Chapter 1

SETTING OUT

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They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap.

—Lewis Carroll, "The Hunting of the Snark"

TO NOT KNOW

About ten years ago one of my students left this poem on my desk:

Is a leaf smart?
Does it keep secrets,
  or
Is there a secret
I don't already know?

No
I know every secret
that roams this earth,
  but one,
the secret that breaks my heart.
To not know what I did wrong.

Eva wrote the poem when she was eight, but it might just as easily have been written by an eighteen-year-old. It is not a child's poem so much as a deep sigh that could come from any of us at any age. I think a lot about what she might have meant by "the secret that breaks my heart. / To not know what I did wrong." Those lines express vulnerability and guilt compounded by a profound uncertainty about how the world works. They are sad and, coming from Eva, who projects strength and hope despite having lived through very difficult times, remind me of how susceptible we all are to events, influences, and circumstances we don't understand. However, the lines are also an expression of faith in education, since to give such weight to the phrase "To not know" is also to honor knowledge as a source of liberating strength.

I often wonder whether an unarticulated and sometimes unwarranted faith in the power of knowing isn't one of the central characteristics of childhood—a characteristic that extends into adolescence, and, for some people, into all of life. I think of my aunt Addie who, at eighty-five, lives alone in Co-op City in the Bronx and tells me that she is learning new things in order to keep alive. These days she is struggling with a fading memory, so she memorizes things she never knew before: state capitals, birds, and animals; the names and lengths of the rivers of the world. I asked why she does this and she told me that knowing more is the key to surviving difficult circumstances. Learning is a confirmation of her will and identity, a proof to her that at eighty-five she can still grow.

Addie is one of my most faithful and critical readers, and her comments always bring me back to my own work and struggles. It is harder to teach and nurture hope for young people now than it was thirty-six years ago, when I began teaching in the New York City public elementary schools. This thought occurred to me on a recent trip to New York. I had some time to kill and decided to wander around Grand Central Station as I used to do as a teenager. It was rush hour and the main hall was full of people charging from one destination to another, some making stops at a newsstand, a dry cleaner's, or a fast-food outlet. People studiously avoided looking at each other, clutched their purses and briefcases, and navigated the space with the purposeful intensity of bees heading home with full loads of pollen. I felt deliciously out of place. I found a café, ordered a double espresso, and watched people.

After about fifteen minutes I noticed a peripheral disturbance in the rhythm and movement around me. Five boys, one of whom could not have been more than seven while the others were around nine and ten, wandered through the crowd. They stopped at a newsstand and spoke to a vendor, who handed them something—candy, maybe, or money—and then chased them away. The boys made for the men's room, entered, then emerged in less time than it would have taken to undo their zippers.

The five children were African American or Latino. Three of them bumped into a person and then ran off to meet the other two, who had just emerged from a tourist gift shop. Then the five of them passed by me. Four were talking to each other and the fifth, the youngest, had fallen behind and was slowly following them, getting lost in the crowd. All of a sudden he stopped, put his thumb in his mouth, looked slowly around, and then, as if panic had overcome him, ran straight through the crowd until he joined his friends. They kept moving, ignoring him, and he trailed behind, sucking his thumb.

The image of that child has haunted me for the past months. At that moment I saw those boys, as I've seen all my students over the years, as complex mysteries, people who know only the smallest amount about themselves and what they are capable of, partially formed individuals with semi-defined surfaces and hidden talents, interests, and resources. I know as much about these boys, who haven't the slightest idea of my existence, as I do about most of my students before meeting them on the first day of class. Perhaps I know more.

I can imagine each of them in my class and speculate about how to draw them into a circle of learners so that the energy and intelligence they put into predatory wanderings can be transformed into positive searches that nurture their own learning. Yet how can we entice them into places of learning? I believe that the climate of hope that informed the beginning of my teaching career has dissipated or been replaced by cynicism and rejection, not just in public debate over the schools, but in the hearts and minds of the children.

