



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
**VCU Scholars Compass**

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2007

## The Need for Caring Pedagogies: A personal look at education in depressed economies

Catherine Curran  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

© The Author

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/687>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

*The Need for Caring Pedagogies: A Personal Look at Education in  
Depressed Economies*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

Catherine Curran

Master of Arts Degree, Virginia Commonwealth University, August 2005-May 2007  
Bachelor of Arts Degree, Mount Union College, August 2001-May 2005

Director: Elizabeth Hodges, Associate Professor, Department of English

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
April 2007

## Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
“Parkinglotgulls”	16
“Gifted and Talented”	31
“Home-makers and Story Tellers”	49
“Teachers and Car Dealers”	73
Conclusion	91
Works Cited	108

## Abstract

### THE NEED FOR CARING PEDAGOGIES: A PERSONAL LOOK AT EDUCATION IN DEPRESSED ECONOMIES

Catherine Curran, Master of Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007.

Major Director: Elizabeth Hodges, Associate Professor, Department of English

By grounding my work in this series of four essays in literary theory, but telling stories to which almost anyone can relate I hope to begin making the connection between sometimes heady academics and everyday working-class Americans. Only when learners understand their circumstances and the need for education, can they begin to take control of what they learn and how they employ that knowledge.

April 2007



## Introduction

As a child I felt that my hometown, Youngstown, Ohio, was the center of the universe. I'm sure children in different towns and cities around the world feel this way too, perhaps because their world view is shaped by their environment and everything else is understood through comparison of what they know. As I grew and learned I began to subconsciously absorb the feeling that comes with economic struggle, yet my family always had enough. We were comfortably fed, clothed, and able to take the occasional small vacation. According to recent demographic studies though, twenty-five percent of Youngstown's population lives below the poverty line, but they survive because the majority of people there are resourceful and hard-working. The problems persist when the opportunities for work are outsourced, education is limited, and leaders are corrupt.

The more my world view expanded through observation and education, the more devastating my hometown's fate seemed. Youngstown has steadily continued decay—a process that started when the city's steel mills began closing

in the Seventies—yet those who stay there cling nostalgically to what it was and what it could have been. I learned much of what I know about Youngstown from the older clients who visited the insurance office where I worked weekdays after high school and summers during college. Listening to their stories, the town's downfall became a terrible shame, something that was simply out of the hands of everyone involved. I felt as though I somehow had been cheated out of the experience of living in a prosperous town; I did not yet understand the correlation between economics and education.

I didn't realize the value of the information I had gathered until I read Deborah Brandt's *Literacy in American Lives*. In her ethnographic study, Brandt relies on the learning experiences of a diverse group of individuals from the Midwest. She places their experiences of ongoing literacy learning into the social and historical context of the twentieth century. In her own words, Brandt's study employs oral history, "Perhaps the best known line of life-story research...which uses interviews to gather information about the social conditions of ordinary lives, information that is otherwise unrecorded and often overlooked in conventional histories of important people and events" (10). I found this to be particularly interesting in a time when educators, or those making decisions for educators, are putting so much stock into other forms of learning assessment and measurement. Perhaps standardized reading exams are failing to gauge what students learn and how they employ literacy in their everyday lives; we should begin having more conversations with students to understand how we can better prepare them to be critical thinkers and active literacy learners.

Once the perspective of ordinary Americans was validated through Brandt's work, I began wondering how to bridge the gap between the academic discourse of literacy learning and those individuals from my real life experiences who helped the theories to become real to me. By reading what scholars had written about the rift that education can cause in families when children gain higher education than their parents could, I knew that I would have to tread lightly.

In his first chapter of *Snobbery: The American Version*, Joseph Epstein discusses how his parents' lack of interest in social climbing provided a life free of snobbery and meanness. Growing up in a household void of high culture, expensive possessions, or any reading material besides magazines, Epstein learned about class systems in high school and college—education his parents worked to provide.

In the pages that follow, Epstein directly aligns education, elitism, and social class. Though he weaves humor throughout, these issues are quite serious and often overlooked by those who are on the lower end of the arrangement. Epstein recalls from his childhood, "When men gathered in my parents' apartment to talk about world affairs, I could not help noticing that the wealthier ones did most of the talking, or at least talked most authoritatively and were listened to most closely" (5). Because Epstein went on to achieve in academics, now teaching at Northwestern, he became aware of the connections between knowledge, class status, respect and discrimination. Though he provides detailed cultural insights, Epstein's work fails to balance a stratified society because it is

aimed an academic audience: a handbook for snobs, justifying their meanness, and perpetuating elitism.

Richard Rodriguez shared similar experiences in exceeding his parents' educational achievement, yet softens the rift by expressing guilt for having done so. In *The Achievement of Desire*, Rodriguez shares his own experiences in the steps necessary for gaining academic success in the American classroom. Yet, with each step toward achievement, he moved away from his uneducated parents. As he studied though, he gained the ability to articulate what had happened in his own life and how it translates to others across the country. Rodriguez asserts:

Not for the working-class child alone is adjustment to the classroom difficult. Good schooling requires that any student alter early childhood habits. But the working-class child is usually least prepared for the change. And, unlike many middle-class children, he goes home and sees in his parents a way of life not only different but starkly opposed to that of the classroom. (He enters the house and hears his parents talking in ways his teachers discourage.)

By subscribing to academic language and conduct as a child, Rodriguez felt he had no room to admire or respect his parents. Complicating the matter further, Rodriguez felt guilty because he knew that his parents had supported him in his schooling and career (624).

When I read *The Achievement of Desire* I began to think of Dr. Bill Macauley, my freshman composition professor and undergraduate advisor at Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio. In my four years at Mount Union I took several of Macauley's classes and worked under his direction in the writing



center. From him, my perspective on learning opportunities shifted, and I began to understand the correlation between education and economy. As the first member of his family to break from the working-class cycle and pursue higher education, let alone gain a Ph.D., Macauley served as an inspiration for my work ethic as an undergraduate. He once told me how proud he was to show his father his bound dissertation. His father sat on their porch reading the pages and pages discussing Macauley's qualitative analysis of workshop-based learning, a fountain pen in hand. After falling asleep with the tip of the pen to a page, Macauley's father ruined about fifty of the pages with a pool of bleeding ink.

Yet another case for bridging the gap from academia to main-stream America: while Macauley's work is invaluable to the academic community, many people from outside the academic world read to be entertained rather than educated. I know this is true in my own family who, when they ask what I'm studying, dismiss my explanation within moments by saying things like, "I don't know what that means, but it sounds important."

By grounding my work in this series of four essays in literary theory, but telling stories to which almost anyone can relate I hope to begin making the connection between sometimes heady academics and everyday working-class Americans. Only when learners understand their circumstances and the need for education, can they begin to take control of what they learn and how they employ that knowledge.

The need for awareness of one's state of learning is emphasized by Paulo Freire's theories in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Although Freire developed his theories of education in his work with Brazilian peasants more than forty years

ago, much of what he gathered can be transposed to people living in the United States today. Because the peasants he taught subscribed to “fatalism” they were unable to learn—they had no hope of bettering their situation. Only when they were able to become the “subjects” of their learning, could they think critically, “unveiling reality”, and participate in authentic learning (Freire 69). Though the conditions for learning in economically disadvantaged areas of Northeast Ohio aren’t as deprived as those in which Freire worked, there are issues that I now understand in my own experiences with clarity because of his definitions.

*Parkinglotgulls*, the first essay of the collection, illustrates the need for what Freire defines as *praxis*. Certainly, people can be oppressed—they can be objects of their environments—without even realizing it. They can also realize that they are oppressed but fail change their circumstances. Freire’s definition of praxis explains how liberation can only be achieved when “critical awareness” is attained. He says:

One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it (51).

This definition is important to my project on two levels: First, to serve as a model for what I hope to do with what I have learned over the years. I am now aware that the patterns of the town were highly oppressive, at times seemingly hopeless. I have spent considerable time reflecting on the nature of the

oppressive environment in order to gauge the appropriate action. Shared attitudes in Youngstown, Ohio seem to foster passive attitudes, complacency, and circumstances in which students become “objects” of their education—the antithesis of authentic learning.

The second level at which this definition is significant lies within the future of the town. The young people who reflect on the oppressive nature of Youngstown leave, without acting, because it is easier to escape the oppression than it is to subvert it; Clearly, I cannot criticize these people since I am one of them. Some young people who choose to stay in Youngstown take action that they presume will help to stimulate growth, yet often do so without reason, perspective or reflection.

The Dan character in the final scene of *Parkinglotgulls* serves as an example of this behavior. Although he is optimistic about creating a positive future for the town and for himself, he fails to recognize all of the ways in which the people there perpetuate their decline. He shared with us the ambition to work for the DeBartolo Corporation, founded by a legendary Youngstown entrepreneur, Edward J. DeBartolo Sr.—one of the few success stories to materialize in the mid-twentieth century from the declining area. Today, DeBartolo Corporation owns shopping malls, professional sports franchises and thoroughbred racetracks throughout the country.

Dan’s aspirations for positive change, in my observation, fell short when he failed to recognize the degrading nature of a dance club located adjacent to the city jail called, The Cell. Instead of seeing the self-destructive nature of this

premise for recreation, Dan seemed to think drinking and dancing in a pretend jail was acceptable.

Dan was a student at Youngstown State University at the time, and I recall in my senior year of high school seeing and hearing about students who would stay in Youngstown, live with their parents, and attend YSU. Those who received acceptance letters to leave our hometown, most to attend smaller private colleges throughout Ohio, began mentioning the relief of escaping YSU, directing a new acronym to the students who did attend, “you screwed up”.

The academic reputation of the university feeds from the vibe of the city—the people who founded it were hard-working, but years of economic struggle lead to complacency and low standards. I lived within miles of the university my entire life without hearing about one particular stand-out program. Violent crime and the occasional scandal—from scheduling debacles causing students to stay in the undergraduate program for more than five years to professors with phony accreditation—have checkered the reputation of the university further.

With no solid educational foundation, the town will only continue to deteriorate. This is also reflected in the area’s public elementary and secondary schools. As I mention in *Parkinglotgulls*, my family fled the city limits when Youngstown city teachers began a trend of striking every other year. Because the city was established on, and many of the people continue to adhere to a union mentality most people don’t fear the results typically yielded by a workers’ strike.

I can recall thinking, at the age of three or four, that a strike was a fun event. My older siblings were able to stay home with our mother and me, and we even went together to the school to picket against the picketing teachers. We

marched in circles carrying signs about placing students' needs ahead of personal greed. At the time, I could not recognize how counterproductive the union mentality can be, but now the trend persists in the school district from which my siblings and I eventually graduated and where my mother still works as a secretary.

She is also the treasurer of the workers' union for the school district, and in the past week has been working with the union president to devise a plan in response to lay-off notices from the district's superintendent. All non-teaching employees received the notice of lay-off last week, with the exception of school bus drivers and mechanics. The union president with whom she is working might have already hindered their chances of job salvation by beginning a meeting with the superintendent by yelling, blaming and name-calling—yet another example of the need for a balance of action and reflection.

Other changes in the district include budget cuts for the arts and extra-curricular activities, as well as the elimination of special needs programs and the gifted program. As I point out in *Gifted and Talented*, the program was based on the results of a single standardized test students took in the second grade. While the program's cut and dry standards for admission, without reevaluation throughout the years, produced unreliable outcomes, as a student I understood the effectiveness of tracked classrooms.

When other students from the gifted program advanced on to higher mathematics courses in middle school, I lagged behind. I felt silly asking questions to which everyone else seemed to know the answer, causing further failure in my grades. When I was finally placed in a regular math course, my

grades improved and I gained a genuine understanding for the material. In the advanced math course I was ashamed of my inability to grasp algebra concepts, and by mid-semester I felt hopeless, causing a complete shut-down in the learning process. While Freire's definition of "oppression" is too strong to use in this example, his idea of fatalism can be transposed on a smaller scale; because I was not learning algebra at the same pace as those around me, my confidence wavered until I developed a defeatist attitude, cutting authentic education at its source: the learner's action and reaction with the material. Instead of making myself the subject of my learning, "unveiling the reality" of math, I was merely an object, hoping to absorb theories and formulas that could be repeated back on quizzes and tests (69).

Without the presence of authentic education, the situation of Youngstown remains bleak. Glimmers of hope exist in parts of the area, mostly within individuals. In the early 1990's Sister Jerome Corcoran started the Mill Creek Children's Center to cater to the daycare and learning needs of underprivileged children in Youngstown. Sister Jerome, who refuses hand-me-down books and learning tools for the students, wants the children there to understand that there are better things in the world and that they are capable of attaining those things. In an interview in 2005 the unrelenting nun said, "A parent should have the right to choose for the child. Poverty almost removes that right, so a parent has to take just what's available" (Mill Creek Children's Center). Insisting on equal participation and accountability from teachers, parents and administration, Sister Jerome's success has encouraged growth in her program.

Because of demand, the Mill Creek Charter School now exists, housing grades k-12. Although it is not a private school, the public charter school frequently has more applicants than it can handle. Accordingly, students and parents who manage to gain admission know that if they begin to slack, their privilege of attending will be given to someone on the waiting list.

The neighborhood in which the school exists, the lower-south side of Youngstown, has long been a dangerous one. Sister Jerome and her colleagues insist on staying in that neighborhood to serve as a sign of hope for the community. The school is architecturally beautiful and modern, but it is also secure to insure the safety of teachers and students there.

As a volunteer at the children's center, I was surprised to see several of the pre-schoolers wearing keys on strings around their necks. Many of the young children went home to empty homes, letting themselves in and locking the doors behind them, further reasoning for keeping the school in the part of town with which the children are familiar.

Mill Creek Children's Center and School are much like the park from which their name is taken. Reaching many parts of the city, the twenty six hundred-acre park is historical and beautiful. It serves as a reminder of Youngstown's prosperous past, and even its hope for the future, yet it is surrounded by decay. I grew up spending a great deal of time in the park's playgrounds and on its trails. Our neighbor, Doug, in *Parkinglotgulls* still works for the park today.

When I lived in Youngstown, I was drawn to the park because of its beauty and energy. If no one was available to go with me, I went by myself, hiking the



trails so much that my feet nearly memorized the roots and rocks that would be obstacles. My mother insisted that I forgo my park visits altogether, pointing out murders on the evening news, but I had to go. I needed the reminder of life and God and hope.

Besides, that I've never been one to give in to lectures. In *Home-makers and Story Tellers* I share the stories of my grandparents' teaching practices. Although neither were school teachers, or even high school graduates, both served as teachers throughout my childhood—and still teach me constantly. When I originally wrote this piece, it was a love story and an attempt to understand their relationship. As I dug deeper into philosophies of teaching, however I began to understand how my grandmother's steadfast and loving style of teaching overpowered my grandfather's more forceful, authoritative approach.

The ongoing message of the piece reflects on how she eventually, after more than fifty years of marriage, softened him. She did not become forceful or angry, meeting him with resistance; instead she quietly and patiently waited for him to approach life from a gentler perspective.

The notion of caring pedagogies is something I learned in my first teaching course, six years ago. Dr. Paula Caldwell, my instructor for the introduction course to the teaching program at Mount Union College, reiterated the need for caring teachers on a regular basis. *Caring teachers live what they believe*, she said again and again. Until I gained experience in the environment where adherence to an authentic pedagogy is difficult, I didn't understand why anyone might not live what they believe.



In *Teachers and Car Dealers* I share some of my first experiences and observations in teaching children in economically deprived Alliance, Ohio. The most difficult part of using these experiences, as a college freshman, to understand teaching philosophies was that there were none. In Alliance there were only rules and procedures, no love, no philosophy, seemingly no caring.

I can never forget my first day observing a class there. I was assigned to sixth grade Language Arts with Mrs. McElroy. Sitting in the back of the room, a few of the girls began chatting with me before the bell rang. They all seemed polite, waiting for the others to speak, and quieting immediately as the bell began to ring. Before starting class or introducing me, Mrs. McElroy told one of the girls to take her nylon jacket to her locker. Then she looked at me and explained the “no coats in school” rule, and the disciplinary action that would be taken—a punch in the student’s card to serve as a warning for this behavior.

The student returned as Mrs. McElroy cued a video about dog sledding, and she sat shivering in her short sleeves watching the dogs trudge through the snow. I wondered if the Alliance Middle School Rule Book defined the differences between acceptable sweaters or jackets and off-limits coats.

