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One Thing At A Time

When I was at school, the town-council was so poor that we were only allowed to have one of anything at a time. One piece of paper per day to write on, one pencil per term, one chair and one desk we all had to take turns to sit at. One of everything - except teachers, of course: there were always plenty of them. The head-teacher put up a slogan in the gym-hall - "*One Thing At A Time*" - and gave us one lecture about it. A pity the slogan was written on just one piece of paper, which made it almost illegible to anyone more than three feet away. "We live in hard times," said the head-teacher, "And we must conserve our resources. Only one of anything. Too much of anything is too much of a good thing." Not that we had ever seen anything at all of a good thing until then, but nobody dared to say it. "From now on, students, only one of anything."

So we went back to our classrooms and began to use just one of everything; which is not what the head-teacher had said. We managed for a while. In Mathematics it was forbidden to write any calculations down on paper, so we just had to do it all in our heads. Literature was OK, although we could only get to do one sentence each out of the one book our teacher had been given (One Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich). Creative Writing was a nightmare, especially if we had a good story in our heads. With just the one pencil and one sheet of paper, we had to write very very small indeed, the kind of writing that a red spider-mite might make. And when your pencil got blunt, you either had to sharpen it to keep the writing small and so risk using up your pencil for that term, or you had to write large with a blunt tip and use up your piece of paper for that day.

There were other interesting aspects to all of this. One day the teacher wanted to demonstrate something called the "domino effect"; but since he only had one domino, the demonstration of this scientific principle was a little bit flawed. When we played football or netball, in the gym under the stern slogan put up by the head-teacher, we were only allowed one team. Usually the team won. But not always. Only one pan was permitted in Home Economics, which was a good thing too, since there was only one ring on one cooker. But when one half of the class was making cheese sauce and the other half was attempting stewed apples, there were days when we pushed back the boundaries of culinary science to a degree which our teacher had never dreamed possible. In Geography we spent a considerable number of days in studying just one significant fact about the Banana of the Windward Island. I was young then and it came as a considerable surprise to me when later, aged 27, I discovered that, not only was there more than one Banana but also that there was more than one island out there in the Caribbean.

History was something of a challenge, particularly when dealing with the Kings of France - only one King Louis, so Louis 14th did not come into our field of study, which meant that the French Revolution never took place. Same problem with Henry II, III and IV and all the subsequent Henries; ditto the Second and Third Crusades, and the Second World War. Still, our teacher coped admirably, even if it did not prepare us well for later life.

In Music, we only had one sheet of music at a time. Imagine my consternation to find out, only last week, that Beethoven's 5th Symphony lasted a good 25 minutes, and didn't fade away after just a few bars, good thpough they were..

The crunch came one day when a single school-inspector came to see that we were adhering strictly to the principle of *One Thing At A Time*. Just as the Inspector entered, there was a terrific crash, as the single waste-basket into which our single pieces of paper were collected, toppled over and rolled steadily in the direction of the door, where, as luck would have it, the

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