Teaching begins as an encounter among strangers. This is particularly true for beginning teachers. When I began my first full year of teaching in 1962, the year I wrote about in *36 Children,* I was a stranger to my students and their community and was quite aware of it. I grew

up in a working-class Jewish community in the Bronx; attended Harvard and then Teachers College, Columbia, both overwhelmingly white institutions in the late 1950s and early 1960s; and did my student teaching and substitute teaching in schools that had a mixture of white and Puerto Rican students. However, during my first full year of teaching at P.S. 103, all thirty-six of my students were African American or Caribbean. The community was African American, bustling with all the complex and, to me, unfamiliar institutions of African American life. I remember a bounty of churches and mosques, some in storefronts or basements, others in imposing stone edifices. There were offices of antipoverty and community-based organizations, including the Harlem Tenants Committee, which during the 1964 New York World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, Queens, ran its own "World's Worst Fair" calling attention to the terrible living conditions in Harlem. There were beauty parlors and barbershops, bars, candy stores, small restaurants, coffee shops, a diner, and an occasional family-run supermarket or bodega. The community was poor but cohesive, and many of the families had lived there for several generations.

P.S. 103, however, was a monument to the nineteenth-century commitment to public education that had barely survived into the mid–twentieth century. My mother had attended the school sometime between 1915 and 1925, when the community was Jewish and Italian. By the time I got to teach there, the imposing five-story brick building was in a state of terminal disarray. The high ceilings of my classroom, which was on the top floor, were falling down in several places. The room had little alcoves where bay windows looked out over the brownstones below. In two places you could see through the walls to the external structure of the building. The tongue-and-groove wooden floors looked as if they hadn't been cleaned in a half century, and the desks—thirty-five of them for my thirty-six children—had once been bolted to the floor. Half of them had come unscrewed and slid easily across the room, leaving track marks in the floor. Pushed into the corner was an old grand piano with a fifth of its keys gone. It was soiled with plaster that had come down from the ceiling, and piled with old and torn textbooks, wall charts, and the tattered remains of what must once have been beautiful cloth maps that could be hung at the blackboard. Half of the blackboard was usable. From my perspective as a twenty-five-year-old first-year

teacher, this classroom was very exciting. It may not have been much, but it was mine.

As it turned out, the piano, the alcoves by the bay windows, and the unbolted desks were blessings. They helped me overcome my biggest problems: getting to know the children and getting them to trust me. They provided me with some of the first experiences that led me to a critical understanding: that what often seem like obstacles to learning and potential distractions from it are in fact the keys to making connections with students.

Take the piano, for instance. At first, instead of thinking of all the wonderful music we could make in the classroom, I thought of how to keep it locked away from the children, or how to use it as a reward for other, more "serious" learning, such as reading and math. I worried about students sneaking over to it and making noise to distract me and the rest of the class. I worried about control, about my planned curriculum, about what other teachers and my principal would think if they heard kids playing around with the piano during reading time.

However, during the first few weeks of school my students put me to the test with the piano. It was irresistible to two children in particular: Larry and Ellen. *Everything* seemed irresistible to Larry, except for sitting in his desk and working. During the course of a morning he and his unbolted desk would migrate from one side of the room to the other and often make a stop next to the piano, where he'd sneak a tune.

As for Ellen, the other children wanted her to sing for them; they begged me to let them come in the classroom at lunchtime and listen to music and sing and dance. They had heard her in church and at parties and said she was fabulous.

I was not prepared for Larry's tunefulness, Ellen's singing, or the articulate way in which my students asked me to do reasonable things that nevertheless would offend the administration and were not part of the sixth-grade curriculum. I was tested by my students before I had enough craft or experience to make informed decisions. Instead I acted on intuition and curiosity and asked Larry to play and sing a tune for the class, and helped the students plan a time for Ellen to sing and for them all to listen to music in the classroom. (I wasn't allowed to let the children into the classroom during lunch and was too new at the schooling game to know how to get around the rules.)

The piano became a center of learning and a social center for the children rather than a dumping ground for old textbooks. Over the first few months the same thing happened with the alcoves. They became private areas for reading, for small-group work, or just for gossip. As the school year developed we became like an extended family for whom formal learning, informal learning, and just hanging out and sharing time and conversation filled the day. It was not chaotic, yet each step we took toward being relaxed with each other was shaky and clumsy, like a baby learning to walk.

I had to learn how to deal with cursing and fighting in a way that would not lead to permanent warfare between me and some of the children. My intention was to find a way to keep everyone involved in our class as a community; I knew that neither punishment nor admonishment worked, and that sending students to the principal or depriving them of privileges didn't solve problems but rather created pockets of organized resistance to learning. I didn't know then what *would* work, so I fell back on a combination of my belief in democratic processes and in the curative power of writing.