What I observed was a wide divergence from the hopeful perspective Dr. Caldwell provided in our discussions about caring teachers. Even farther from an optimistic viewpoint was the environment I found at Wally Armour, my part-time job. From my experiences there with my employers, co-workers and customers, the striated society of Alliance, Ohio came into focus. As I became involved in the Alliance community, I saw the disparity between the college environment and that of the surrounding town. This essay was the most difficult to write because

there seems to be no solution, no lesson—it simply *is* the way it is. For that reason, the conclusion I have drawn might seem abrupt. The resolution of this story might come from finding hope. Unfortunately, after four years in Alliance I found that the college was keeping the town alive.

The college community has made attempts to create literacy learning programs for public school students and their families, but all plans have failed to execute because of the lack of cooperation from students' parents. As I narrate in the essay, many single-parent homes, and impoverished living situations make it difficult to allow time for evenings of reading. Most people there are merely trying to survive.

Despite my attempts, I felt like a failure in reaching out to the middle school students with whom I worked. Additionally, I didn't know enough about people and the world to offer advice to a colleague at the car dealership where I worked, who was stuck in a terrible job because of her lack of education and resources.

Deborah Brandt's idea of literacy as a commodity expressed in her introduction to *Literacy in American Lives* rings especially true for the people in Alliance, except the owners of the car dealership and their families since many of them navigated their business without demonstrating outstanding literacy skills. The children in the public school system seemed doomed to perpetuate the largely oppressive class system.

Hopefully, by ending on this note I highlight the fact that learning occurs within schools, families, and communities. This theme permeates each of the

essays in this project, and may dispel some of the blame parents place on teachers, and teachers place on parents for insufficient learning.

These essays are designed to frame my own pedagogy, as I shaped it from examples of caring teachers and critical theory. My philosophy of teaching and learning was molded in spite of my initial confusion and disappointment in Alliance Middle School, and the national complications caused by The No Child Left Behind Act.

Brandt's study in *Literacy in American Lives* allowed theory to finally come into practice and realistic application in my life because she was giving validity to ordinary Americans. The stories she chose to include in her findings could be those of the insurance clients I mention in *Parkinglotgulls*, fellow students in *Gifted and Talented*, my own grandparents in *Home-makers and Story Tellers*, or co-workers and middle school students in *Teachers and Car Dealers*.

## Parkinglotgulls

“One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge the human beings’ consciousness. Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it.”

-Paulo Freire  
*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

On the first day of September in 2005, my dad and I sat in the sand on Virginia Beach. As soon as I decided to move from Ohio to Virginia for graduate school, he planned a trip to visit. “Why would anyone want to live anywhere far from a beach?” he asked, flicking the sand off of his feet. Although his job had taken him to Texas a few years earlier, he traveled frequently throughout the south-eastern part of the country and squeezed in an hour or two at a beach whenever possible, even if it meant sitting by himself.

We sat without talking for a while, watching the beach traffic until he said excitedly, “Hey, why do seagulls live by the sea?”

He had my attention—I knew a cheesy punch line would follow such a question. Humoring him, I replied, “I don’t know, Dad—why?”

“Because if they lived by the bay, they’d be called bagels!” My dad never held back shameless puns, but I still laughed.

“But I’ve seen them in parking lots too.” And I decided to tell my dad the story about the parkinglotgulls back home—the place from which we had both come.

\*\*\*

Because I turned eight that summer of 1990 and Julie would be ten the next November, our mom allowed us to wait in the car while she went into Sparkle Market in Cornersburg, Ohio. As responsible, mature ladies we waited in the car for about five minutes, observing other shoppers and parking lot seagulls until we began searching the car for something to feed the seemingly displaced birds. “Don’t they know they’re supposed to live by the sea?” I wondered out loud as I turned to reach into the far-back of the 1986 Pontiac Parisienne station wagon for impromptu bird food. I flipped through some papers in the storage compartment, fingers finding the melted and re-hardened crayon at the bottom, but no food.

By then, Julie had already removed the lid of her water bottle, pulling out slices of lemon and tossing them to the gulls. Two yellow circles on the pavement drew the gulls’ attention. The birds pecked and tossed the slices, shaking their heads. “Must be too sour,” Julie giggled at how silly they looked.

I knew the birds didn’t belong in that parking lot because our family had gone to Myrtle Beach earlier that summer for our first beach vacation in years, and I had seen them there. I knew from my own limited experience that the beach was a wonderful place, and I wondered why those gulls weren’t living in a place their name implied.

\*\*\*

The summer of 2005 took me back to Youngstown after graduating from Mount Union College, just forty-five minutes from the place I was born.

Although I'd never lived any farther from home, I felt like I was ready to leave Youngstown, perhaps for good. But before I could, I would return to work for our former neighbor, Ed at his insurance agency, just as I had nearly every summer since I was fifteen. The office was in a rezoned house in Cornersburg—the place where Youngstown, Canfield, Austintown, and Boardman come together. People in this area refer to Cornersburg only as “the corner” although there are technically five corners at the intersection. A small car lot called R.P.M, an Italian specialty shop, the Sparkle Market, a Shell gas station, and Ed LeViseur's State Farm Insurance agency sat on the corners, and for a long time, that place was the center of everything.

My assigned tasks at the office included basic receptionist duties, receiving payments from customers, filing, and sometimes running across the street to the convenience store to buy lottery tickets when the jackpot grew high enough. Rose, the office manager, and I had desks in an open room on the first floor of the house. One client told us that where I sat used to be the porch when people lived in the old house. In a place like Cornersburg, insurance clients don't pay their bills online; they come into the office to pay in person, usually staying to chat.

I loved most of our older clients who wanted to talk about the way Youngstown used to be, when they went to dances in the ballroom at Idora Park, and when the neighborhood on Youngstown's West Side where I grew up was new. I liked Bill, who called himself, “a real S.O.B—sweet, old Bill.” And Thelma, who called me to read her bills to her because she had, “the wet macula in one eye and the dry macula in the other, making it just impossible to see those numbers.” She'd say, “I'm eighty-two, you know?”

Thelma wasn't the only one who allowed me into her world of aging and physical break-down. I heard, both on the phone and in person, tales of kidney stones, heart flutters, and infections. I even saw the occasional colostomy bag. After nodding and listening to an elderly woman for nearly an hour as she listed her ailments, I collected her payment in cash, and she shuffled her orthopedic shoes out the door. Rose looked at me as the door closed and smiled, "My mother would tell you, 'you just have one of those faces,' honey. They feel like they can talk to you."

I wasn't sure then how I felt about my role as confidant for the unending parade of elderly clients, but in between medical complaints, they taught me plenty about the place I came from. I craved their nostalgia for the place where they made homes after World War II, and was thrilled to find out that the first house my parents bought as a couple was part of a neighborhood built for veterans. Even the streets were named after battles. Our years in that neighborhood were some of the happiest for our family, and Ed's family was an extension of my own. Before we were old enough to cross the street called Coral Sea that separated our homes, Julie and I would shout in unison to Ed's teenage daughters, "Jackie and Jen, come on over!" They often ran over pretending to be on a talk show, and we sat on our concrete stoop porch attempting to discuss grown-up things, but Julie and I asked the questions and we didn't know where to begin.

If none of the LeViseurs were outside, Julie and I would run through the back yard to Doug-the-bachelor's house and leave dandelions on his porch as a surprise for when he came home from his job at Mill Creek Park. I wasn't sure what

his job was, but Julie told me that he took care of trees. I was intrigued by his big blue truck and handle-bar mustache. We reached our fingers through the chain links in his fence to pet his dogs, Afghan and Marrakech while he was gone, but watched from our yard after four o'clock to see the big blue truck pull in the drive. The ends of his handle-bar mustache curled even more when he spotted the yellow weeds on his concrete stoop.

We grew up in the neighborhood, intended for our nation's heroes, on the tail end of all that was enchanting about Youngstown. After our dad's brand new 1988 Pontiac Grand Prix was stolen from our driveway, and while the Youngstown city teachers were on strike again, we began looking at houses outside the city limits. We moved away from the fun teenage girls and dogs with exotic names into a more stable public school district, but I always wondered what might have happened if we hadn't run away.

I had Ed to remind me of stories like these from my own childhood and insurance clients who can render a clear picture of how great Youngstown once was, yet there is still so much missing from my understanding of this place.

At State Farm one Friday in August of 2005 we had plenty of visitors who had no need of conducting business at all. Andy Marciella came in to see me before I left for graduate school, George Shuba came to give us photocopies of news clippings about himself, and Diane King came to use our copier to make birthday party invitations.

When I first met Andy Marciella, seven years earlier, he frightened me. He came into the office, dropped himself into a chair in front of my desk, and began asking questions. "Aren't you a pretty little girl? Are you new here? You must be



one of Eddie's nieces?" Before I could answer, he plopped his elbows on my desk, resting his greasy head in one hand. White flecks fell on the dark veneer. He smiled, revealing a few broken teeth. He told me that I should be careful. "The world's an unkind place, especially bein' a cute little girl and all."

"Thanks," I tried to keep the conversation as short as possible, holding my breath so I didn't smell him. Andy slid his payment stub and scribbled check across the desk with gnarled fingers. I entered it in the system as he continued talking about teenage pregnancy and girls who make decisions based on insecurity. I stared at the printer as it prepared his receipt. "Here you go," I said handing it over. "Have a good day."

"Say, what's your name?"

"Catie."

"Okay, Cathy. Remember what I said," Andy pushed off the desk to stand up.

"Alright".

Andy closed the door and Ed emerged from his office smirking. "So, Catherine, you met our Andy."

Rose moved to my desk with dampened paper towels, and began wiping the surface. "The other secretary used to go nuts when he came in. She'd Lysol everything afterward."

"That's Andy," Ed added. "He's filthy."

In defense Rose said to me, "But he has such a good heart. He'll pray for you, Catie. He goes to the hospital and prays with people he doesn't even know. He leaves cards for people if they're sleeping."

I listened, trying to figure out Andy. Then Ed nearly snorted, “I can’t believe they even let him in the hospital. He’s not exactly sanitary.”

From then on, when Andy visited our office, he came straight to my desk. If he called on the phone, he asked for “Cathy” and none of us corrected him. Once he brought me a giant bag of M&M candies, but he always came with advice and stories about teen girls from other parts of Youngstown who made bad decisions. “They think sleeping with guys will get them to stick around, Cathy, but it’s just the opposite.” I learned that he began volunteering for the St. Vincent DePaul Society with Ed’s late father decades earlier, and he continued to take food and clothes to teen mothers even when the society became under funded.

After several years of lectures he began adding to the end, “But I don’t need to tell you this, ‘cause you’re a smart one, Cathy. You have goals and plans for life.” The last time I saw Andy, he gave me some final advice about being careful. “You seen the news with that Natalie Holloway. You just can’t trust people, Cathy.” I bobbed my head in agreement as I had so many times before. I tried not to stare at the scab on his arm that rested on my desk. “Well, I’d better get going. I got some visits on the South Side.”

“Thanks for the advice, Andy.” All this time and he still baffled me. I watched as he pulled the door shut.

I looked at Rose for her take, and she answered with a question, “Do you ever feel like he’s an angel? I mean, he really cares about people.”

I smiled, and continued to nod, even if I never thought of angels as filthy old men—a disguise perhaps. Before I could finish the thought, George Shuba barged in the door.

“Hello, Rose,” he proclaimed loudly. “There ya’ go, young lady,” slapping a Xeroxed copy of what looked like a scrapbook page on my desk. Then he gave one to Rose and set the extras on an empty table before he rested his tall frame in a chair in front of Rose’s desk.

She sat with her hands folded in front of her, smiling at him then looking at the news clippings and photographs from the late forties and early fifties. “Isn’t this something,” she entertained, shaking her head. George had been visiting at least once a week since his mother died about a year before. He repeated himself quite a bit and neglected to conduct business if there was any to conduct. His wife, Kathy, often came in hours after his visits to pay their bills or make changes to their policies. When I met her, Kathy Shuba was a grouchy first-grade teacher with a smoker’s voice and frequent complaints about the insurance rates and her mother-in-law, who lived with the couple. When her husband’s mother eventually passed, Kathy seemed almost invigorated.

But George’s mind began slipping afterwards, though, and he based his days around sharing with us his glory years when he left Youngstown to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers. “I was the first man to shake Jackie Robinson’s hand as he crossed home plate,” he repeated frequently.

Although she’d heard it before, Rose replied, “That’s really something.”

I listened, agreeing that it really was *something*. I wondered what could possibly bring him back to Youngstown, Ohio after achieving such fame, *certainly not that grouchy first-grade teacher he’s been married to for years*, I thought.

Ed came out of his office to join the conversation, “George Shuba, how the heck are you?” He picked up the page from Rose’s desk. “Signing any autographs today, ‘Shotgun’?”

George smiled and uncrossed his long, seersucker-clad legs. “The gals at the bank got a kick out of those old photos.”

“How about that?” Rose encouraged a positive response from Ed.

“That’s really cool, George,” Ed pretended he was hearing of George’s fame for the first time.

I smiled at Ed’s use of “cool.” He was always trying to look and sound younger than he was, which contended with the genuine aspects of his personality. Ed’s father, who I grew up calling, “Papa LeViseur,” began the insurance agency and was a staple in Cornersburg. People came to him for handouts of cash, even if they weren’t clients. Word spread about the generous man on the second floor of the old-house-turned-office-building and young women arrived with barefoot babies on their hips for personal doses of goodwill.

His father’s charitable legacy was evident in him sometimes, and he always treated me like one of his own daughters, but there was also the part that only saw the filthy man in Andy Marciella and the has-been baseball star that was George Shuba. He even pretended to be out of the office when Kathy Shuba’s calls to complain about rates became too frequent. Ed was a great boss, though because he was understanding of personal obligations, and liked to close the office at four-thirty during the summertime so we could enjoy more of the daylight and warmth that are so rare in Northeast Ohio.

I continued to listen to Ed interact with Rose and George, and tried to discern if he was bolstering George's self-esteem or mocking him to his face. My faith in him decided that he wanted George to feel good about himself. It was clear though, that his tolerance for behavioral patterns didn't translate to everyone when our next guest arrived.

The door opened again, and Diane King came through. I looked at the clock on my computer desktop. Four-twenty-five: right on time for Diane. Most Fridays we waited for her to call and ask how late we were planning on staying open that day. The answer was always the same, "We close at four-thirty, but you can slip your check under the door and we'll process it first thing Monday morning."

"No," she'd usually say, "I've got to get in there so my insurance doesn't lapse."

We'd watch for Diane and she'd run in, out of breath. "Maggie, thanks for waiting around." I have no idea why she called me Maggie, but I couldn't get the words in to correct her. On this Friday in August she didn't have to get a payment in under the wire. She just wanted to use our copy machine to make some invitations for a friend's birthday party.

"Look, Maggie. I've got this old picture of him from when he was a kid, and if I put that in a corner, and fold it just so, it makes a nice little card." I watched her hands fold the paper in half once, then again to make the crease in the card.

"That looks nice," I lied. The idea to throw a party for a friend was generous, but a pack of invitations from the drugstore wouldn't cost much. "Do you know how to use the machine?" I tried to seem helpful.

“No, baby. I need your help.” Diane grabbed my hand and spun me out of my chair.

I unfolded her page and placed it against the glass of the copy machine.

“How many do you need?”

She thought for a minute, and I became aware of Ed, Rose, and George watching us. “How about fifty?” she tested.

No wonder she didn’t want to buy the invitations. Pressing the number into the machine, I could feel Ed’s eyes burning into me, but I couldn’t refuse Diane’s request either. He had paid her premiums on several occasions when she cried in his office about not having any money, a trait he inherited from his father, but cut her loose when she returned from a trip to Bermuda bragging about the gold jewelry all over her ears, fingers and neck.

Ed cleared his throat, “Okay, Mr. Shuba. You have a good weekend and tell Kathy we said ‘hello’.” He headed for the door, “Rose, Catherine, I’ll see you both Monday. Diane, have fun at your party.”

“Alright, Ed. We’ll see you later.” Diane waved good-bye, but it looked more like she was shooing him out his own door. She seemed completely comfortable using Ed for making party invitations.

I stood near the noisy copier with her and watched through the window as Ed walked next-door, to Davidson’s, for a beer before he went home.

