

Different Doesn't Mean Worse

Daniel Morrison

When I was young, my goal was to become the Principal Trumpet in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—a lofty one, I know. I was certain that playing trumpet professionally was my path, and I did everything in my power to successfully reach my desired outcome. My entire life revolved around trumpet. Growing up with two music teachers as parents, I



was given a very early start on my musical journey. I have memories of dragging my dad's old Bach Stradivarius up one step at a time to my bedroom, and I can still smell the charmingly musty aroma that emanated from its velvet interior. Things were going as

well as they could with my development on the trumpet throughout my childhood. I was already playing up to a high C in 6th grade, and I performed Clarke's "Maid of the Mist" at Solo contest that same year. I started to believe that maybe my lofty goal was attainable after all...until, in an instant, everything (literally) came crashing down.

In my infinite adolescent wisdom during an afternoon at my best friend's house, I spontaneously decided to ride a motorized scooter—without a helmet. Everything was going just fine until I got distracted, lost control of the steering, and plummeted face first into the ground. The first two points of contact from my body to the pavement were my wrist, which I broke, and my upper lip. The broken wrist was no big deal. I played baseball that summer wearing a glove over my cast. My upper lip, however, was a different story. I landed directly where the left edge of my mouthpiece rested. Stitches inside of my lip and lacerations on the outside of it were my parting gifts

from the accident. As one might imagine, this accident was detrimental to my future development as a trumpet player. I truly believe I was never able to play the same again after that day.

After my injury, I still worked to play trumpet and to get back some of the ability I had lost, but as I grew older, ultimately I knew it was unlikely that a career as a professional musician was in the cards for me anymore. Because of this, my focus and interests began to shift toward music education. I started to pay closer attention to my dad in his role as the Director of Bands at Prospect High School in Mt. Prospect, Illinois. I researched music education as a degree option, and I asked questions to some of my mentors and teachers about pursuing teaching as a career. Ultimately, I fell in love with teaching music and pursued it with great focus and clarity. It led me to a dream job at Ronald Reagan High School in San Antonio where I have had the most incredible experiences of my life, and a fortuitous byproduct of this move was meeting the love of my life—my wife.



If I had not fallen off that motor scooter, busted my lip, and ultimately shifted gears, I would not be sitting here on this path I ended up pursuing. I never liked sharing my motor scooter story in the past, because it was traumatic, and on the surface, it always had a negative connotation

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in my mind. The global pandemic, however, has changed my perspective a great deal, as I know it has for so many others. In the midst of the summer lockdown, I had the realization that my motor scooter accident was one of the best things that could have ever happened to me.

At this point, you might be saying to yourself, "Well, that's a nice story, and I am glad everything worked out, but what does this have to do with our current situation, or with me?" Well, even though I would never have wished to fall off a motor scooter, I am now able to look back and see so many positives that came from it. I believe that while none of us asked for a global pandemic and all the devastation that came with it, we cannot change our circumstance. Why not find ways to make the most of this time through creativity and consistency so that we can look back on these days and remember the fantastic ideas and improvements that came to fruition during the most unusual and unprecedented stretch of months we have ever experienced? I am confident with a few tools and a shift in mindset, this is possible for us all.

Reframing Reality

A crucial step in finding real purpose right now requires letting go of expectations tied to how things go during a "normal year". If we simply try to take techniques and approaches from years past and force them into our classrooms right now, we are trying to fit the proverbial square peg into a round hole. What can you do to make this school year meaningful, enjoyable, and engaging for your students? Start with that question and allow any answer to exist. Write them all down, figure out which ones you can reasonably bring to life, and get started. I know that sounds overly simple, but sometimes things are so easy that they are difficult.

At Reagan, when we found out our summer band camp had to be virtual, we knew we could not just spend

eight hours a day teaching marching fundamentals and lip slurs over Zoom. We would not have had a band by the end of that experience. Instead we did exactly what I just suggested. We talked about completely different ideas that we would not have time to do during a normal year. One of those ideas was contacting some of the best professional musicians from across the country to run virtual masterclasses with each section of the band. We decided to swing for the fences, because the worst that could happen was that people might say no.

Ultimately, everyone said yes! We had members of the Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony, New York Philharmonic, "The President's Own" U.S. Marine Band, Broadway performers and more interacting with and teaching our students. Talk about an example of how different doesn't mean worse. It was a huge success, and we will absolutely be continuing this event in future years.



This was an idea that would have never been conceived without the restrictions placed upon us. Whether this exact event would work for your program or not is irrelevant. What matters is the mindset shift required to thrive in the current environment. I encourage you to think big, think different, and not to discount any idea. You might be amazed with the outcome.

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When Different Does Mean Worse

The Chicago Bulls of the 1990s are considered by many to be the greatest sports dynasty of all time. They won six NBA Championships and probably would have won more if Michael Jordan hadn't "retired" for two years. This dynasty, however, did not pop up overnight. Michael Jordan was drafted by the Bulls in 1984, and they did not win their first championship until 1991. It took years of building and learning to finally break through. While they were dominant through most of the 90s, it certainly was not easy. The culture of excellence had to be at the forefront of the organization's efforts and mindset each and every day. The last championship the Bulls won was in 1998. The front office then made a series of shortsighted and "different" decisions, resulting in the 1999 Bulls team, now considered to be one of the worst professional teams in sports history. In a matter of months, the dynasty was diminished to amateur hour.

Building and maintaining an organization takes time, patience, and persistence. This is as true of our music programs as it was of the prodigious Chicago Bulls. If we allow one year of some turbulence and disruption to impede our drive to create special outcomes for students, we will start to lose these students from our programs, and the result over time could be catastrophic. Fortunately, we have the power to avoid this outcome. One of my favorite quotes comes from Theodore Roosevelt, and it could not be more relevant during this time. "Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty... I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well."

We are experiencing the epitome of difficult times right now. Let's recognize this fact, embrace it, and find innovative solutions to thorny issues. Our future selves will thank us, and the future of our programs depends on it.

Daniel Morrison is currently the Director of Bands at Ronald Reagan High School in San Antonio, TX where he manages and teaches the Marching Band and conducts the Wind Ensemble. In addition, he assists with the Symphonic Band, Concert Band, and various chamber ensembles. Under Mr. Morrison's direction, the Marching Band is a multiple time BOA Regional Champion and was selected to march in the 2018 Rose Parade and the 2019 Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The Marching Band was also named the 2019 BOA San Antonio Super Regional champion. The Wind Ensemble was selected to perform at the 2018 Midwest Clinic and has been named a TMEA State Honor Band Finalist as well as a Mark of Excellence National Winner. In 2020, Mr. Morrison was selected as the Texas Phi Beta Mu International Bandmasters Fraternity "Outstanding Young Bandmaster." Mr. Morrison graduated from the University of Illinois with a bachelor's and a master's degree in Music Education.