teaching was no longer a source of joy for me. I would be up at all hours of the night worrying about it. Newspaper stories and editorials slamming teachers and touting reforms would make my stomach turn. I began to have physical symptoms of stress. I have always been a “good kid” who did what was expected of me. Only now what was expected of me no longer seemed right. What seemed right ran counter to what was expected of me. It was kind of a nightmare.

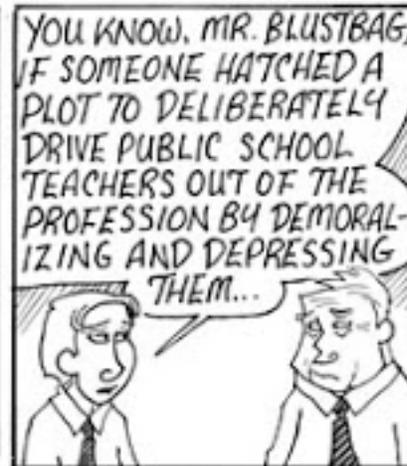
In the comic strip, Mr. Fitz has a nightmare about the possible future of schools (which I have posted here as well), and wakes up depressed. The plot resumes here on the day after his nightmare.



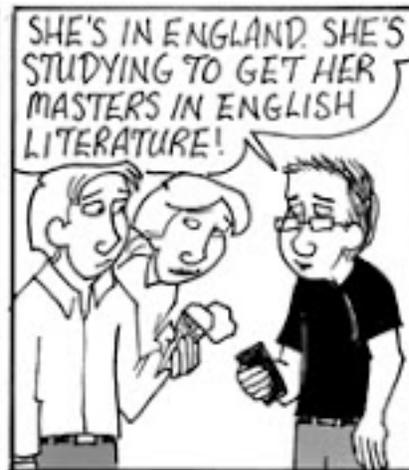


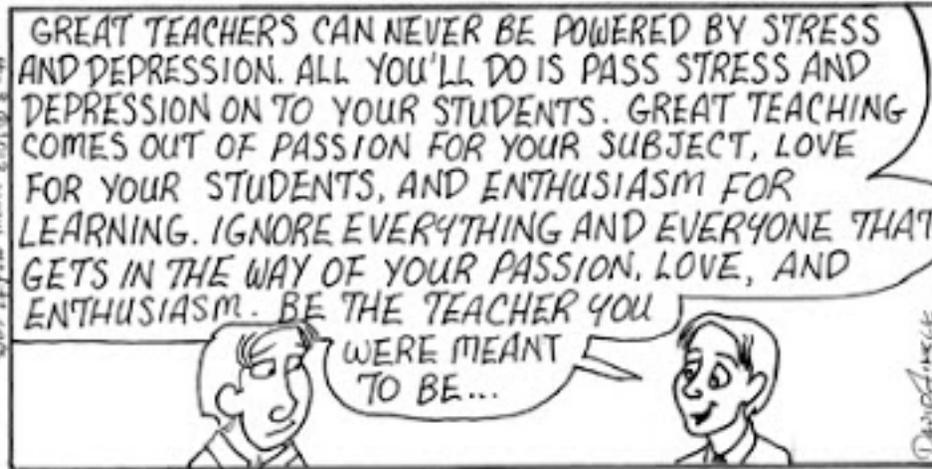












All of the symptoms Mr. Fitz has in this series, I had. The heart attack scare happened pretty much exactly as written. My wife, the real Mrs. Fitz, was endlessly supportive in the midst of all my angst. I can draw cartoons about it now, but make no mistake — I was not in a good place. Having the series run in the newspaper was interesting; I had people asking after my health at church and at school functions. Our next-door neighbor and one of my college professors said they were afraid I was going to kill off Mr. Fitz and end the strip. I told the neighbor that she could have come over to our house and ask how it was going to end, and she said she preferred to read about it in the paper to see how it unfolded, to live with the suspense.

The final sequence, about Mr. Fitz meeting former students, didn't all happen in one place, but it is all based on real encounters with former students, and they did indeed help me realize what really matters about my teaching. My former students rescued me, and helped me to find my "Sweet Spot" again. My wife rescued me, too, by reminding me that I should listen to those students. My own children, in fact, were also my students for all three years of middle school, and they reminded me of what I'd done for them as well. And, it should be noted, I am blessed with an administration that values real teaching and encourages me. Not everyone has that. For a while I didn't appreciate their support enough. Now I do.

In the end, Mr. Fitz's decision is my decision, and drawing the ending to this series help me firm that decision up in my mind. If I allow the reformers' agenda to drive me from being a public school teacher or ruin what is best in my teaching, I let them win. Enough teachers have left in disgust, and I can't blame them. For the time being, though, I have decided to keep teaching the way I know best, and to speak up about why these reforms are so wrong. Any agenda for public schools that can send a teacher like me into a tailspin of depression has some very serious flaws, and that's an understatement.

I followed up on the series with this strip just a while ago, and it was the perfect epilogue to the series:



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