George gathered up several of his photocopied pages and said goodbye to us, and Rose began organizing the unfinished business on her desk. I pulled the warm pages that would become Diane’s party invitations out of the copier tray and handed them to her. She took a seat at my desk and began folding them as

she had demonstrated for me moments earlier. In disbelief, I looked at Rose who always knew what to do in awkward situations. “Well, Diane I hope your party goes well. We’re going to get home now.”

Diane looked startled, “Oh, my apologies, ladies. I’ll be out of your hair in just a minute.” She began folding frantically. “How ‘bout giving us a hand, Maggie.” I walked around to the other side of my own desk and began folding.

We eventually got rid of Diane and were able to close the office for the weekend. I had plans to go downtown with two of my friends for an event called “Party on the Plaza,” an effort to keep young people interested in the city. The committee to revitalize Youngstown thought the best way to go about drawing young people downtown was with mediocre local music and inexpensive drinks.

Jennie, Lara, and I had been best friends since we were ten and they insisted that we go out before I “left town for good,” as they dramatically put it. As most of our friends left Youngstown to find careers after college, Jennie and Lara promised each other they’d stay. There aren’t many jobs for college graduates there, but they managed to find employment. Both girls are very close to their families and couldn’t stand to leave, but they couldn’t stand to stay either without someone to keep them in check with reality.

Youngstown has a personality of its own, and if one stays too long, it is probable that Youngstown will overwhelm the individual. The older clients at State Farm could cling to the better times, and blame the decay on the fall of the steel industry or the corruption in the local government. Ed and Rose could remember their childhoods when they played on the safe streets of the North

Side, and not regret running to the suburbs when crime escalated in the city. For people my age, though, the running has to go farther than the suburbs. Fewer than ten percent of people in Youngstown have a bachelor's degree, because for years, a college education wasn't necessary. Almost every adult I knew growing up was some sort of laborer at the General Motors plant, or Delphi, the parts plant, or a remaining steel mill. The women were stay-at-home moms or secretaries or hairdressers. The only people I knew who went to college were my teachers. And the teachers got through to enough of us, to encourage us to seek higher education—but then what? We realized that there was nothing for us in Youngstown, but none of us thought to make something for ourselves there.

Jennie, Lara, and I had barely made it into the Plaza of Youngstown's downtown before we saw a classmate from high school. Dan almost ran to us, slopping beer over the side of his cup. I immediately remembered why my friends had to do so much convincing to get me to come out. I avoided this type of crowd when I was seventeen; there was certainly no reason to be friends now. On one occasion, I even left a New Year's Eve party at Jennie's house because this same Dan showed up with a baggie of pot, and I refused to be associated with anything illegal.

My friends politely listened to Dan as he mapped out his future for them, "I have three more semesters at YSU and then I graduate. I just finished an application to intern with the DeBartolo Coropration this summer, so if I get that I'm pretty much set."

I looked around at the crowd, and the empty office buildings surrounding us. Some weren't just empty for the weekend. The Phar-mor administrative



building had been empty since the local chain of retail stores filed bankruptcy in the late nineties—Jennie’s dad was one of the employees who was let go with a few month’s severance pay.

Dan blathered on, “If I end up working for them I think I can really turn this place around.”

Lara giggled, “That’s ambitious!” She caught herself, “Good for you, though. Sounds like everything is going well.”

He began again, “Yeah, look at this place.” He swung his arm at the pathetic skyline of Youngstown. “There’s so much potential.”

I wondered what I was missing. I looked at the same skyline—the most aesthetically pleasing building in sight was the over-crowded jail.

Jennie added, “Maybe you can convince the DeBartolos to do something with the old Phar-mor building.”

Dan continued to smile excitedly at our reunion, but before he could begin talking again, I asked, “Where are we supposed to meet your fiancée, Jennie?”

She knew the cues, “I think he’s near the other stage. We’d better get going.” Then to Dan, “It was good seeing you.”

Lara added, “Good luck with your plans.”

As we were maneuvering through the crowd, Dan shouted, “Me and the guys are going to The Cell later if you want to meet us.”

“The cell?” I looked at Lara.

“They opened a dance club right next to the jail called The Cell. There’s a mural on the wall of iron bars and an inmate.”

“Are we the only ones who see anything wrong with this?” I asked, and I continued to wonder about the identity of this town.

The decay of Youngstown has been blamed on everyone but those who persist in small ways there, those who continue to limit themselves to the constraints placed on them by unions, or struggling schools, or dangerous neighborhoods. It’s almost impossible to comprehend the entire reality of a situation when so deeply immersed in it. The connection has yet to be made between the reflection of who we are and how we became ourselves, and the action that will reverse our slow decay.

There are attempts from all angles to see the good in our hometown: The elderly who reflect, and the youth who want to act, but the praxis has not been reached. From what I have seen, Andy Marciella is the only one making progress for the good of our community.

## Gifted and Talented

“The basic question concerns the nature of education with no qualifying adjectives prefixed. What we want and need is education pure and simple, and we shall make surer and faster progress when we devote ourselves to finding out just what education is and what conditions have to be satisfied in order that education may be a reality and not a name or slogan.”

John Dewey 1938  
*-Experience and Education*

In February of 1991 Mrs. Delesky began preparing our second-grade class for Iowa testing. The standardized test designed at the University of Iowa would be used by Austintown, Ohio’s public school teachers to guide all of the second-graders into tracks—but that’s not what we were told. Mrs. Delesky’s class might have had the best preparation for this type of test, compared to all fifteen other second-grade classes in the district because we were charmed by her encouraging words, comforted by her enthusiasm for learning, and distracted by her colorful parrot earrings.

Mrs. Delesky began talking about the test in just enough time to guide us toward her behavioral expectations, but without lingering on what could be a terrifying process. She reminded us that the tests were quite important, and that we should not interrupt the class once we began on a section. Bathroom breaks were more regulated than normal, and talking was an absolute “no, no.”

After demonstrating on the green chalk board how our bubble sheets would be properly filled, Mrs. Delesky transplanted some of us from our assigned desks to different spots around the room so that we would only rely on our own brains for answers to the Iowa Test questions. The students who had a more difficult time staying still remained in their seats, and the more well-behaved

students were allowed to choose their testing position. Spots on the carpet were quickly snatched in a scramble of number-two-pencil-toting eight-year olds. I remained in my seat until Mrs. Delesky said in her high-pitched cheeriness, “You too, sweetie. Scoot. Find a spot.” I scanned the room and the only empty area left was near the window sill, so I decided to stand during the reading test, using the cold marble sill as my desk.

The test materials were circulated around the room, and we all fell silent. Soon, Mrs. Delesky gave us the instruction to begin, and only the scribbling of pencils and clicks of the radiator could be heard. I read each question carefully and filled in the bubbles for each answer making sure not to mark outside of the blue circle. I turned the test booklet to the page with the large stop sign and felt the need to wiggle myself while I waited for the next section to begin, but the radiator held me in my place.

As I investigated my entrapment, I began feeling the hot air from the heater. The chain on my stone-washed denim vest was caught between the metal slats of the radiator. I quietly dug my pencil underneath as a lever and tried to dislodge the chain of my new vest for which I got so many compliments. Its light denim wash, the metal accents of chains and coin-sized smiley faces fastened with small pink bows, were the subject of discussion in the girls’ locker cubbies earlier that morning. Usually Carly’s outfits were the topic of interest, because her leggings always matched her hair bows and other accessories. Nicole sometimes got the attention when she wore her purple sweater with the fuzzy kitten. My outfits were often too frequently repeated or out of style altogether,

but that day the new vest got some recognition in the world of early nineties, second-grade fashion.

Now it was holding me to the hot metal radiator. Chips of paint from the vent and splinters from my pencil scattered on the surface, but I still couldn't be freed. Although Mrs. Delesky had warned us about interrupting the exam, I couldn't stay there anymore and couldn't escape on my own. I considered removing the vest, but remembered that the shirt I wore underneath was thin and stained. I stood there raising my hand quietly while Mrs. Delesky graded papers at her desk on the other side of the room. My arm began to wobble as I waited for her to notice without disturbing the other students.

As other students began finishing the tests and shifting in their seats Mrs. Delesky looked around the room. She noticed my raised hand and rushed over to assist in my predicament. Together we wiggled the chain, but it wouldn't slip out of the metal slats. "How did this get itself down there?" she whispered to me.

I just shrugged my shoulders and watched her face grow red with the blowing heat and frustration. She looked around the room to check on the other students who were finishing their exams. Nicole was sitting near the bookshelves, twirling her hair and looking at us. Mrs. Delesky quietly ran to her and asked her to go down the hall to get her father, Mr. H, one of the two day-time custodians. Nicole's parents were divorced and she lived with her mom, but she gave her dad a hug every day on our way to lunch—the only time the rule of the single-file line could be violated.

The other students began to stir, peeking from their positions to see what we were doing. “Hush, puppies.” Mrs. Delesky quietly urged the fidgety eight-year olds.

Moments later, Mr. H. arrived with pliers in one hand and his daughter’s hand in the other. Nicole must have explained the situation, and I hoped that he could free me from the hot radiator wall. Then Mrs. Delesky announced that time was up for the section of testing and everyone should put down their pencils and keep their test booklets turned to the stop-sign page.

She invited the rest of the students to take a restroom break while they waited for me to become unhooked and we could begin the next section, but they were more interested to see what the commotion was about. I looked out the window while Mr. H. worked on the chain, turning my head away from his smoky smell. “All free, kiddo.” He patted me on the head then moved to Nicole to squeeze her shoulders, “See you later, Peanut.”

I looked down at my new vest and almost started to cry when I saw that the chain was broken into two pieces hanging straight toward the ground instead of connecting a smiley face to a button like it had this morning when my classmates fussed over it. Mrs. Delesky rushed to her desk and rummaged through the drawers until she found her tape dispenser. Without saying a word, just reading the look on my face, she returned to my side to tape the chain links back together. My friends who had gathered began to giggle, but Mrs. Delesky just sang, “Restroom breaks, restroom breaks, quick like bunnies.”

We resumed testing when everyone settled back into their positions, and I chose to use the shelf beneath the hamster cage for my writing surface instead of

standing at the window sill. Each day that week we worked on a new section in the morning, then had an abbreviated schedule in the afternoon with our normal studies. At the end of each day Mrs. Delesky thanked us for our excellent behavior and reminded us to eat a good breakfast the next morning.

Eventually, our class resumed normalcy and Iowa tests became a distant memory. That is until a few of our parents were sent letters asking them to attend a meeting that spring for a program called Create Class. As a result of the level of development displayed in our performance on the Iowa tests, we were labeled as “Gifted and Talented.” The principal and gifted program coordinator both signed the letter and my parents were excited to attend the meeting and to brag to my grandparents about this new label.

I was indifferent about the change until my parents returned from the meeting to tell me that Nicole and our other friend, Emily would be in the program too. Second grade ended and most of us were not happy to switch from Mrs. Delesky’s class to Mrs. Porinchak’s because we had heard that Mrs. Porinchak was very strict and she didn’t wear colorful jewelry or flowing skirts.

Summer break progressed the way it did for most children in Austintown—long games of hide-and-go-seek until the street lights came on, weekends with grandparents, and wishing on everything for September to never come.

\*\*\*

“Ya got bugs in your ears, kiddo,” Ted pretended as he jammed his dirty, fat finger in my ear. I put my ear to my shoulder, and squirmed away to the other side of my grandpa’s wood shop.

“Not funny,” I growled through my teeth.

Ted is my mother’s cousin’s husband, and one of many relatives who takes delight in his role as “jokester.” The jokes, never really funny in the first place, had grown old.

Grandpa piped up, “You’re not going to get her with that one anymore. She’s our *gifted and talented* one.”

“Oh yeah,” His dimples deepened as he smiled, “what’s that supposed to mean?” He looked to me for the answer.

“I go to the art room on Thursdays next year and get out of regular class,” I said from my distance.

“*Gifted and talented*,” Grandpa repeated, etching the words into his new definition of me.

“Well, how’d you get ‘em to believe that?” Ted persisted with the non-jokes.

“I got a good score on my Iowa test,” the best answer I could think of to dismiss the attention.

“That’s where they made the mistake then,” Ted spit out, “you should have been given the *Ohio* test since you live in *Ohio*.”

Having spent enough time with the guys, I left the shop to see how the ladies were doing with the canning.



I watched my grandmother peel tomatoes and slip them through the top of the grinder she was cranking. Red pulp spilled into a giant yellow Tupperware bowl, balancing on the edge of the card table. I stared, growing frightened about the upcoming school year.

Canning happened at the end of the summer when the majority of the garden was harvested. Each summer my cousins, siblings and I stayed with my grandparents as they turned their house into a cannery, each of us helping with additionally difficult tasks each year. Grandma set up the card table on the enclosed porch and put the old steel grinder there for the adults to take turns cranking. When the yellow bowl was nearly full she stopped cranking, breaking my trance. Rubbing her elbow before she lifted the heavy bowl, she called me over to take her place on the frightening machine. "I'm going to start making this into sauce. Why don't you grind a little while your sister peels." Before I could answer, she was in the hot kitchen digging in the cupboard for bay leaves.

My older sister, Julie, put her paring knife down for a minute to wipe the tomato seeds and juice off of her sticky hands. She tuned the radio to a different station once Grandma was out of earshot and we sang along with Paula Abdul's latest as I wondered if I was ready for all this growing up.

Within weeks, summer had reached its abrupt end, and we were forced into new routines with new teachers. It didn't take long to realize that Mrs. Porinchak was just as nice as Mrs. Delesky, she just had a slightly different style. My classmates and I quickly adjusted to being addressed with Mrs. Porinchak's

matter of fact, “Hey, gang” instead of Mrs. Delesky’s silly, “Okie, dokies.” I guessed it was another part of growing up.

As soon as we adjusted, however, eight of us were uprooted to the empty art room for our first meeting with Mrs. Cassano, the Create Class teacher. Our friends who stayed with Mrs. Porinchak sensed that something strange was happening.

Emily, Nicole and I sat together and listened as Mrs. Cassano introduced herself and some of the activities in which we were expected to participate. Among the most daunting: learning French, typing, and completing a research paper. Mrs. Cassano spoke carefully and softly, correcting an occasional mistake by saying, “or rather...” instead of “er...” like everyone else I knew. I wondered if I was the only one who felt uncomfortable.

Each Thursday followed a similar pattern: the eight Create Class students began in our regular class with all of our friends and Mrs. Porinchak. She took attendance and prepared the lunch orders for the cafeteria. I packed every day and brought a quarter for a pint of chocolate milk, and after the first week of class Mrs. Porinchak automatically checked the chocolate column when I dropped my quarter into the yellow envelope on her desk.

When Mrs. Cassano arrived, she came to take us from Mrs. Porinchak’s room and our friends, some of whom made disapproving comments as we left. Amy, who was very bright and extremely competitive, felt that she should not stay in the classroom with the regular students. This put the Create Class students in an awkward position. Especially me, because I didn’t think I belonged in the class at all. Emily didn’t want to leave either. She had just moved desks to

sit near Keith and she said she liked the smell of the strawberry gum he chewed sneakily without Mrs. Porinchak noticing.

We trudged to the art room behind Mrs. Cassano wondering if she only had the one outfit she wore each Thursday—gray tweed skirt, peach sweater, pearls. She made us take notes as she shared the agenda for the day. We learned the first Thursday that we were to write, “Agenda” and the date at the top of the page before jotting down the list of activities. My favorite part was lunch when I could claim my chocolate milk and sit with the rest of my friends. Mrs. Cassano smiled at us only when we were quiet and writing or listening intently, exposing her strangely crooked teeth. Nicole suspected that she had been punched in the mouth from the way her teeth all slanted inwardly.

We progressed, politely and attentively, mostly out of fear. We did exactly what Mrs. Cassano asked because we didn’t know how else to react. If she could take a punch in the face, we reasoned, she must be pretty tough. She encouraged critical-thinking through discussions about ethics, and problem solving activities. Each moment was planned, even when we had to take turns doing typing drills on the single computer. All of these lessons seemed like they would be useful as we grew into adults, but none of us were having much fun. At the end of the day, we marked our activities on a log. The agendas and logs were compiled in our folders for our time-management lessons later that year.

Eventually, we began discussing possible topics for our research projects. Out of desperation, I selected to study the Rainforest, a topic Mrs. Cassano forcefully guided into my sights. The trouble with this research project was that most of the work would be outside of school time—but I didn’t do it.