In November of that first year there were rumblings among groups of students. The conflicts threatened to blow up. I didn't know who belonged to what clique, or anything else about the history of the conflict among the children. It seems, according to student writing I've saved, that on November 14 there was an incident serious enough for me to call a trial in the class. I had been reading about experiments in democratic schooling, such as those described by Homer Lane in *The Children's Commonwealth,* and I decided there was nothing to lose and perhaps a lot to gain by instituting a trial. I had no idea who had done what to whom, and amid the screaming and threats of fights I wouldn't find out. Besides, even if I did find out, doing so wouldn't get to the larger problem of finding ways to adjudicate disputes without disrupting learning or excluding children.

There was one thing, however, that I had already begun to understand as a teacher: moments of tension and conflict can be turned into occasions for learning if managed sensitively. I realized that having a trial was an opportunity to teach the complexities and virtues of a jury system. If the goal became to teach about our system of justice in the context of resolving a problem, rather than to find guilt and institute punishment, the negativity in the class might be turned

into greater understanding of civil and community life, both in the classroom and in the children's futures.

I spent time explaining the jury trial system, including such notions as reasonable doubt, jury polling, testimony, proof, and evidence. I also had the contending students choose attorneys and prepare cases, had the whole class select a jury, and even appointed a court reporter. Then, after three or four days of preparation that took up about three-quarters of an hour a day, we had a trial. By this time the conflict seemed to have died down and there was no longer a threat of all-out warfare among the students.

Here are some of the students' comments on the trial:

Rachael

Wed. Afternoon at 1:30 my class had a trial. My teacher Mr. Kohl, was the judge. Some children were selected to be the jury. The two defendants were Belinda C. and Joyce. Belinda's lawyer was Sam, and Joyce's lawyer was Ruth.

It started when someone said Ellen, and Theresa had notty hair. There were witnesses for Joyce and Belinda. Joyce won the case.

I think the whole case was ridiculous. But I also think the jury made a good decision.

Connie *November 15 1962*

COURT'S DISCUSSION

Yesterday we had a court discussion as you all know it of course was between Belinda and Joyce and you wanted to know my opinion well you think Belinda was wrong not everybody but almost the whole class except for a few others I think she was wrong because I how Joyce is you might not Think so but I almost know her as much as she knows herself (and you know much she knows herself) and she's a very nice girl I think she is (except for a few other people on her side which is one or two) but Belinda is very rude and kinda complicated child and she's always starting something or in something that she don't know the first thing about and always starting fights or something I'm not trying to say that she's not better than anybody else but she's kinda you know coo coo and doesn't know what she's talking about half of the time. And if Joyce talks about somebody (but

she really doesn't) it in a nice way of saying they're nice or pretty or you know! But Belinda every time I look over there she's running her trap (and so and so and so and this and that and bla bla bla she's always talking about somebody. maybe I'll stop looking over there and think of her as a nice person.

Belinda

I think the trial was not fair because the jury was prejudiced because all of them said I was guilty and I wasn't guilty. Many of them said I was right until I accused them of being prejudiced. And they know I was right that is why they took that vote.

Ruth

I think the Trail was very fair. I made up a story about two woman one woman's name was Clara and the other's name was Phillis. One day Clara was putting her garbage in Phillis' yard. Now Phillis saw her but said it was nothing. Clara kep doing it and the more Phillis kept it in her the more Clara put in. Phillis began to turn *pale* and then. Everyone was looking at her and wondering what was wrong. She wouldn't say a word of it not even to her husband. She got so sick of it 'til she had to take the case to court. The jury listened and said the case was dismissed. Phillis won, and Clara had to pay $200.00 fine because of littering. I think the guilty person should be made to pay five cents fine.

I wasn't on Brenda Thacker's side or Belinda's. How my name was in it was beyond me. P.S. Mr. Kohl, if you were there what would you have done?

Sandra

I think that wasn't a fair trail. You was on Joyce's side. The whole class seems like they dosen't like Belinda but I do I don't care if you don't like me and Belinda or Janette but I do you talk nice to the other kids but don't nice to us if we say something you jump down our thouts. Mr. Kohl I know you believe Joyce and all her friends so you don't have to hide it because

me and Belinda Now and I still say that wasn't a fair trial the kids don't like Belinda that why they charge us guilty.

