

Every Cloud has a Silver Lining (or take every opportunity that comes)

As this is probably my last chance to address a room full of students, over the next few minutes I will try to offer you some advice, based on my own experience, and at the same time give you a little summarized history of how I ended up in the F.T.I and what I thought of my time here.

I'm going to skip my childhood in Africa, or I could be talking for hours. I'll start with my adolescence.

At fifteen, under heavy pressure from my father to "do something with my life" I joined the Royal Air Force to commence a two year apprenticeship in electronics. Electronics seemed to be the future, as indeed it proved to be.

So, after finishing my electronics apprenticeship I worked in that field for a year and I soon realised that being in the R.A.F. was not how I envisioned spending the rest of my life. So I sold my record collection and saved from my wages until I had what would now be the equivalent of €4000 and I paid to leave the R.A.F. Friends and family could not understand my decision. They saw it as jumping into an unknown abyss. It was, but I knew it was right for me.

Before I left the Air Force, I made a vow to myself that before I was thirty I would have done three things: learn a foreign language to the point where I could make friends in that tongue; live in a country which spoke that language, and make an L.P. of my songs. I have been a songwriter since I was sixteen. I started writing pacifist protest songs while still in uniform!

Over the next few years, I had a series of unusual jobs ranging from a postman, through door-to-door salesman, to an artist's model in an art college. I also had a number of disastrous relationships with unsuitable partners. Every time one or the other came to an end, I realised that each had taught me something valuable and that the seed of the next stage in my life often lay in the collapse of those

incompatible careers or affairs. I was realising the truth in that old English proverb: “Every Cloud has a Silver Lining”.

Of course, the darkest cloud in my life had been the death of my mother in a car accident in Lagos, Nigeria, while I was in the Air Force. I was 15 and she was only 36. That experience led me to reassess my life in all its aspects. The only silver lining from that cloud was that I got to know my father better. He had been a rather shadowy figure in my childhood, always busy doing something and having little time for me or my brother. We became very close after my mother’s death and would remain so for the next 36 years until his death.

At twenty one, I joined a reputable amateur theatre company in Liverpool and thought I had found my vocation. I loved the theatre and decided I’d like to make a career of it. I asked about university courses in Drama and found I needed “O and “A” levels that I did not have thanks to having left school to join the RAF at 15. So, while working as an electronics technician in a factory during the day, I studied for my exams as an external candidate: an experience that gave me a lot of sympathy for students who have to work while studying.

Three rewarding and hectic years passed in which my love for theatre and my experience in all aspects of it increased. I went on to do a Master’s Degree in Theatre at another university and then suddenly... it was all over. I was once more faced with the abyss. I headed back up to Liverpool feeling a little terrified of what the future might hold.

On the train, I sat opposite two men who were discussing a degree in Performance Arts they were setting up in Liverpool. I introduced myself and by the end of the journey we had become friends. They told me that I seemed an ideal candidate to lecture on their course, but unfortunately, they had all their staff already. I gave them my father’s phone number and we said farewell.

Two weeks later the phone rang. It was one of the men I had met on the train. He told me that one of their lecturers had been suspended for unprofessional conduct and asked if I would be interested in replacing him. I spent a wonderful time teaching on the course until Conservative Prime Minister Mrs Thatcher axed it as part of her cuts, along with many other fine arts courses throughout Britain.

This was not the last time that evil woman would have an influence on my life. And indeed, her vile philosophies of “*There is no such thing as society*” and “*Greed is good*” have destroyed the old world of solidarity and built the selfish world we all live in today.

The collapse of my lecturing job forced me to stop teaching about theatre and get involved. For the next few years I worked as a performer, director, singer-songwriter and even ran my own theatre company for three years too. But making a living in the arts is always precarious and although I loved the life, the insecurity and constant uprooting from one place to another started to drain me. I was also no longer a carefree youth. I was approaching thirty. Just then, an old friend phoned me to ask if I would like a job teaching Drama in a secondary school, and I jumped at the chance.

This is where Mrs Thatcher comes back into the story. On becoming Prime Minister, she had decreed that all new teachers had to have the equivalent of *ESO* in English and in Mathematics. Now I had an English “A” level, but maths was never my best subject. So I was allowed to start work at the school, but as I didn’t even have a Math’s “O” level, I was not paid as a teacher, but as a tutor.