Each week passed and we were expected to have another step of the project done, and everyone else did. Not me. Nicole's mother helped her take notes from encyclopedias and they discussed her topic, fairy tales. Emily's dad found postcards that she could use as visual aids for her report on Niagara Falls. I never mentioned it to my parents, and they didn't ask.

Two weeks before we were to present our projects, Mrs. Cassano called for progress reports. We were to share with the rest of the class the details of how we were going about completing our projects, but I didn't have a scrap of research to share. Each student took a turn explaining his or her topic and how he or she went to the library with her mom or searched through books with his aunt, showing note cards and Xeroxed pages with highlighter marks, and I waited for my turn, hoping that Mrs. Cassano would skip over me. Unfortunately for me, she was taking notes. When I told her that I was reading all kinds of books about the rainforest, she asked if I could share something from my research folder. I fumbled through pages in my regular Create Class folder, hoping by some miracle, pages of research would appear within the scraps of agendas, logs and French worksheets. When nothing surfaced, Mrs. Cassano moved on the next activity for the day—a “Madame, Merci, et Mou” video and worksheet to teach us French.

It had become a frequent occurrence, now that we had gained her trust, for Mrs. Cassano to leave the room after cuing the VCR. We didn't know what she was doing, but we could approximate the amount of time she would be gone, and thanks in part to our time-management training, the precise level of mischief we could produce without her ever finding out. I was anxious to see what Jennifer

and Matt, the fourth-grade students who usually led the mischievous activity, would produce that day. Maybe making piles of spit balls or getting into the art supplies that were strictly off limits—it didn't matter as long as one of us volunteered to watch the video, gather the answers for the worksheet, and share them with the rest of the class before Mrs. Cassano returned.

A strange turn of events occurred that day though. Mrs. Cassano cued the video, dimmed the lights and asked me to join her in the hall. We walked in silence back down to Mrs. Porinchak's class and I thought that I was returning for good, to listening to stories on the carpet and whipping through easy work sheets. Instead I waited in the hall while Mrs. Cassano pulled Mrs. Porinchak from her work in the classroom. My classmates within the room wondered why Mrs. Cassano was returning in the middle of the day, and peeked through the open door. Together the teachers asked me why I had not participated in the research project. I wanted to say, "Because nine-year olds don't do research, especially in the spring when we can be playing outside." Rather, I began crying and struggling to think of an excuse. I must have somehow communicated that I was under a great deal of stress at home due to my mother's new employment outside of the house, and the ridiculous amount of chores I was expected to accomplish each day. I also added something about time-management. My teachers gave me some tissues to wipe my face, and Mrs. Cassano took me back to the art room where I finished the day's activities, including my activity log that didn't include the detail of being called out.

Later that afternoon, I was outside skipping rope when my mother's voice echoed in the garage, "Catherine!" My stomach flipped as I walked toward the inside garage door.

"I just got off the phone with Bernie Porinchak," she stared at me waiting for a response.

I wound the jump rope around its handles and searched for an explanation, even though I knew that she knew everything. Mrs. Porinchak showed concern for the alleged house work I was expected to undertake each day. My mother explained that she was gone from the house for a shorter period of time than I was, and that I wouldn't even know she was gone if she hadn't told me.

Within minutes, I was sitting at the kitchen table with several encyclopedias to take notes. Then I drafted an apology letter to Mrs. Porinchak.

Eventually, I produced a passing research paper on the rainforest—for a third-grader. Create Class lasted through fourth grade, and the eight of us managed to stay friends with our classmates who didn't do as well as we apparently had on the Iowa Test. I wondered what the point was of a label like "gifted and talented" when there were others in Mrs. Porinchak's class who worked harder and earned better grades. It was clear, even then, that we were all growing and learning at different rates.

This label became increasingly garbled and seemingly misplaced when we moved into the fifth grade. Five elementary schools in the district blended into two middle schools. My class from Lynn Kirk Elementary was split between the middle schools, then we were mixed with two other elementary schools. Seven of

the eight Create Class students coincidentally went to Austintown Middle School because of bus routes, and were pushed into advanced Reading and Spelling with Mrs. Jeswald, along with the Create Class students from the other two elementary schools.

The sole Lynn Kirk Create Class student, Shannon, who went to Frank Ohl Middle School, was one of only two “gifted and talented” fifth graders. The gifted program didn’t provide funding for a teacher for those two students, but the school administration decided to keep them out of main-stream Reading and Spelling class. This resulted in class time split between Mr. Wilson the librarian and Mrs. Cassano for the two students.

At the start of this transition Mrs. Cassano occasionally met with us during Mrs. Jeswald’s class periods. Following the visits, our new teacher pretended not to listen as we all groaned about our former teacher. This new, larger class brought new diversity in achievement and behavior, but we didn’t try to sneak anything past Mrs. Jeswald—she always seemed to know what we might plan next.

Her style for encouraging critical thinking seemed more like a game, and became more successful than anything we did in Create Class. Mrs. Jeswald had a book of “Stories with Holes” that she read to us. We would have to fill in the holes by asking *yes* or *no* questions. The first one we completed as a team was easy, therefore we became hooked.

Mrs. Jeswald said, “The man was afraid to go home because the man with the mask was there.”

After a few quiet moments we began formulating questions that would yield either a “yes” or “no” answer.

Nicole went first, “Was the man with the mask a burglar?”

Mrs. Jeswald replied quickly to keep the questions moving, “No.”

Someone else helped, “Was the man who was afraid to go home because the man in the mask might hurt him?”

“No.”

“Was the man in the mask a clown?”

“No.”

“Was the home the kind of home we normally think of?”

“No, but good question.” She raised her eyebrows.

“Was it a nursing home?”

“No.”

“Was he wearing the mask for a disguise?”

“No.”

“Was it a game?”

“Yes!”

“Was *home* home base?”

“Yes.”

“So the man with the mask is the catcher and he has the ball.”

“Yes, exactly. Fill in the holes then,” Mrs. Jeswald was all smiles and encouragement.

“So the man who was afraid to go home was the runner, and the man with the mask was the catcher and he had the ball to tag the runner out.”



“Great job, you guys!” Mrs. Jeswald carefully planned classes to leave a few minutes at the end for these exercises. The only downfall was when the bell rang right in the middle of a story. These activities lent themselves to teamwork. Even when Mrs. Jeswald began timing us at the end of seventh grade, we listened carefully to take cues from one another that would help to fill in the holes of the story.

The group of students that formed Mrs. Jeswald’s class made even less sense than the group of Create Class children. We were years past scoring well on the single standardized test that placed us in this permanent track. The only circumstance under which new students joined was if they transferred from another school district, and had been previously been labeled as “gifted and talented”.

In my other classes I began to wonder if the rosters were also compiled methodically, if teachers were given entire batches of the bad math students, or the ones who were great at science. There were students who displayed talent in Band, and others who seemed to possess gifts of memorizing dates in Social Studies class, or painting well in Art—why hadn’t they been labeled as such?

In seventh grade the students in Mrs. Jeswald’s class were invited to participate in the Reading, Discussion, Enrichment after-school program. This program would continue through twelfth grade, and the books we read would increase in sophistication each year. We would have to read the books on our own time and meet twice a month—first for the discussion of the book, then for the enrichment portion that was usually a guest speaker who related to a theme

found in the book. The two Frank Ohl students would meet with us for the bi-monthly sessions.

Despite the universal benefits of the R.D.E. program, only students from Mrs. Jeswald's class were invited, therefore only students who had done well on the Iowa test in second grade could participate. I thought about my other friends who might be willing to read books and discuss them as an extra-curricular activity, and felt that they were being cheated somehow, especially when I learned that we could earn scholarships for college if we stuck with it until twelfth grade.

Initially, all of us signed and returned the invitation letter to Mrs. Jeswald as our acceptance, except for one student. When Mrs. Jeswald asked Corey about his letter after taking attendance one day he calmly said, "I'm not going to do it." The rest of us were shocked, and Mrs. Jeswald asked to meet with him in the hall when we were dismissed to lunch.

Corey chose increasingly significant acts of rebellion in the months that followed, until we were told that he moved away. It seemed like such a shame, we all thought, that Corey had turned his back on opportunities that were given to him. But we never saw or heard from him after he left.

In high school R.D.E. participants were blended into advanced English and History classes with other advanced students. In this environment we realized even more clearly how the opportunities we had been given throughout our schooling should have been more evenly disbursed. The other students were clearly capable of academic discussions and would likely benefit from something

like R.D.E. Even more, other students probably would have helped on days when R.D.E. students hadn't read as carefully as we should have.

Slowly our numbers of students at R.D.E. meetings dwindled when students became involved in other activities like sports, work, and most unfortunately, drugs. By our senior year, a little more than half of the original group of students remained active in R.D.E., and even fewer were still maintaining good grades. The label placed on all of us ten years earlier seemed inaccurate in most instances. Students who had positive support from parents, or who somehow managed on their own to succeed, made plans for college—much like anyone else in our class.

What we had done on an exam when we were eight gave us many opportunities for success and advancement that we chose to use or not. We were trusted, as children, to be left alone in an Art room with expensive supplies. In eighth grade, mentors from the community invited us to shadow them because we were “gifted and talented.” We went to the zoo, visited museums, and saw plays when students who didn't do quite as well on that Iowa test years earlier, sat in the classroom.

The unfortunate nature of these circumstances was only magnified by the hit or miss success rate. Today, Nicole is a pediatric nurse in Cleveland, but I heard Emily did not go to college. No one knows what happened to Corey or the students who began hanging out in drug circles in high school. Another student finished her Master's degree in Biomedical Engineering at Tulane University last January, despite the interruption of hurricane Katrina. Still another is in a Ph.D. program for Molecular Biology at Rutgers. Several became teachers and are

scattered throughout the country. Two of the boys are finishing engineering degrees close to home, and one girl became an accountant. I don't think any of us speak French.

## Home-makers & Story Tellers

“A thing so complete has its own beauty.” -Sherwood Anderson

Bob and Anne live in a small, cozy home on North State Line Road in Masury, Ohio. Across the street is Pennsylvania. Bob jokes that he will one day push Anne across the street into Pennsylvania “when she’s ready to go” because the death certificate costs a few dollars less there. That is a joke he can make because they have been together for fifty-nine years. The cost of death certificates is a fact he knows because he is eighty-one years old and in the past few years he has lost his two best friends and both of his brothers. Throughout their years together the couple has paid attention to minor differences in dollars and cents out of necessity. And over the years, she has grown accustomed to his sometimes dark sense of humor.

They paid a mere sixteen thousand for the house about ten years ago, and have patiently and painstakingly transformed it into a home one tiny detail at a time. The first project in the home was the kitchen. Bob is a meticulous woodworker who has built numerous kitchens over the years, including ones in the past four homes in which the two have lived. He likes to buy houses that are inexpensive, fix them up until there is nothing left to fix, and then find another inexpensive house to transform into a home. It has never been her idea to move, so the kitchen is always the first project, so that Bob can appease his wife.

While Bob undertakes major projects, Anne contributes the details: perfect hospital corners on the linens of their twin beds, fresh baked raisin-filled cookies,

starched creases in his blue jeans, perfect stacks of handkerchiefs in his top dresser drawer, outside and in, flowers suitable for *Better Homes and Gardens*. She has a cellar full of canned peaches, cake mixes, spaghetti sauce, hot peppers from their garden, and anything else imaginably edible. Last winter when Bob's body didn't allow him to clear the snow from their sloped, narrow driveway the pair remained inside for over two weeks. A neighbor brought them milk once, but other than that they had more than enough food to survive.

Within the beauty of their interdependence lies the heart-breaking vulnerability that one might soon be without the other.

This old man measures his days in terms of fishing: Whether or not he went, and whether or not the fish were biting. He easily tells his grandchildren that he loves them, but this wasn't the case when his four children were younger.

He had a reputation in town for being mean, almost ferocious. Neighborhood children feared him. A close-shaven head and muscular physique encouraged nicknames like "Mr. Clean." Most adults feared him. He drank too much, then became angry for no apparent reason. His children weren't punished for bad behavior at school because the administration knew that they would be in far more trouble at home if he found out.

His daughters couldn't date Italian boys or Catholics; the list of people they could date is shorter: Protestant German-Americans. That's what he is, therefore that is what he accepts.

He operated machinery in gravel pits and installed pumps for wells for people in town, work that produced a muscular physique and thickly callused

hands. He looked like a bear when he rubbed his back against a wall to scratch it. These days the same habit is almost cat-like because he has shrunk over time and because he no longer moves aggressively.

He often prefaces rants with the words, "By God," but is nowhere near ferocious. He still drinks, but is not mean. You can catch him working on a six pack of Genesee or some other bottom-of-the-line cheap beer before noon. But he has mellowed and sweetened over time. The children in their new neighborhood shout to greet him when they see him. While he was working in the yard one day before they officially met, his four-year-old neighbor, Maggie, shouted out her second story window, "What's your name?"

He smiled kindly when he identified the location of the cheery little voice, and without answering, shouted back, "What's yours?"

"Maggie!" she exclaimed proudly.

"Well, that's my name too" he joked.

Now, each time she sees him, she yells, "Hello Maggie!" and he replies the same.

He runs jokes into the ground by telling them over and over again. The same goes for stories about me when I was little. Bob is my grandfather.

Anne, my grandmother, is the reason why my grandfather has mellowed and sweetened. My grandmother is quite possibly the kindest, most nurturing, fervently faithful, loyally thoughtful woman to ever grace the face of this earth.

She finds goodness in people who possess little or no goodness. She knits multi-colored sweaters for children in third world countries. She puts everyone

else before herself. She giggles at comic strips, and makes the best fudge. She hums when she's nervous, or rubs the diamond in her engagement ring that she still wears every day on her pants to make it shine. She never learned to drive, but can give you directions to any place she's ever been. She can remove the burnt-on food residue that gets left around stove burners that no other human can remove. Her persistence is quiet, but highly effective. She never gives up on the people she loves, no matter what.

I have spent a great deal of time with my grandparents in my lifetime. Until recently I have taken for granted the knowledge I have gained from them both as individuals and as a couple. Most of what I can attribute to him has come in the form of lectures, front-porch philosophy, jokes, and bear hugs. What my grandmother has taught me on the other hand, has come from my observations of the effects the unrelenting love she gives to everyone and everything around her.

I would like to tell you their story in the way that I see it today—certainly not the way anyone else might see it. The story begins with what she went through in the way to becoming who she is, it moves on to what he was, and finally concludes with what grows from her persistent, silent, magical presence in his life. To outsiders and even other members of our family, this old couple seems to be average, simple, even boring. I know that they're not boring—they might recycle stories or talk about ordinary things, but they are complicated, contradictory, even compelling—their love story is hidden in the details.



In September of 1942 A friend of Anne's mother extended an invitation for her to live in Washington, D.C. a few weeks before her junior year in high school was set to begin. She would be working for them as a nanny and housekeeper, but it was a step up from her present situation. They might have known that she needed an escape from the place she called home.

After losing her mother to cancer three years before, she welcomed the opportunity to be near people who might actually acknowledge her mother's life and death, unlike her father and his new wife.

Desperately needing a break from the physical strain of beatings from her father, and emotional strain from taking care of her seven younger siblings, Anne left the family farm in Mercer, Pennsylvania to live in our nation's capital.

She attended classes at Anacostia High School, and volunteered with the Red Cross rolling bandages that would be sent overseas to help the war effort. For Christmas that year, her adoptive family gave her a cheap bracelet with metal bent around small red discs to almost resemble flowers. It was the nicest thing anyone had ever given her.

Despite her popularity in school, the fulfillment she received from volunteering, and the nurturing home she had found, Anne's worries about the lives of her younger siblings seeped into her pleasant life. She imagined her father beating them with the leather strap intended to be used for sharpening razors. The food she ate didn't taste good, as she imagined the others eating only bread with ketchup. Feeling as if she had abandoned them, she returned to Mercer. Anne returned to find her family in a desperate financial situation, and

the abuse from her father and step-mother had persisted for the younger children. As a result, Anne went to work in an office at Cooper Bessemer, and was forced to drop out of high school. She helped the family financially, I suppose, but I know that her presence was their most abundant blessing.