Fred

I think the most important thing of our trial was when the dession was made. and when we dug down deep and got the facts which Samuel and Joyce dug down and got.

The most troubling aspect of the trial was Sandra's comments. Was I playing favorites? Was there some deep division in the class that I was insensitive to and that affected the comfort with which some students learned? How complicit was I with the tensions within the group? Frankly, I had no way to answer these questions, and I was very sensitive to wanting all of the students to like me. I now know that desire for approval is characteristic of many caring young teachers. It can be helpful in giving students who have a history of rejection in school a feeling of being welcome and important, but it can also make the teacher vulnerable to manipulation by youngsters who will try to charm him or her into letting them not learn.

In those days I didn't explicitly understand the nature of the personal bonds that have to be created in order for serious learning to take place, but I was determined to become an effective teacher and brought everything I knew and cared about to bear upon teaching that class. In 1962, for me, that meant creating a resolutely Eurocentric curriculum. I wanted my students to like me; I wanted us to trust each other; and I wanted the classroom to be a nonviolent place, but that wasn't enough. Imaginative engagement with ideas, and the development of literacy in both reading and math were and continue to be at the center of my work with young people. No amount of good feeling is adequate without that pedagogical dimension, without students actually knowing more and being able to do more at the end of a school year than they could at the beginning.

Before coming to P.S. 103 in September 1962, I had spent six months—January to June—teaching fifth grade at P.S. 145 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. During that time I became convinced that text-based and workbook-based learning would simply not do for much more than memorization of disconnected information. Such rote learning didn't work with many of my students, anyway. I had to

find out how to spark excitement in the classroom, and at 103 I found two ways, one based in the children's own experience and the other based in Greek and Mesopotamian mythology.

I discovered the power of rooting learning in what students know outside of school, of tying what I teach to what they understand of their own lives and experience. Early in the school year one of the students—Rachael, I think—came up to my desk before class and told me she couldn't do any homework the previous night because there was a fight outside and she was scared. Another child corroborated her story and said the cops tried to break up the fight but beat up the wrong people. A third student, Fred, told me his cousin was hurt in the fight and had to sit for hours bleeding in the emergency room of the hospital.

A few days later Fred and Larry handed me this paper:

> Last night on 117th St. Liebowitz collected the rent. They told him not to come himself but he came for many years. The junkies got him last night. He wouldn't give them the money so they shot him and took it. They was cops and people runny all over the roofs and streets.
>
> There were people from the news and an ambulance took Liebowitz.

After reading this, I decided to share it with the class, who affirmed that everything was true. In fact, the reality was even worse: 117th Street between Madison and Fifth Avenues, the worst block in the neighborhood, was known as "junkie's paradise," and several of my students lived in the midst of this twenty-four-hour chaos and violence. As we discussed what it was like to live on 117th I found myself becoming silent and respectful. The children's stories didn't seem like horror stories so much as sad tales of resignation or heroic narratives of survival. Even though I grew up in a working-class neighborhood in the Bronx I did not know what it was like to live so close to the edge. I realized how free I had been as a child from the burden of constant wariness and worries about imminent death.

As an assignment I asked the children to write about their block. Over thirty papers were turned in, the most ever for a homework assignment. Perhaps this was because I had asked them to write about something they knew and wanted to talk about. Phyllis began

her paper: "My block is the most terrible block I've seen." Nancy wrote "My block is the worse block you ever saw people getting killed or stabbed, men and women in building's taking dope."

Not all the papers were completely negative. Frances wrote: "From Madison Avenue to about the middle of the block the houses are kept clean. The back yards are kept swept and the stoops are clean. I like my building and block." Other students also indicated that they lived on islands of stability and decency in the midst of a violent and depressed neighborhood. What struck me was how life had forced adult awareness and sensitivity upon the children. They were not protected from death; they saw or lived poverty. Rats and garbage were themes in their experience, accompanying all their attempts to create more harmonious lives. One student invited me to come and see the reality for myself; another described how she stayed holed up in her apartment.