I spent a year with a very patient maths teacher, trying to prepare for the exam. He was convinced everyone could learn enough maths to pass such “an easy exam”. However, he eventually declared me to be his first and only failure. So, here was another dark cloud in my life waiting to show me its silver lining. Should I continue working for two-thirds of the salary of my colleagues for the rest of my life? Or should I look for another opportunity?

Do you remember the promises I made to myself to learn a language, live abroad and make an album by 30? Well, I got to that date and hadn’t done any of them. Now, when you change the two at the start of your age to a three or the three to a four, etc, those decade-changing dates seem to lead to a serious reflection on what you have achieved so far and what you still have to achieve. Anyway, there I was in a library in Northampton in the centre of England, reflecting on my failed promises to my younger self, when I suddenly looked down and saw a book open on a table *Teach Yourself Spanish*. “It’s a sign!” I thought.

From the moment I picked up that book, it seemed that destiny's arrow was pointing me in a certain direction. A friend saw the book on my desk and lent me a Spanish course she had on cassettes and the Israeli girlfriend of my flatmate who had arrived in England at Christmas, turned out to have originally been from Argentina. I helped her with her English and she helped me with my Spanish. Then I got a huge envelope with a Spanish stamp from an old Scottish friend who I had lost touch with. It was a calendar from something called the Caixa. He was working as an English teacher in Catalonia and asked if I would be interested in working with him in the following academic year.

So, I arrived in Igualada in September 1986 to find that my friend had overestimated his popularity and he did not have enough students to pay two wages. I had the choice of returning to Britain with my tail between my legs or setting up on my own. Consequently, I borrowed a thousand pounds from my father — it was so cheap in Catalonia back then that that trivial sum was enough to survive for months on and I set up my own “Academia” in Capellades.

I soon met some young people who liked the songs I played in a local bar and suggested we form a group. That group, called “*Pere Flipat*” had quite a successful time as curtain raisers (*teloners*) to many of the famous bands in the Catalan Rock boom of the late eighties and early nineties: Sopa de Cabra, Sau, Companyia Elèctrica Dharma, etc.

In that period I also met the woman who was to become my “*compañera de la vida*” — my wife Carmen. So, that silver lined cloud that had driven me to Catalonia was really being generous to me.

For the next five years, I had a monopoly on private English teaching in Capellades. I soon had more than enough students to pay all my bills and more working only 12 hours a week. Unimaginable now.

Anyway, when my Spanish was more fluent and I was immersed in learning Catalan, I also started to take occasional translation work and enrolled in a translation course to get some official recognition of my translation skills.

The next dark cloud on the horizon came when an English woman turned up in Capellades and set up a rival school. The loss of income, as some students tried out the new teacher, led me to do

more translation work and this soon became an important source of income. There was that silver lining again.

Some years later, I was working on a long translation as part of a team and had to go into Barcelona to coordinate some aspects of the translation. My contact there was Roland Pearson, who soon became a firm friend.

Sometime later, Roland rang me to ask if I would be interested in teaching at the UAB where he was working. The job would only be for a year, as I would be replacing a teacher who had taken leave of absence. Again I seized an opportunity.

At the end of the year, the teacher I was replacing did not return and so I was offered the post for a further year. That year somehow turned into twenty years of the most rewarding job I have ever done. Not financially rewarding as any Associate Lecturer here could attest, but certainly gratifying in all other aspects.

I loved this opportunity to be surrounded by fresh young minds and to help their development in my own small way. I enjoyed being an educator, a facilitator and an entertainer here at the F.T.I. and I look back on that period of my life with a certain pride and even nostalgia now that it is over.

In my time at the F.T.I. here, I met many extraordinary people both on the staff and in the student body. Many of the latter have kept in touch with me via Facebook and have told me repeatedly how much they enjoyed my classes and how much of an influence I was on them. Surely no teacher can ask more of their chosen profession than that.

So, I'd just like to finish by saying I have told you all this to encourage students listening to me here (who might not even know who I am, given that it's now two years since I last gave classes here) to follow Monty Python's advice and "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life". When you leave here you will face enormous challenges and be forced to endure many frustrations and disappointments. Don't let any of it get you down! While you are in a low period, enjoy the positive things in life, your friends, your hobbies, music, T.V series, etc., and if you *are* faced with some dark clouds then just hang on in there and that silver lining will surely reveal itself.