Even now as her seven siblings, three who shared her mother and four who are half siblings, have moved to different parts of the country, she is the connecting thread. They rely on her to be a sort of family liaison who knows the details of the others' lives. She accepts them regardless of decisions they have made, things they have said, or times they might have taken her for granted. *Because that's what family does.*

At eighty-one, my grandmother still loyally corresponds to friends and family. She even writes to some people who she doesn't know very well, and some who don't write back. I'm not sure why she does, but I hope they appreciate her devotion in some way. For me, her letters always appear just when I need them the most. Her handwriting has grown more scribbled over time, but her genuine warmth and goodness persist.

A pathetic looking cartoon basset-hound and the message, "I'm missing you" decorate the front of a card with a loving note inside:

*My Dear Catie,*

*How nice to hear from you this week. We do love you very much, but you already know that.  
Aunt Marty and I went to the store this morning. It is raining, but is supposed to rain harder tomorrow.  
I think we are going up to Uncle Paul's Sunday. We usually go there on Labor Day and Memorial Day.*

*Grandpa is so dizzy he feels sick to his stomach- he hasn't been driving and I don't think he should.  
I'm glad you will be home for Thanksgiving, even if it is in Columbus.*

*Till next time  
all of our love,*

*Grandpa  
and  
Grandma*

I notice she signed his name before hers even though he probably didn't know she sent me a card. She wants the people around her to feel loved from every direction and she tries to be the messenger.

Once my grandmother returned to live with her family and began working, she and her younger sister, Marty, managed to save enough to share an apartment with one other roommate, and escape their father's house and the nightmares that went along with it. I suppose they didn't feel like they were abandoning the siblings left at home, but serving as an example of how to change the situation.

Grandma was working at the office of the Westinghouse factory in Sharon, Pennsylvania during the day, and often found dates for the weekends. They went to organized dances, or just found things to do around town. Since she didn't have her driver's license, she hoped to find someone who might take her out of town.

The sisters had a few dresses to share, and swapped with other girls in the building to make it look as if they had extensive wardrobes for a young lady living near Mercer, Pennsylvania during the '40's. Anne and Marty Maine helped one another prepare before dates. Neither made enough to afford Nylons, like the

trendy girls were wearing. Instead, they wore leg make-up, a trick Anne had picked up while living in D.C. *During the war, nylon was hard to come by.* Marty steadied her hand to draw the “seam” down the back of her older sister’s leg as she prepared for a date with Ray Foltz.

Grandma said once, she and Ray had a nice enough time on their date until she found out that he was three years younger than she. Returning to work on Monday, the girls in the office shared stories of their weekends. Someone told Anne that Ray had an older brother.

The next Saturday, Marty steadied her hand to draw the seam on her sister’s leg for her date with Ray’s older brother, Harold Foltz. Throughout dinner, Harold was quiet. He turned red and answered abruptly when she asked questions. She excused herself to the ladies room where someone told her that Ray and Harold had another brother—one in the middle.

The following Saturday Marty helped my grandmother prepare for her third date with the third brother. Ray’s and Harold’s middle brother, Bob had a face more pleasant than Harold’s and a build more muscular than Ray’s. He also had a great sense of humor. Grandma played out her own version of *Goldie Locks and the Three Bears*. The brother in the middle was “just right.”

No one in my family understands how she pulled off dating all three brothers or why she chose the one in the middle. My brother, who is very close to Grandpa had never even heard this story until I told him. I wonder why this isn’t one of those stories that we hear over and over again. Grandma tells it the same way each time, leaving out the specifics—a skeleton of a story. I ask Grandpa for his version, but he seems annoyed, maybe because I might find out that he

doesn't have all of the control in their relationship. He says that he didn't know that she dated both of his brothers until much later. Sensing that he was uncomfortable with this one, I ask him another question, "Where did you take Grandma on your first date?"

"We drove out to Kane, Pennsylvania to see the wolves."

I laugh a little at the way he assumes I've been there or I know what he's talking about. "Isn't Kane out toward the Allegheny National Forrest?"

"It's about half an hour west."

I do the math. "So you took her on a long car ride on your first date? Two hours each way?"

"Sure." Like it was normal—I would be in for at least a three hour lecture if he found out that I went on an out-of-town first date. I let him know that this is a double standard. He keeps laughing. I enjoy giving him a hard time because not enough people do, and because he taught me well. We talked a while longer and he helped to put more pieces of their story into the framework.

After dating for a few months the two decided to get married. Neither of their families had much money, and they couldn't afford a fancy wedding. Grandma knew that she would be let go from Westinghouse if she got married, but they needed her income. Some of the girls in the office had married secretly in Catlettsburg, Kentucky and then returned to work without telling any of the higher-ups. This seemed like the only way for the young couple. They got on a bus, got married, stayed in a hotel room with a chamber pot—the bathroom was down the hall, and returned home as husband and wife.

When grandma returned, however, she was too much in love to remove her new ring. She wore it proudly and boldly as she returned to work. For some reason, the bosses let her continue to work there.

To this day grandma still says love is simple. “Eventually, you find someone, and a decision is made, and that’s that.”

To this day grandpa says, “She tricked me into marrying her.”

My grandparents told me this story of their wedding as simply as I relayed it to you. Both of them on the other end of the phone, chiming in one sparse detail at a time. Both her mysteriously silent control over the situation and his dry humor remain. I suppose the lack of specifics makes it seem all the more magical to me. None of us know how she managed to weed her way through these three brothers until she made her decision or even why she made it, including Grandpa. I like it that way.

Our family has a hunting camp in the Allegheny National Forest. Grandpa’s parents bought it in the 40’s. Most property owners display names of their places by painting them on old saw blades or wood-burning it into a hunk of a tree or carving it into a stone. No one in my family has ever decided on a name. Although no one uses it for hunting we still call it camp; it’s not nice enough to be called a “cabin.” That word conjures images of logs and stone, people sipping cocoa, wearing J. Crew sweaters. Our place isn’t that. It’s an old wooden house, cold running water, no shower. We wear old t-shirts, sip local beer. We call it Camp.

I've gone there every summer of my life for a few weekends here and there, spending time following deep paths, finding orange salamanders with black spots, memorizing river patterns after canoeing the same stretch of a few miles countless times.

One day, too cold for swimming, about ten years ago, three of us took a drive. I'm not sure how the combination of my mother, grandfather, and I ended up driving through the mountains together, and as a teenager I certainly could have imagined better ways to spend my day, but now I am grateful for the memory. Grandpa thought my mom and I might be interested in seeing a pine forest. *Kelly Pines. It was planted by the CCC boys a few years back. They did work all around here. Just to work. One of the acronym programs F.D.R. came up with to keep people busy, and to help them earn some money.*

I sat in the back seat of the Jeep listening to his voice and to the pebbles hitting the undercarriage as we turned down the narrow dirt road. When we were little, Grandpa told my siblings and me that the sound of the pebbles was deer throwing stones to keep us out of their woods—we believed him until we learned that deer don't have fingers to grip pebbles and their joints bend the wrong way for throwing. He still uses the line; we still giggle like children in the back seat.

The road had just been oiled so the dust was weighted down. We were only a few yards onto the road when the massive pine trees blocked out the entire day. Grandpa pulled on the headlights. I watched the illuminated green numbers on the digital thermometer above the rearview mirror creep down from the seventies. As the trees stood over the jeep, I felt as if they were examining us—I

know it had been a while since they had seen a vehicle of any sort. I felt as if no one else knew about such a place besides my grandfather, and now my mother and me. The impossibility of seeing an end to this forest to the front or either side of the Jeep caused me to imagine the young men who had found employment with the Civilian Conservation Corps, working soil, planting the seeds, tending saplings—now it was a secret the three of us shared. My grandfather continued to explain and philosophize from the driver's seat. *It's taken a lot of years for this place to look like this. Before the CCC boys came in this place wasn't so beautiful.*

My mind wandered as he spoke. *Nature is so patient. We should all try to be like that. It takes a long time for things to change into something else. Like watching Kabuki Theatre, like fishing, like my grandmother's persistent love.*

My grandmother pays attention to small details that might go unnoticed by other people. She is capable of seeing what others neglect, and of knowing what she can do to make things better. She has spent a considerable amount of time nurturing the life around her. Like the plants in her flowerbeds, garden, and inside her tiny home, the people closest to her have become stronger and more beautiful because of her fervent care. Her friends bring plants to her when they have failed to care for them properly, knowing that she will care for them until they are lush and filled with beautiful life. Once they're strong enough, she returns them to the owner if they still want them, and if they feel worthy of possessing such beauty. She attributes the thriving life of those plants to knowing the correct combinations of light and water, but I know that it's something in her voice that brings them back. My grandmother hums as she



walks around her house tending to the African Violets, shamrocks, Christmas Cacti, and others.

She told me that it helps to hear a voice.

Like the plants, numerous people have turned themselves over to the care of my grandmother. Rather than depending on medical professionals, they come to her for some sort of peace in times of need. Her aunts, Mary and Alice, as they grew decrepit, relied on her care. And she took care of them both into their final days, never letting anyone see the toll it must have taken on her. My great-grandmother, her mother-in-law, who refused to go into a nursing home, moved into my grandparents' home in her last days. Although no life-saving miracles were performed on these people, I imagine that they had peaceful passings because of the woman caring for them.

My grandmother's presence in these instances might not have saved any lives, but an indescribable magical quality exists in her mere presence. She doesn't acknowledge her selflessness, or if the thought of helping others face death brings her closer to her own mortality. I wonder if she notices.

On the surface, it might seem that she is an ordinarily sweet woman in her eighties. Even others in our family might not realize the power she possesses. They take for granted the fact that food tastes better when she makes it because it is genuinely prepared with love, and that they are somehow better for just knowing her.

I sat one Sunday, after finishing the supper dishes, with my grandmother at the kitchen table my grandfather has made. The chairs, secondhand from my great-grandmother's home, were in nearly the same condition as they had been

when they were bought thirty years before. Although they had been used countless times, this is another one of my grandmother's secret powers: keeping things looking new and nice.

My grandfather had retired into his chair in the living room to watch a Court TV crime drama, and the two of us were deciding how to spend the rest of the afternoon. Typically, we would play cards or dominoes or a dice game. As our conversation drifted, she made doodles on a scratch pad that we used to keep score for the games. I watched her right hand scribbling circles on the paper as the fingers on the left hand tapped the table lightly. I tried to imagine what those hard working hands might have looked like when my grandparents were first married. The diamond in her wedding ring probably had sharper cuts, the gold had a newer shine. There were no age spots on the backs of her hands or deep wrinkles on her fingers. I wondered if my grandfather had noticed these changes over the years, or if they had been so gradual that he hadn't paid any attention at all.

She began filling the space with stories about her life as she grew up, comparing her experiences to mine. At the time I was finishing college with education as my minor. "I'm glad you're going to be a teacher," she told me. "My mommy was a teacher before she got married." I was named Catherine Elizabeth after my grandmother's mother, the former teacher.

"I think you're a good teacher, grandma." I thought about Professor Caldwell's dissertation premise that she repeated to us in class. *Caring teachers live what they believe. You have to have a teaching pedagogy that is based in caring for students.* My grandmother could do that without effort and I

wondered if her mother had a pedagogy. Of course, ideas of progressive education hadn't even reached the one room school house in the countryside of Pennsylvania where my namesake taught, and the word pedagogy wouldn't have been placed on her teaching philosophy. But I'm sure if she was anything like my grandma, she was a wonderful teacher.

My grandmother, although she never worked outside of the house after having children, taught me many things over the years and I only wonder the impact she might have had on the lives of other children. She only said things once, but showed with her actions what she expected from her children and grandchildren. Because of her I can make perfect hospital corners, bake apricot filled cookies, can tomato sauce, and grow African violets.

Her approach at career advice is much gentler than my grandfather's. He sat me down for a talk once, but just lectured that, "Education is the only thing no one can take from you. Get your education because it's in here." He patted his temple with his index finger. "Teachers at Brookfield are starting at thirty-thousand a year. By God, I'd have to install a lot of pumps to make that much, and that's if people paid me. You wouldn't believe the excuses people can make up when they owe you money." As I continued through school he repeated the idea that education can't be stolen once it is acquired. His lecture style made me appreciate my grandmother's soothing encouragement even more.

I had no desire to play cards or dominoes that day. I wanted to know more about the genealogy project she had been putting together for the past several months. We walked together down the short hall in their home toward the spare bedroom where she was storing her work. I was a close step behind her as she

wobbled and used the wall for balance. She giggled a little bit and explained to me that she was okay as long as she had something to hold onto. “See? It’s good to have a small house so the walls are close if you lose your balance.”

She had several new binders and albums that I hadn’t seen yet, piled on the desk and one of the beds. As we began to flip through the binders of information she had gathered I came across some loose pictures of her with my grandfather shortly after they were married. They were standing with his parents in a field or large yard. She noticed me smiling at their young faces and bodies, “We were living in Uncle Fred’s garage then.” I struggled with the thought of them surviving several Ohio winters in a garage without much of anything. *No wonder she’s so good at building fires in the wood-burner at camp.* I suddenly realized how much she had accomplished since then. Although she hadn’t made the headlines of the news, enough money to buy her dream home, or any obvious contributions to humanity, she had lived honestly, loyally, and unselfishly. Her love is what brought them through each difficult circumstance. Her unwillingness to give up on that love is what has helped him to grow as a person.

Unlike my grandma’s silent strength in the face of death, my grandpa has always makes death into a joke. When I misbehaved as a child he pulled out his Stanley measuring tape and pretended to take my measurements for the pine box he was going to put me in. Of course I was able to joke right along with him. Looking back on it now, wondering what an outsider might think, it seems horribly disturbed. I laughed then, knowing that he would never even spank any of us grandkids for bad behavior, let alone kill us—even though he did have the materials in his shop to build a pine box.

Grandpa's strange fixation with death in combination with his woodworking skills led to the creation of his own box. When my grandfather talked about being cremated because it's cheaper than buying a burial plot, it didn't surprise me. Death seemed like another part of life, and in life he did his best to save money wherever possible. He built a box for his own ashes, and showed it to me like he would show me a shelf he had made.

After the box was built, he did a little research and discovered that the dimensions would not work. He told me the box he built was too small. "Couldn't we just level you off, like when you scoop flour into a measuring cup and have to knock off the excess with the flat edge of the knife?" I didn't want to think about him dying, so I played his own game. He laughed at my suggestion, but began work on the new box anyway.

Grandpa went out and bought more of the hard oak he had used on the first box. On the second one, he used epoxy to place photographs on each of the four sides. Three of just him, and one of him and his old hunting dog, Ronnie. He showed it to everyone in the family, and my mom asked what we would do with the box once he was in it. He had just assumed that we would take turns keeping it. My mom told him that she didn't want it and she thought he was morbid. She didn't follow his lead on joking about death.

It takes a while to learn his sense of humor; I grew up with it. When my older sister, Julie, brought her boyfriend, Mike, home to meet the family, I'm not sure any amount of preparation she did could make our grandpa's sense of humor as endearing to Mike as it is to us. Mike, now her husband, is sweet and luckily he has a sense of humor, but when I saw that someone had left him alone

with Grandpa on the patio, I quickly joined them to run interference. It was too late. I'm not sure what transpired before I came into earshot, but as I entered the scene I heard that my grandfather had Mike in an interrogation session.

"So, Mike, do you treat my girl nice?"

"I like to think so." Mike glanced in my direction as I stepped outside. His eyes asked if that was a good answer. Grandpa kept firing away.

"Well, that's good because if you ever hurt her, I'll kill you, and I'm too old to go to jail." He laughed and patted Mike's knee a little too hard. I did my best to think of a good way to change the subject. Mike seemed fine. He knew it was a joke. Julie must have prepared him well. Grandpa released the stare he had Mike locked in. He noticed that I had joined them and said, "Oh, you've got to laugh. That's really important. If you can't laugh you might as well be dead."

Days later on the phone Grandpa told Julie that Mike was "a keeper".

At the most recent family funeral, Grandpa's joking about death came to a grinding halt. At the news of the loss, Grandma called his heart doctor. She knew that his heart couldn't take the stress of losing someone and dealing with a funeral. The cardiologist called in a prescription for a sedative. The two of us sat in my mom's living room on the day of the service and he cried. He told me he had already taken a pill. *The doctor told me they were supposed to help you through stuff like this.*

I thought back to my great-grandmother's funeral in 1996. His mother was ninety-four years old, but he couldn't even sit through the service. I remember him telling me then, that *no matter how old you are when you lose both of your parents, you feel like an orphan.*

As my mind wandered back to the present, I caught him popping another pill. "Grandpa, I don't think that's a good idea."