My follow-up to the children's responses was to ask them to write about what they would do if they could change their block. I wanted to tap into their dreams as well as their immediate reality. Phyllis's response was full of the rage all the children felt about what they were forced to live with:

> If I could change my block I would stand on Madison Avenue and throw nothing but Teargas in it. I would have all of the people I liked to get out of the block and then I would become very tall and have big hands and with my big hands I would take all of the narcotic people and pick them up with my hands and throw them in the Oceans and Rivers too. I would let the people I like move into the projects so they could tell their friends they live in a decent block. If I could do this you would never see 117st again.

The students' responses to these two assignments entirely changed my plans for that school year. Originally I had intended to take a fresh approach to the material in the standard curriculum. We would study the frontier, the industrial revolution in the United States, and world geography in hands-on ways. My impulse was not so much to reject the curriculum as to transform it from a mechanical and rigid sequence into an interesting series of projects based on inquiry and experience. I wanted to motivate my students to learn

what the system wanted them to, only in a more creative way. I did not intend to raise issues such as poverty, racism, sexism, and pervasive violence. I wanted to be a creative teacher, and it was the students' responses that moved me to understand that I couldn't be one without also being militant and passionate in defense of their right to a decent childhood and to the hope of a welcoming place for them in the adult world.

My class was 6-1. That meant that of the seven sixth-grade classes in the school they were academically the top. Yet many of the students acted as if learning were their enemy. They ran around the classroom with abandon, interrupted class discussions, and in general tried to make my life miserable. I noticed that although most of them could read on a fourth- or fifth-grade level, and some—like Rachael, Fred, and Larry—could read just about anything you put before them, none of them wrote well. There were also a few students who could barely read at all. Except for Rachael, the children had formal mathematical skills way behind what the system expected of sixth-graders.

My pride and my expectations for my students pressured me to find a way to have the class acquire skills and exceed the expected grade levels. Never in my whole teaching career has it occurred to me that there are limits to what any student can do. The limitations I perceive are to do with how ingenious or sensitive I can be in devising the right situation or discovering the right materials to reach into my students. I am hopelessly optimistic when it comes to believing in people's capacity to grow and learn. Such optimism has occasionally led conservative educators to accuse me of romanticism, but I readily accept any accusations of being positive and hopeful in the service of my students.

That first year of teaching, I was torn between being creative within the system, and following my instincts and the children's responses to what I presented to them. There were no guidelines or formulas to follow, but the students' voices spoke to me so strongly that the authority of my supervisors, the instructions in teachers' manuals, and the practices of my colleagues weren't collectively strong enough to keep me from listening to those voices, learning from them, and then teaching to my conscience. Besides, the school around me was a shambles. Students roamed the halls; many of the teachers screamed themselves hoarse every day or simply gave up

teaching and presented the children with coloring books and crayons to keep them seated and silent. Racism was rampant, though not explicitly articulated except in the teachers' lunchroom, which, after a few encounters with bitter and defeated colleagues, I avoided. Sticking within the system didn't have much to recommend itself to a young teacher.

It was also easier for me, in 1962, to break with the system than it might be for beginning teachers these days. It was the heyday of the civil rights movement in the South, and many of us new teachers considered ourselves part of the northern branch of the movement. We worked in communities that were as segregated, impoverished, and victimized as any in the South. P.S. 103 had over a thousand students, only one of whom was white. Once he graduated, the school never had another white student. It was torn down a few years later and replaced by a new building renamed P.S. 79. So far as I know P.S. 79 has never had a (non-Latino) white student.

The words of the students obsessed me. What was my responsibility when they hurt so much? I couldn't change their block but could I give *them* power to change it in the future, or the skills to leave and to succeed in the larger city? *Should* they leave? What would happen to the children left behind? How could I change the whole school, when I didn't even know what to do in my own classroom?

At times I felt these questions were interfering with my teaching. How could I focus on spelling tests, on introducing new concepts in mathematics—on the industrial revolution—when bigger moral issues were untouched? I tried to talk to my colleagues about my dilemma, but it was impossible. None of them wanted to talk about teaching or children with a first-year teacher. Some of them warned me not to raise questions that might upset people. As it was, I had been involuntarily transferred to the school and didn't have tenure. I decided it was best to shut up, at least until I could get union protection.

By Halloween, I knew I had to do something for my children. In many ways, that Halloween was the most important day of my life. The school day itself was uneventful, except that the students were more restless than usual. There was an air of anticipation. I sensed an unusual glee in the kids that morning. People were waiting for the night—for the celebrations, the costumes, the tricks even more than

for the treats. My students told me that they ran around with socks full of chalk and marked up everyone in sight. Anthony and John told me about going up to the rooftops and throwing water and "stuff" down at people partying in the streets.