"You used to say that when you were little and your mum tried to give you ear drops, 'it's a baad idea, mum, it's a baad idea'" He laughed and wiped his drippy nose with a handkerchief that he shoved back into his pocket.

"Seriously, Grandpa, you're not going to make it through the service. Those things will make you too sleepy."

"Naah, I'll be fine."

He couldn't joke then or now when faced with an actual death. Why had it become a joke so many other times? My sister came in and said we had to get to the funeral home. I made sure that my uncle was with Grandpa before I left.

A few weeks later I called my grandparents to let them know when I would be home for Christmas. Grandpa answered with a belabored, "yhello."

"How are you feeling, Grandpa?" My mom had mentioned to me that he was having chest pains for the past few days. This worries me, but it's nothing new. We're all aware of both his bad heart and his unwillingness to seek the medical treatment that will help. He takes a moment to realize it's me.

"Oh, Oh Cate." He seems short of breath.

"So, how are you feeling?" I know the answer.

"Oh, fine as frog fur."

"Well, that's pretty fine, isn't it?" I play along with the idea that he feels fine only to humor him. Once he tells me that he's inside watching television and that he's covered up with an electric blanket, I know for sure that he's not. The amount of blood thinners he takes doesn't allow his body to keep itself warm. I'm

used to these facts since this has been going on for years. He should have had bypass surgery over four years ago, but refused because, *by God, Jack Adams died of a stroke right on the damn operating table during bypass surgery.* I've learned this stubborn old man's style. I realize what he wants me to do in response to his joking; I try not to become distracted by his inability to catch a breath.

He shouts down the hall, "Anne, it's Catie."

Grandma picks up the phone in the bedroom, so she can talk to me too. We chat for a minute and he listens silently. When she tells me about the book she's reading, I secretly wish that she was knitting me slippers. The idea of her reading a book instead of knitting is selfishly disappointing and troublesome at the same time. Maybe knitting is too much for her hands—she has a bad shoulder too. I thought about what she said once about getting old. "I never worried about getting old. I just do what I can and don't bother with the rest."

Typically during the month of November we could expect them to be setting up their very own version of Santa's workshop. She would be knitting slippers for all of us. Grandma slippers had become a Christmas staple. We count on receiving them, but at the same time, we do not take them for granted.

He would be out in the garage he converted into a space for woodworking. An assortment of tools and machines, collected throughout the years, always cleaned and put back in just the right place after they've served their purpose, help him to take on just about any project. After twenty four years of holidays and birthdays I have an extensive collection of wooden shelves, nightstands, step stools, picture frames, candle stick holders, and various other things he's made.



My favorite piece is a music box that he made for me for Christmas in 1990. The music box, made out of pine, plays “These Are a Few of My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music*. On the bottom he used a wood burner to inscribe, “For Catie From Grandpa Christmas 1990.” He lined the inside with red velvet, but that’s barely visible due to the scraps and trinkets I have filled it with over the course of the past fifteen years—seemingly insignificant items that really are my favorite things:

A half-melted candle from a vigil held for a friend.

Orange ticket from a trip to the Empire State Building

Half a dozen tiny clichéd inspirations from fortune cookies.

Dried flower petals

A scrap of white lace

Final pay stub from my high school job

A gift tag from my brother: *To: Katers From: Seanny*

one from Grandma too: *From Grandma June 1999*

Yellow post-it note: *Cate, Really Nice Job! Well Done! -Dad*

Bus pass from Colonial Williamsburg

Floppy disc of family recipes

News clipping from *The Sharon Herald*—Grandpa’s scribbled writing on the side: *Dear Cate, told ya so. Love, Grandpa.* The article entitled, *Eating like the King*, was about Elvis’ love of deep fried peanut butter sandwiches—an inside joke—another one of the stories he’s told at least forty times. I don’t remember the conversation I had with my grandfather that inspired this timeless tale, but I

believe him since I've heard it repeatedly for years. He tells it much the same way each time:

*You kids were staying at our house for the weekend, and not long after lunch you started fussin' that you were hungry. I tried to get a rise out of you and said that your grandmother would fry you up a peanut butter and jelly. Well, you thought about that for about a minute before you came back with, "You don't fry peanut butter and jelly!"* He pauses leaving time for me to laugh—I laugh. *You were mad.*

He hangs on to these little stories the way I hang on to a scrap of lace or a flower petal. They don't mean that much on their own, but the people behind them mean everything to us. How could I have learned to love so much from this man who was once the source of fear for neighborhood children?

The gift tag in my music box from my grandmother was from a book she gave me as a surprise. While we were at camp that summer, I had spent a lot of time thinking about the way things work, how miraculous nature is. I never remember mentioning it to my grandmother, but somehow she bought this beautifully printed book, *A Place on Earth*, that captured what I had been thinking.

I remember being surprised to see a package wrapped in yellow and green paisley tissue paper that night. I was exhausted from a day of hiking and running in the creek, but I had to look at the entire thing before I could sleep. The artwork was simple, but the pages were various textures of parchment and filament paper. I look back on it now and the opening page provides some understanding to the way their love has imitated nature.

*Each frog and insect, bird and tree, and everything that lives and  
breathes somehow creates its place on earth.*

*The plants need water to survive  
in turn give water to the sky.*

*A blue jay feeds upon the nuts  
of the trees that the jays have planted  
the moth that pollinates the flowers  
once ate the leaves before it flew.*

*As each thing ever fosters  
the thing that fosters it.*

*And in return must ever give as much as it receives  
that all things shall keep a perfect balance  
and earn a place on earth*

My grandmother was exactly right to think love is simple. Love is natural—it is what we want instinctively, what we spend our lives seeking. The complications lie in our inability to allow ourselves, for whatever reason, to love fully, and to let someone else love us back. But my grandparents seem to have accomplished a simple love. They have allowed it.

The space between the beginning of life and the end of life is short; it is filled with blessings that we can choose to see. Unfortunately, most people miss what's not presented to them in a clear frame. The trick is not only paying attention to the blessings that are in the details, but also placing some there yourself for other people to notice. For most of my life, I only observed the

details she provided and I hoped that he noticed. Now I know that not only did he notice, but he also learned how to create some for the rest of us.

## Teachers and Car Dealers

Unending cycles of competition and change keep raising the stakes for literacy achievement. In fact, as literacy has gotten implicated in almost all of the ways money is now made in America, the reading and writing skills of the population have become grounds for unprecedented encroachment and concern for those who profit from what those skills produce. In short, literacy is valuable—and volatile—property.

—Deborah Brandt  
*Literacy in American Lives*

The college I chose to attend was small, private, and only forty-five minutes from home. Mount Union College is set in the center of Alliance, Ohio, and its history is older and far more enchanting than much of the surrounding town's. It took a while for me to understand the dynamic of the town that was so different from Youngstown, where I had spent my preceding eighteen years.

Youngstown was divided into distinct areas that came with their own personalities, the North, South, East, and West sides, and the surrounding suburbs of Canfield, Boardman, Austintown, Warren and Campbell. By asking someone what part of Youngstown they're from, I could immediately gain a foundational understanding of what they might be like, but Alliance was more difficult to understand because the stay-at-home moms who drove Lexus SUV's lived only streets away from the single moms who worked midnights. But the SUV moms drove their children to private school west of the city, and the single moms weren't always awake in time to get their children on the Alliance Public School busses.

Before beginning my sophomore year, the need for more money than my work-study jobs allowed sent me on a hunt for part-time employment off-campus. I had gone home for the summer to work for Ed at State Farm, and had

spoken with finance managers at car dealerships when they called to give us new car information and to verify insurance for our mutual customers. That planted the seed for me to send my resume and cover letter to the several car dealerships that lined State Street. My years of pleasant employment at State Farm caused me to think that I enjoyed office work, when in reality I enjoyed the people for whom I worked. On the contrary, I would learn, I do not like office work when it is accompanied by unkind leadership.

Managers from both Montrose Ford and Wally Armour Chrysler called me with offers for cashier/receptionist positions, but the deciding factor was Wally Armour's offer of Six dollars, fifty cents an hour over Montrose's Six twenty-five. Following brief training with Karen, the daytime receptionist, I was left alone in the cashier booth under the stairs in the service department, surrounded by plexi-glass on three sides. Vince, the parts manager, and Gary, the service manager, introduced themselves and welcomed me, but the phone was ringing and I was told that I had to answer within two rings by saying, "Thank you for calling Wally Armour, your five-star dealer. How may I direct your call?"

Months went by with evenings and weekends in the tiny plexi-glass booth under the stairs, answering phones, receiving payments for parts, service, and car deals, and filing unending piles of documents. The atmosphere was nothing like my office job at home; there was a vicious feeling underneath the surface and clear distinctions between the departments in the dealership.

One evening I escaped the booth and forwarded my phone to the sales desk to file auction information for newly acquired used cars. I sat with my back

to the two sales managers, Bill and Bob, and slipped the pages in the files, pretending not to listen to their conversation. When the dealership obtained used cars from trades or the auction, the people in the reconditioning department detailed them and made them look new. Sitting at the desk, I learned that Wally Armour profited the most from these pre-owned vehicles. Naively, I assumed, *the recon employees must make good money since they're so important to the success of these sales.*

When Chad, the recon manager, brought the sales managers their dinner in greasy bags from Kentucky Fried Chicken. Their chairs creaked as they shifted to pull their wallets from their back pockets to repay Chad. Waiting quietly for his repayment, Chad played with the button on the sleeve of his dark blue work shirt. Bill and Bob each slid bills across the counter in Chad's direction more quietly than they'd done anything all evening, rather than handing him the money. I noticed that neither bothered to thank him. Chad was barely out of the door on his way to eat his chicken in the recon garage before the sales managers started making fun of him and his job.

Bill quickly pulled containers out of his bag, and began devouring his chicken, "I hear they're looking for a new recon employee."

Bob sucked meat off the bone of his drumstick, "Yeah, I bet that's a tough process."

The men laughed with their stuffed mouths and Bill added, "They do the foggy mirror test."

In an inadvertent reaction, I swiveled my chair to look at the managers.

"You know what the foggy mirror test is, Cate?"

“Oh, I wasn’t listening,” I tried to convince him.

Bill quickly informed me, “They just hold the mirror under the guy’s nose in the interview. If it’s foggy, he’s got the job.”

The men continued to laugh and eat chicken as I finished filing in disgust.

\*\*\*

That semester I began tutoring students at Alliance Middle School as part of the requirements for my education minor. I came to know the students I worked with regularly, and learned a little more about Alliance as a result. As a result of a grant from the state, the middle school was new, with new computers, new books, and new desks, but the teachers were not new; the ones I encountered should have retired before reaching this stage of cynicism. Only concerned with discipline, none practiced theories I had learned just a few miles down Union Avenue in my education class.

Records of discipline were kept on students’ “punch cards.” Each week the student received a new punch card in homeroom with her name and student information, and each offense committed resulted in a punch in the card and various degrees of punishment. A student I worked with on Wednesday mornings, Heather, received regular punches for her tardiness. When I asked Heather why she had so much trouble catching the school bus, she explained that she was the oldest of four children and her mother worked the night shift at a factory in Canton, about twenty minutes outside of Alliance. It was Heather’s job, as a sixth-grader, to get herself and the other children out of bed, fed, and dressed before the bus came. Her youngest sibling was two, and sometimes, she



told me, another family member came to watch him while her mother slept. Her father had passed away months earlier. “Those kids don’t always want to do what I tell them to do,” Heather explained to me. “If I can’t wake my mom up to watch the baby, I can’t get on the bus.”

One Wednesday I waited in the library for Heather, but the tutoring coordinator introduced me to another student I’d be working with that day. She explained that Heather would be back next Wednesday after she returned from her suspension. I wondered what Heather could have done to deserve to be suspended; she didn’t seem like someone who would get into a fight or disrespect a teacher.

The new student completed an assigned science worksheet, and I helped him to look for the answers in his textbook—as were my instructions from the coordinator. I tried to have a conversation about the content of the worksheet, but I was worried about Heather.

I went to the office to sign out following the session, but stayed to talk to the tutoring coordinator. Curious about my regular student I asked, “Why was Heather suspended?”

The coordinator explained uncaringly, “She had too many tardy punches.”

“That makes no sense, though,” I said with a smile, “Heather shouldn’t be punished for missing school by missing more school.” The reasons why this was wrong piled themselves on top of one another in my brain, but I could verbalize none. I don’t think it would matter anyway.

Her response seemed like a line stolen from the Alliance Middle School Handbook, “We have rules and subsequent discipline procedures to follow when students break those rules.” The coordinator wrapped her arms around her clipboard and held it to her chest.

I left the middle school that day worried about Heather and angry at the illogical discipline system. I wondered if that coordinator had any training in philosophies of education. I asked myself, “When do teachers exchange pedagogies for procedures?” The need for discipline in public schools is real, but the clear-cut and uncaring procedures were obviously not helping the Alliance Middle School students.

Heather returned the following week, and we didn’t discuss her absence the week before, but I said I was glad to see her. She was working on an essay for Language Arts about where she saw herself in twenty years. My heart sank when I read what she had already composed. Heather’s aspirations consisted of working at the Bath and Body Works at the Carnation Mall in Alliance and driving a new Dodge Neon. Rather than focusing on the lines in her essay that day, Heather and I talked about acquiring financial aid for college. I explained my own situation and how generous the state of Ohio can be if you have siblings in college at the same time. “You’ll have to get good grades in high school, and start your study habits now, but you can do it.”

Heather kept her eyes on her page and refused my advice. “At least Bath and Body Works smells good, not like my mom’s factory.” Alliance was beginning to make sense to me, and I felt useless.

I worked that afternoon at Wally Armour and began paying closer attention to the hierarchy of power. Although the owner, Wally Armour, was rarely there, his two sons were there each day. Wally “J.R.” Armour, the business manager, stayed upstairs in his office most of the day, but came down the stairway directly above the cashier booth at about five p.m. to hand his cordless telephone to me to put back on its charging base. When I heard his feet descending the steps above my head, I slipped his pile of overly-detailed phone messages to the edge of the counter to save him from asking, “Messages, young lady?” He avoided eye-contact with me anyway, so I figured I was just making his snobbery a little easier. He’d then place his phone on the counter and walk away without saying anything else.

J.R.’s younger, louder brother Al was the head salesman. His colorful wardrobe of sweaters matched his obnoxious personality, and brassy sales style. My interactions with Al were much more frequent than J.R.’s once-a-day visits because he frequently demanded his phone messages, ordered me to put a payment through the outdated system and print a receipt, aggressively requested that I to pull a dead file from the office building next door. Dead files were called that because the sale was never finalized. They often contained all of the customers’ personal financial information and notes from the salesperson who started the deal. Al frequently asked for dead deals that other sales people had begun, and he almost always came back to me later with the down-payment and the customer’s file to place in with other completed sales. I had no idea how he managed to finish what other sales people could not, but I knew that he was

getting credit for work he had not initiated. Saying anything was out of the question—even thinking it was outside the parameters of my employment.

In many ways my role was complicated. The demands of the Armour family were impossible; if I went next door to pull a file for Al, I might not be able to answer the phone in two rings like his father expected and frequently tested. My training had not prepared me to handle these men. Demands and snobbery persisted at a steady level for weeks, and I developed ways of handling it until I met J.R.'s youngest daughter, Abby.

The plexi-glass walls that incased my cramped work area faced out into the service lobby where two service advisors sat. I was usually too busy answering phones or filing to notice the traffic of customers, unless they approached the counter to pay a service bill. One day, however, I heard a child singing a new hip-hop song and looked out to see who it was. Gary, the service manager who welcomed me on my first day, must have heard too because he wheeled his desk chair out of his office into the service lobby to match a face with the song.

The small, freckle-faced girl continued singing, "We gonna' party like it's your birthday, gonna' sip Bacardi like it's your birthday, and you know we don't give uh-huh 'cause it's your birthday."

Gary jumped out of his chair and asked, "What the heck are you singing, Miss Abigail?"

I tried not to laugh at how she must not have even understood what the song was about. *She can't know what Bacardi is, or realize that she substituted an "uh-huh" for a word she certainly shouldn't know.*

Abby just smiled at Gary and said, "It's a new song that I dance to."

When Gary saw that I was watching he walked Abby over to the booth by her hand to introduce her. “Abigail, this is Cate. She’s our new cashier. She goes to Mount Union and she’s going to be a teacher.”

She smiled, exposing some missing teeth, and reached her hand up to the opening in the plexi-glass to shake my hand. “I’m Abby Armour,” she said, like a little adult.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Abby.” I was sincere—Abby’s sweetness indicated that all members of the Armour family weren’t born narcissistic and stuck-up.

Gary said, “I’d better call some more folks to come pick up their cars, ladies. Miss Abigail, you check with your mom and see if you should be singing that song of yours.”

“Okay,” Abby said, exasperatedly.

*Very dramatic child*, I thought, but I smiled and asked, “What grade are you in, Abby?”

“First. And I’m in a play at the firehouse theater. And I think it’s okay to sing that song because it’s just a new version of ‘Happy Birthday’.”

I knew that she was mistaken, but I couldn’t correct someone who was so cute and bubbly. The ‘50 Cent’ song she was singing was about drinking, drug use, and sex. “I like the old version better, I think,” But Abby couldn’t be discouraged.

“Well, this new one is better for dancing and it says, ‘so come give me a hug if you’re in to getting’ rubbed’.” Abby danced around the service lobby, entertaining me until she heard her name.

Her overly-primped and pulled mother came around the corner scolding her in a loud whisper, “Abigail! Stop that!” In an instant I recognized the voice as J.R.’s wife who was always dismissive to my friendliness on the phone. She looked at me in disgust and I realized Abby wasn’t in trouble for the song she was singing, but because she was singing it to *me*. “You get away from her!” Fonda pulled her child away from me as if I was a hungry lion, and dragged her to the sales desk in the front of the dealership.

Abby waved at me with her free arm and smiled until she was out of sight. Fonda Armour must have had a stern talk with her daughter later that evening about staying away from me. From then on, each time she visited, Abby walked into Gary’s office to talk to him without looking in the direction of the cashier booth.

Weeks later, Karen, the daytime cashier, stayed to talk to me about how we were treated by our employers. We usually only exchanged pleasantries as she left and I came. The transition was often rushed—Karen stretched the phone’s wires, sliding it onto the ledge outside of the booth. I stood there answering and transferring calls as she made her deposit bag and counted the cash drawer. She knew a little about what I was doing in school, and I knew that she loved her husband and two young daughters. It was quite clear that Karen and her husband didn’t have a lot of money, but her joy came from the love of her family. Almost daily, Karen had an update about something one of the girls did or said or learned, and a small part of the plexi-glass had photos of the girls taped to it. Or she would tell me about something nice her husband had done to make her day

easier. That day, though, Karen seemed almost angry—a far departure from her pleasant, up-beat attitude.

As soon as the phone paused, Karen began telling me that she suspected that Al had been testing her because she was overweight. “I can’t get around that fast because I still have some baby weight to lose from my pregnancy with Taylor, but he’s always telling me to go pull dead deals from the office. He had me running all over today and I missed the phone when Senior called.”

Karen looked at me waiting for a response, but I just shook my head with my mouth agape. I could picture Al watching her run across the lot for him while the phone rang.

“I think I might be in trouble with the old man for not getting the phone soon enough,” she said eventually.

In an attempt to make her feel better, I lied, “I don’t really think it should be a problem.” I knew otherwise, that our employers were on a power-trip and that they were training their children to go along with them.

As if she was reading my mind, Karen began telling me about J.R.’s wife Fonda who treated me terribly weeks earlier. “I went to high school with Fonda, you know.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.” I wanted to tell her how our boss’s wife had looked at me like I was unfit to socialize with her child.

“Yeah, we lived in the same trailer park. Talk about forgetting where you’re from. She acts like she doesn’t even know who I am—like I don’t recognize her with her new last name and new boobs.”

I laughed so loudly, Gary peeked out of his office at us.

“So, what are you going to do, Karen?” I asked, hoping that she was going to demand better, or write a letter to the editor of the local paper, or quit.

Karen thought for a moment, but I could tell that she just felt stuck, “I guess I’ll just wait it out and see.”

“Try not to worry about it then,” I encouraged. “Your girls will make you feel better when you get home.”

“You bet they will. Those little arms around my neck are a cure for anything.” Karen gathered her receipts for the day and took them to the office on her way out. “You have a good night, sweetie. I hope it’s quiet for you.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

All night I thought about Karen and how she was trapped financially in an abusive job. Unlike her high school classmate, it seemed Karen had married for love. Fonda saw a way out of the trailer park and sunk her claws into the son of a car dealer—a high prize in such a depressed economy.

Without any other job opportunities in Alliance that would allow her to get home to her children in the afternoon before her husband left for his job, Karen seemed ensnared in a cycle of mistreatment and low pay. Unlike Fonda, she couldn’t stay home with her children or drive them to private school outside of town.

This socio-economic stratification transferred to the students I worked with at the middle school, and ran conversely to what I was learning about at Mount Union. Dr. Caldwell told our education class about her dissertation based on “caring teachers,” and exemplified every word of it. Dr. Macauley, my advisor and the Writing Center Director, related to me that he had been the first person



in his working class family to go to college, and it showed in his respect for students possessing work ethics—rich parents or poor. He insisted that we call him by his first name or by Dr. Macauley, but not “Mr. Macauley” because of what he went through to obtain the title. Dr. Lowe taught me how to do Marxist and Feminist readings of text, film, and culture. He insisted on critical thinking and sharp analysis of each reading assignment, but made the projects interesting with examples drawn from popular culture. Everything I read, discussed, and did in school was inspiring, but caused Alliance to be all the more depressing.

In our booth at Wally Armour Chrysler, Karen kept a list of the sales staff so that we could help customers on the phone remember who they had spoken with if they had visited before. The list was in constant flux, with names added and crossed off on a weekly basis. One afternoon I noticed a new name scribbled at the bottom of the page in green ink. “Tyler Durkin.” I wondered why that sounded so familiar. No sooner had the connection come to mind, when Tyler came stomping around the corner along with Al Armour, his new mentor. Tyler had been a student in my freshman orientation group at Mount Union, and I wondered how he would have time to be in school full-time and sell cars full-time too.

Tyler had come into our orientation group with a misplaced sense of accomplishment because he would be playing on the football team that fall, and Mount Union had won the National Championship for Division Three football several years in a row. A knee injury ended his season in our first year, and his

enthusiasm for Mount Union and confidence to be the big man on campus died with it.

Karen soon informed me that Tyler was, “taking some time off of school until he figured out what he really wanted to do.” Weeks went by at the dealership and I watched from behind the plexi-glass as Tyler morphed himself into Al Armour. Soon, he was throwing deals at me to receive and demanding that I run all over the dealership finding the files he needed. I bit my tongue.

When the odometer of my mother’s 1988 Jeep read three-hundred-thousand miles, I suggested that she take a look at the used Jeeps on the lot because Gary told me that employees and their immediate family members could buy the auction-acquired vehicles at invoice cost. She packed a bag of groceries for me and drove the forty-five minutes from Youngstown to Alliance.

I watched as her old Jeep pulled into the lot between the sales building and the office, black smoke spewing. She grabbed a brown grocery bag from the back seat and headed into the building where I told her I would be. Before exiting the booth, I slid the phone through the opening in the plexi-glass.

My mother set the bag of pasta and sauce on the floor so she could give me a hug. Excitedly, she asked, “who should I buy a car from?”

I had already considered this carefully. Basing my decision on how sweet he was to his wife when she called and how few cars he had sold that month, I singled Jeff Summer out to be the only car salesman I trusted at the dealership. I also noticed that Al Armour had been following up with the customers from Jeff’s dead deal files, which seemed like stealing to me.

My mother and I hadn't been talking for more than a minute when Tyler came around the corner, interrupting our conversation and ordering me to go pull a file for him.

"I'll be just a minute, Tyler. I'm clearly with a guest." I gave him a cold look hoping he wouldn't notice how much I looked much like my mother.

"It's for Al. I think you should probably get it now." Tyler shifted his weight and shoved a slip of paper with a customer's name scribbled on it into my hand before turning away.

My mother looked at me in shock. I had complained to her about how I had been treated in the past several months. One evening I called her immediately after I was filing outside of the booth, and one of the car salesmen stood near me and patted his thighs saying, "Putting on some weight there, aren't you?"

Another time a salesman's wife called to ask me if I knew if he was having an extra-marital affair. She kept harassing me for weeks, asking the names of women who were calling him regularly, even if they were potential car-buyers.

The entire sales staff, including the management, seemed dysfunctional, and I tried to keep my distance, but they kept pulling me in, making me their servant, spy, or target of low-humor. I wondered how the other staff handled it. How did Jeff Summer maintain respect for his wife when constantly surrounded by misogynist colleagues? How did Gary and Vince feel dignified in their jobs when they knew they were helping to line the pockets of self-important bosses? How would Karen find a way to spend time with her family without going on

welfare? They seemed trapped by their lack of resources, experience, and education.

My mother left that evening without speaking to anyone about purchasing a car. She told me that she understood why I was so frustrated and said she would try to help support me until I found a better job. I tried to stick with the job until I had something else secured, but I gave my two-week's notice the same day I found out that Wally Armour Sr. and his wife got into the car business after retiring from teaching.

It was all too much to handle—all too perfectly wrong. I wanted to learn to be an effective teacher in a town where people confused rigid discipline for education, and where teachers became car dealers for the money.

The frustration my mother saw was only half of what I was experiencing. The hierarchy at the dealership was just a microcosm of the demographic of Alliance. The children in the school system would have little chance of escaping the class system unless they found motivation elsewhere.

Jerry, a polite seventh-grader at Alliance Middle School who was raised by his single father, had motivation to get to college. "I'm going to play football," he went on during a tutoring session when he saw that I was excited about his plans for college.

"That's great, Jerry. You'll have to make sure to keep your grades up too, so that you can get a good job after college." I thought about Tyler Durkin and his bad knee and lack of interest in school. "But you're very smart and responsible, so that shouldn't be a problem," I said hoping that he would work to live up to the new attributes.

He didn't hear me. "My dad says I'm getting faster all the time. In a couple more years I'll break some rushing records."

"I'll be sure to watch for your name, Jerry. I'm sure you'll do something worth while." I hoped he would stay as sweet and polite as he was during our sessions.

Four years later, I think about the students in Alliance often. I wonder what Heather and Jerry are doing—they should be making plans for college this year. I hope they found a way out—not necessarily out of Alliance, just out of the mindset that they have to subscribe to its restraints. I hope they work for people who respect them, but they can only do that when they grow aware of the oppressive nature of the environment in which they were raised. When the parties with a great deal of control in Alliance are people who trade careers with integrity to become car dealers for the money, the system should be assessed and subverted.

Although I wonder less about what they're doing, it's easier to learn how the people at Wally Armour are doing, especiall since Al Armour updates the dealership website regularly. In the list of departments, neither the reconditioning employees nor the cashiers are listed, keeping me from determining if Chad and Karen are still there, and further illustrating the fact that some things never change. I can see that Gary and Vince loyally remain in the same positions in Service and Parts management, and that J.R., Al and their father are maintaining the tone of self-importance. Al has posted his photo and

poorly-written biographical information first in the list of sales managers, listing his title as, “Hand Shaker, Deal Maker”.

Deborah Brandt’s idea of literacy as a commodity is largely true, and devastatingly underestimated. In small towns with depressed economies like Alliance, Ohio, the stratification caused by inadequate educational systems perpetuates itself with each generation. Children, unless inspired and encouraged to break out of their socioeconomic class, will limit themselves to mere survival.

With the exception of marrying into a family of car dealers, of course.

## Conclusion

“All social movements involve conflicts which are reflected intellectually in controversies. It would not be a sign of health if such an important social interest as education were not also an arena of struggles, practical and theoretical. But for theory, at least the theory that forms a philosophy of education, the practical conflicts and the controversies that are conducted upon the level of these conflicts only set a problem. Is it the business of an intelligent theory of education to ascertain the causes for the conflicts that exist and then, instead of taking one side or the other, to indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties.”

-John Dewey 1938  
Preface to *Experience and Education*

In the present state of America’s educational system caring pedagogies are more crucial than ever. Teachers who hope to be authentic educators will have to work diligently to cling to philosophies of teaching while meeting the standards established by our government. As John Dewey said so long ago, it’s not about choosing sides, but finding a “deeper and more inclusive” place from which we can gain our inspiration for teaching (5).

It has been my intent in this collection of essays of some of my experiences in education, from the standpoint of student and teacher, to give my understanding of how I came to develop my own pedagogy. Authentic learning cannot be measured by standardized testing, and the stakes have only increased since my experience as a second-grader who had her vest caught in the heater.

Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in January of 2002, the American public has heard snippets of detail on the local and national news. We have heard students’ and teachers’ complaints about the drudgery of standardized testing, and wondered what might be so difficult about meeting

these standards. Perhaps the general population accepts the government's heavy-handed involvement in public education because of the seemingly benevolent title of the act, but the details are shrouded in layers of business language and the intentions are confused in political agendas.

One of the central problems of No Child Left Behind is its foundation of business concepts and practices, and its sabotage of authentic education in our nation's public school systems. The people making the decisions for our children's educational experiences are trained in business and politics and lack the moral sense and compassion of authentic educators. Further, they are trying to measure learning through business formulas.

This governing business attitude only lends itself to procedures—not pedagogies. As a college student hoping to become a teacher, I had difficult time understanding why the theories that my professors taught and employed did not transfer to the Alliance Middle School environment where I observed and tutored. The more I learned about the No Child Left Behind Act and its influence over the day to day curriculum and procedures in schools across the country, the more I understood the confining environment in which our children are expected to learn. With constraints on curriculum and assessment following only one form, students who do not learn in an input, output style would have little chance of success.

With these experiences in teaching and learning shaping my views, I have examined the language of No Child Left Behind. In the past several months I have paid attention to how issues concerning education are mentioned, and skimmed over each day, on the local level of Richmond, Virginia and the national level.



Further shaping my frame of reference for education, I have relied heavily on the theories of Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Deborah Brandt.

I have looked to our government's explanations of No Child Left Behind as well as the interpretation of the act by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the National Education Association (NEA). I will also cite other organizations of "educators" and "experts" who have weighed in on No Child Left Behind and education reform in America.

My aim has been to understand how the general population of our nation might interpret what's being delivered to them regarding No Child Left Behind, and how we, as educators, so easily abandoned philosophies of education to replace them with business practices. I would like to bring to light the truths behind the title of the act and find a way to better convey those truths to those who it will affect the most: the people working and learning in America's public schools.

### **Defining Authentic Education**

Methods of education have been the source of debate and growth for years. When John Dewey's lecture series, *Experience and Education* was first published in 1938, he discussed what were then considered traditional and progressive means of education. Dewey's concise, yet balanced view of educational philosophy weighs each side in its strengths and weaknesses, then digs more deeply into the true philosophy of the issues.

In Dewey's examination of the older form of education, he points to the flaw that it "imposed the knowledge, methods and rules of conduct of the mature person upon the young". But he was preparing education for progress and the

move away from this authoritative notion. Conversely, since then, more ranks in the hierarchy have been added, first the state governments, then the national government. What might Dewey say about our present situation of education where knowledge, methods and rules of conduct are imposed upon the teacher by the government? The teacher is left with little choice but to then impose them upon the students as well.

Dewey, in a chapter on social control, discussed scenarios when experience and cooperation benefit students' understanding of social control. We can transpose Dewey's situation onto the larger level of our government's handling of public education. He establishes a scene of children playing a game at recess, where rules govern fairly. Dewey attributes their understanding of social control to their emulation of elders, and concludes that they understand they are parts of a cooperative whole. "For even in a competitive game there is a certain kind of participation, a sharing of common experience". He goes on, "those who take part do not feel that they are bossed by an individual person or are being subjected to the will of some outside superior person" (Dewey 53). Dewey's philosophies were once valued in our education system.

It is clear when we revisit his ideas how far from them we have diverged. He goes to lengths to discuss these scenarios because he put a great deal of stock in the experience of education, on behalf of both students and teachers. The norms of social control he highlights do not violate freedom. He does not dismiss authority completely, but emphasizes the importance of individuals in a community.

Dewey's philosophy of education placed faith and responsibility in the teachers' and students' experiences. In a chapter called, "The Meaning of Purpose" Dewey launches his address off of Plato's notion of a slave as, "the person who executes the desires of another...and who is enslaved to his own blind desires"(67). It is not enough, then to have control of one's own actions, but one must also be conscious of one's desired outcomes. Dewey gives value to the desires of the students, with a teacher's guidance to help them exercise and develop social intelligence. We can see how this might be increasingly difficult for teachers to accomplish, when much of their time is devoted to discipline and test preparation.

Paulo Freire also places trust into the individuals involved in education. Although his philosophies grew out of working with illiterate adults in Brazil decades ago, they can be transposed to the needs of our learning situations today. Understanding of Freire's work is crucial to becoming an effective teacher and learner, and for realizing what our government is doing to steer us in the wrong educational direction.

In his second chapter of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire explores his notion of banking education and its treatment of the human mind. In banking education, students become empty receptacles awaiting the deposit of knowledge. Freire argues that this is no way of authentic learning for, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (72). As Freire enumerates the problems created by banking education, including its oppressive, hierarchical nature, we can align these traits to our

current system. We can also see that Dewey's idea of social control that was weighted in a careful balance of individual freedom and some guiding authority is absent as well.

No cooperation or reciprocity exists in the world of banking education; creativity and critical thinking are stripped. Students are objects of learning, ripe for manipulation. In our instance, curricula are formatted to meet the values of standardized tests, and emphasis is lost in areas that are untested. Trust is replaced by "accountability" that is measured by easily misconstrued means. Even when "reading" accounts for fifty percent of the standardized testing, the true value of literacy learning cannot be weighed.

In her introduction to *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt introduces us to what recent ethnographic studies in literacy have found. "Together, these studies strongly imply that literacy among the U.S. citizenry has been underestimated by standardized tests and other narrow, usually school-based measurements that miss the meanings and forms of literacy in everyday life"(7). She places literacy in the context of the reality, not by some skewed measures on an exam, and acknowledges the differences in the ways we employ literacy for our social circumstances. The idea of an ethnographic study aligns with Dewey's and Freire's pedagogies in the aspect of valuing the experiences and thinking of the individual learner. Because we're dealing with people and their cognitive development, there is no way to boil the results down to a set of figures, which can be dissatisfying to the business-minded.

The meaningful learning experiences in my stories, like Mrs. Jeswald's encouragement toward critical thinking and Mrs. Delesky's constant insights

toward caring assessment, have slowly become more significant to my overall pedagogy. Because I have had the benefit of learning from many caring teachers, I have also learned that assessment must occur in a variety of forms, on a regular basis.

### **Measuring Success**

In business we can measure productivity results in terms of input and output. One of the most accessible resources for the results of NCLB on the web displays a chart titled, “Education in America: State by State Scorecard”(Center for Education Reform). The chart is an example of what the supporters of NCLB are looking to produce and the antithesis of what can be measured with careful and caring assessment on behalf of skilled educators. The chart displays inputs (spending), outputs (assessment rank and graduation rates), and education reform action (charter school grades, school choice, and accountability policy). The Center for Education Reform compiled the data for this chart in April of 2006 based on various sets of research by other parties. Although the assessment rank is not based on NCLB testing, it is based on other forms of standardized tests. One interesting aspect of the input to output relationship is the lack of correlation between the two factors. For example, despite the District of Columbia’s spending ranking of 51, meaning they spend the most money per pupil (\$15,489), they also earned the number 51 spot for achievement, while number 50 on the achievement list, Mississippi, spent the least amount of money (only \$5,890 per student). Minnesota ranked the highest for achievement, but they spent less than ten thousand dollars per student. This chart further demonstrates the notion that throwing money at a problem does not solve it and

that what works for business does not work where human minds and potential are concerned.

Many of the people in my essays were relatively successful at obtaining financial success. The Armour family, owners of the car dealership in *Car Dealers and Teachers*, left teaching to begin their business. Clearly, selling cars is more financially profitable than teaching in public schools in Ohio, yet that is not how I would measure success. Andy Marciella in *Parkinglotgulls* serves to represent genuine wealth and happiness that is gained from unselfish service to others. He paid his bills on time, but lived modestly. He once told me that he couldn't wear nice clothes into bad parts of the city because that would make it more difficult to relate to the people he was trying to help. Although the Armours were actively involved in formal education for years, I suspect that they failed to serve as sponsors of authentic learning in the way Andy Marciella could accomplish. Breaking down the hierarchy that comes with government involvement like No Child Left Behind, is a step toward caring education.

### **Understanding No Child Left Behind**

Because No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was written largely by people working outside the realm of education, not much of the language translates directly from our business-minded leaders to the reality of everyday teaching and learning. Despite the drafting of this act within the Department of Education, many other political players have taken turns in influencing the plan. We are repeatedly reminded by the administration that NCLB is "bipartisan". This idealized political situation neglects to address the implications a business plan

might have on the teachers and students who have been made into business managers and data producers.

The trust and freedom of John Dewey's brand of educational philosophy have been replaced with the buzz word, "accountability". Paulo Freire's notion of "banking education" is the exact replica of standardized testing. Deborah Brandt's idea of "Literacy as a commodity", if ever considered by our lawmakers, would likely be skewed into a reason for increased testing of reading.

The Hoover Institution of Stanford University published an overview of the ideas proposed prior to the passing of NCLB in 2002, beginning with the Johnson administration. Andrew Rudalivege wrote the article, "The Politics of No Child Left Behind" that summarizes the key political players and movements that most influenced the passage of NCLB, including what some politicians have done to win fans and gain cooperation from the imposing party. He even skims over the surface of the use of the term "accountability" in the context of the act, and synthesizes some of the facts and figures into a chart highlighting, "standards, assessment, and sanctions". What Rudalevige fails to mention in his article, however are the repercussions that might occur as a result of the selfish nature of politics and its new place in the everyday lives of our children.

Rudalevige points out the gradual shift toward standardized testing, beginning with the release of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983. Presidents Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton all took strides during their terms in office to push for standards at the state level. This point further demonstrates the bipartisan involvement in NCLB, as well as the siphoning off of teacher freedom in the American classroom. When the testing began voluntarily at the state level

in the mid-nineteen eighties, it did not impinge drastically on regular class time. Teachers were not focused solely on teaching to imposed standards, with stakes like accreditation, funding, and job security. Reading and math were not the only subjects to be valued either.

Just a year after the passing of NCLB, Rudalevige couldn't have foreseen the consequences of high-stakes testing. From reading his article, though, it is plain to see that the focus is not on learning. Because the aspect of bipartisanship is so played up in this and other discussions of NCLB, the message is: applaud our politicians for finding common ground. Unfortunately none of them seem to be on the appropriate ground to begin with—they're simply meeting in the middle of nowhere.

For this reason, we must look to the experts in the education field to see what they have to say about NCLB. The National Education Association's tag line, "great public schools for every child" seems to echo the premise of "no child left behind" but they dare to do something that our politicians have failed to do: listen to the teachers.

The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University published a recent report entitled, "Listening to Teachers: Classroom Realities and 'No Child Left Behind'". The NEA posted a summary of the results of part of a larger survey on their site. The group at Harvard, in cooperation with the NEA and eleven different school districts, has undertaken a national survey called, *No Child Left Behind: The Teachers' Voice*. One particular portion of the survey focused on districts in Fresno, California and Richmond, Virginia. Both districts serve low-income and minority students, and yielded findings that are not surprising.



Of the teachers interviewed, most of them had high opinions of their schools, colleagues and the standards of their institutions. They felt that their schools could improve more, and were willing to accept accountability “if it was based on a system that fairly measured instructional performance” (NEA 1). The issue of “accountability” recurs in every discussion of NCLB. As admitted by the teachers who participated in this survey, they are willing to rest the “accountability” on their own shoulders when the system of measuring their performance is fair. However, those who have worked in education and who have studied critical pedagogies know that measuring teaching and learning cannot be boiled down to mathematical business formulas. The current talk surrounding NCLB is grounded in so-called accountability, and the law was sold to the American people by placing the responsibility of education on teachers, but the means of measurement are skewed and can be manipulated. Another finding in this survey project elicits more of the same in claiming:

Teachers confirm that the NCLB accountability system is influencing the instructional and curricular practices of teachers, but it is producing unintended and possibly negative consequences. They reported that, in response to NCLB accountability, they ignored important aspects of the curriculum, de-emphasized or neglected untested topics, and focused instruction on the tested subjects, probably excessively.

Because so much of teachers’ time is spent preparing students for tests and actually testing, they don’t have time to improve in other areas. Accountability, we can all agree, is important. However, when it is measured by how well a group

of students performs on a set of standardized test questions, we are only examining a skewed portion of what that teacher is accomplishing or not accomplishing. For this reason, teacher accountability cannot be measured by such means, nor can it be measured by those so disconnected from the reality of the classroom as politicians in Washington D.C.

An article written in November of 2006 by Alan Dessoiff summarizes some of the NEA's arguments against NCLB as the law is nearing its fifth anniversary. Dessoiff's article begins with what seems like an attempt to defend NCLB, stating, "Most educational groups suggest improvements (for NCLB), usually focused in their own personal interests" (Dessoiff 1). Fortunately, what Dessoiff cites as "personal interests" also happen to be the interests of authentic education. Because the NEA is composed of teachers, their perspective on how NCLB is working and how it is failing comes directly from the classroom, not filtered through data from a series of exams. The NEA cites one of NCLB's major shortcomings as its, "one-size fits all measures for students, failing to recognize that students learn in different ways and timelines". This point against NCLB is so obvious, yet so important. One of the first aspects of education that any teacher must familiarize him or herself with is Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. Because Multiple Intelligences are crucial to education, they are featured as part of the Praxis One exam—the first level of testing for teacher certification.

Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences began with seven basic intelligences ranging from Linguistic to Bodily-kinesthetic. Because Gardner's theories encourage reflection on behalf of the teacher, the teacher assumes

accountability in her own right because of her moral obligation to teach to her students' various intelligences. Her lesson plans might include activities that rely on several intelligences, and her reflection of the effectiveness of those plans would be one form of assessment. Because these integrated lessons can play to several intelligences at one time, students are likely to remain engaged. Although evidence of the effectiveness of Gardner's theories cannot be manipulated into standardized test scores, we do know that the exams of NCLB are neglecting at least five different types of valid intelligences.

The bottom line in this respect is that we are human beings; we work with different sets of skills and talents. When we put so much stock in testing only Math and Reading skills of our children, we are neglecting other aspects of their intelligence that, when developed, could be truly successful for them.

The White House's website, though, would lead us to believe that learning is taking place because of NCLB. What we can gather as we investigate their use of language, though, is that if true learning is taking place, it is *despite* NCLB. They break it down into a simple formula consisting of high standards, accountability, and the tests that are showing improvement in these areas. The page gives a bulleted list of wrongfully boastful accomplishments, including their compassion for English Language Learners and those with special needs. The true tone of the act comes through when they state, "Every student must read, write, add and subtract at grade level—that is not too much to ask" (White House). They set out with the title flaunting "high standards" then admit that they're not asking for much at all. Why then is so much time and energy devoted to testing these standards? Shouldn't our government deem teachers capable of

assessing the progress and capabilities? The confusion in the tone of this page further exemplifies the confused nature of this garbled policy.

The reason for the lack of focus of NCLB lies in its abandonment of authentic education, which can only happen when educational philosophies are established, and trust and freedom are employed to back those philosophies. The White House's web site hints at training for teachers with the heading, "We Must Improve Teacher Quality" but this notion can be dismissed when we read the blurb below that further demonstrates the habit of throwing money at a problem. The proposed "teacher fund" doesn't allow for further training, but only rewards teachers who perform well in terms of standardized tests. Near this paragraph, the site displays a document titled, "A Quality Teacher in Every Classroom: Improving Teacher Quality and Enhancing the Profession". Optimistic and curious, I investigated the document to find that it was dated 2002. The document highlighted so-called accomplishments of the administration, when compared to the policies that existed before, serve as disappointments. Further investigation displayed projections for the future, unfulfilled plans and promises to teachers and students.

The language used by the White House to describe NCLB neglects to mention anything about learning and teaching, and places the narrowed curriculum of reading and math at the center of the conversation. This aspect further illustrates the lack of education background used in planning this law, as it is common knowledge in the field that student-centered curriculum is the most effective in fostering an environment of learning.

The National Council of Teachers of English has taken time and consideration in making suggestions for the reauthorization of NCLB in 2007. Taking language from the law itself, NCTE builds upon NCLB and incorporates aspects of authentic education, rather than simply business. “NCTE members are dedicated to closing the achievement gap through accountability, flexibility, and high quality instruction” (NCTE 1). The organization challenges the idea of standardized testing by suggesting multiple forms of assessment. Multiple forms of assessment on a smaller scale would put less weight on the current methods and offer more immediate feedback to teachers and students. Still, the practice of government sanctioned assessment is not the same as dialogue, but less time spent preparing for and taking standardized tests would allow the time it takes to achieve dialogue.

Another vital aspect of NCTE’s recommendations is teacher quality. Though NCLB calls for teacher accountability, it is not the same as making sure teachers are qualified. If teachers are better prepared, if they formulate personal pedagogies in teaching theory, they will succeed in meeting standards while creating an environment where authentic learning can happen.

### **Empowering Education**

I began this investigation citing John Dewey’s view on social movements in the realm of education because it is still relevant today. Political parties have stakes in their sides of the issue, but we cannot subscribe to one side or the other. We must, “indicate a plan of operations proceeding from a level deeper and more inclusive than is represented by the practices and ideas of the contending parties”

(Dewey 5). The plan that would be appropriate for this situation would abandon high-stakes testing and take up human compassion and dialogue. The teachers and learners in the stories I have composed serve to represent how I have learned through my interactions with the world.

When Paulo Freire began his work liberating peasants in Brazil through literacy, he began with an “awakening of their consciousness”(Critical Consciousness 43). As our students wait for the next round of information to fill their heads, that will be regurgitated back in the form of bubbles on standardized tests, they are missing the opportunity to interact with each other and the world around them. They are removed from situations of creativity and invention that served so effectively to promote literacy in impoverished parts of Brazil. If Freire could see the formulas and statistics that make up NCLB, he might say that our students are building naïve consciousness. Without creating knowledge by observing their roles in the world, they are missing an opportunity to develop critical consciousness. Because of the hierarchical nature of NCLB, students will not experience dialogue in Freireian terms.

Because learning and understanding how we learn in our social context only happens in this dialogue, the methods and results enforced by NCLB are useless. Teachers and students should not be judged and punished or rewarded based on their performance as ranked by these flawed exams.

The solution to this problem created by NCLB lies in the hearts and minds of true educators. Learning, by Freireian dialogue, requires love, humility, faith, mutual trust, hope and critical thinking. None of these aspects is considered in the constraints of NCLB.

Pedagogy cannot be forced or even taught, but is inspired by the desires of individuals, the potential of learners, and the knowledge they create by communicating with one another and the world around them.



## Works Cited

- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Center for Education Reform. 2006. Center for Education Reform. 30 November 2006. [http://www.edreform.com/\\_upload/CER\\_state\\_edstats\\_snapshot\\_apr06.pdf](http://www.edreform.com/_upload/CER_state_edstats_snapshot_apr06.pdf)
- Dessoiff, Alan. "NCLB's purity: flaws notwithstanding. No Child Left Behind has brought about significant academic improvement and is here to stay.(NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND)." *District Administration* 42.11 (Nov 2006): 43(3). *InfoTrac OneFile*. Thomson Gale. Virginia Commonwealth University. 7 Dec. 2006 [http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IACDocuments&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=ITOF&docId=A154561322&source=gale&userGroupName=viva\\_vcu&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IACDocuments&type=retrieve&tabID=T003&prodId=ITOF&docId=A154561322&source=gale&userGroupName=viva_vcu&version=1.0)
- Dewey, John. *Experience and Education*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Epstein, Joseph. *Snobbery: The American Version*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.
- Freire, Paulo. *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition*. New York: Continuum, 1993.
- National Conference of State Legislatures. 2006. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. 25 November 2006. <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/NCLBHistory.htm>
- National Council of Teachers of English. November 2006. NCTE Recommends Changes Be Made to NCLB through the 2007 Reauthorization Process. 15 November 2006. <http://www.ncte.org/about/gov/cgrams/126092.htm>.
- Rodriguez, Richard. *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez: An Autobiography*. Boston: D.R. Godine, 1982.
- Rudalivege, Andrew "The Politics of No Child Left Behind." *Education Next: a Journal of Opinion and Research*. 2003. No. 4. Hoover Institution. 7 December 2006. <http://www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/3346601.html>