I had my own fantasies of Halloween in Harlem, a white man's fantasies mixing fear and admiration. I wanted to stay in the community and be part of the celebration, and indeed I was invited to a few parties by my students' parents. But apprehension about being stranded in Harlem at night got the best of me, so I retreated to my apartment farther down Madison Avenue, where I felt safer.

Back on Nineteenth Street, I spent the evening reading papers and trying to figure out a response to "My Block." At about ten I got restless and went out for a few beers. On the way down from my apartment—a fifth-floor walkup—I noticed that someone had moved into the vacant apartment on the first floor. The new tenant was at the door saying good-bye to friends. I got a glimpse of her face, decided I wanted to know her, and vowed to knock on her door and trick or treat if her light was still on when I got back from the bar.

It was, and I did.

Teaching tales poured out that night, and stories of her return to New York after a year of traveling in Europe. Perhaps it was that passion and my obsession with the children that moved her. To this day, thirty-some years and three grown children of our own later, I don't know what originally attracted her to me. However, my thirty-six children very quickly became hers as well. I read my students' papers to Judy and began to formulate a strategy to respond to what the children were teaching me.

There are many ways to respond to the truths children can tell in school if trust develops in the classroom. One might be to shape the curriculum around neighborhood studies, collect local oral histories, and become involved in community-based organizations. Another might be to examine and celebrate the children's cultural heritage. A third would be to directly confront racism, explicitly teach civil rights, and figure out a way to engage in particular struggles over equity and justice.

I tried a bit of each of those methods, but without confidence or direction. Finally I turned to a fourth, inspired by the second of my exercises, "What I Would Do If I Could Change My Block." My idea

was to rethink, with my students, the creation of society and the potential for people to live in groups governed by compassion and mutual aid. I would begin with Egypt and Mesopotamia (I didn't know anything about ancient Chinese civilization), and then focus on Greece. I was intrigued by the idea of a pantheistic universe in which many gods with differing powers fought, made love, and created trouble for people and for themselves. I guessed that a world in which ideas such as revenge, justice, respect, deceit, honor, pride, and dignity were played out in mythical adventures would appeal to my students, whose lives were laden with moral dilemmas and social problems. Moreover, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and, more fully, Greece, which I knew more about and had visited, might give us intellectual distance from the children's immediate problems and allow them to think and speak and write about issues without being overwhelmed by them and giving up.

There was another, crucial bonus for centering the curriculum on Greece. I had noticed that, though the great majority of my students had mastered basic phonic skills, they had major difficulties comprehending material that was supposed to be on their grade level. Vocabulary was the main problem. The children could speak and think on mature and complex levels, but they did not have a mastery of the standard language of ideas and emotions. When they encountered such language in a text they panicked, and the other reading skills they had developed were of no use to them. Guessing could take them just so far; then they were lost. I reasoned that, given the Greek roots of much English intellectual language, I could build vocabulary through an encounter with word-origin stories and indirectly increase my students' reading power.

My vocabulary lessons worked. I remember explaining to the class that the word "sarcasm" meant "flesh cutting," and referred to the Greek Dionysiac ritual of stripping the flesh from a living person. For a week, everything negative was described as "sarcastic," and we had some wonderful discussions in class about how bad a comment had to be to qualify as sarcasm rather than mild joking or simple ridicule. I followed up that lesson by introducing words such as "skepticism" and "irony," and then "hyperbole" and "metaphor."

One of my great pleasures that year was to watch the children's faces light up with recognition as they came upon a word from the vocabulary list in their reading. They expressed the joy that comes

from being able to use something you have learned, and I felt like a gardener who has prepared his soil well.

Vocabulary, however, was just a small part of the program. I wanted the children to imagine different, better worlds, to think about their city and their block as temporary, as made by people who could also remake them. I created a curriculum to tease their imaginations into hope for themselves and for the communities in which they would later live. I wanted to connect, through a study of the early history of humanity, to the current civil rights movement. My curriculum was about the making of culture, and for me the civil rights movement was about the remaking of culture. In both cases everyone's effort was required to make the world better; I wanted my students to feel that their voices counted and that their intelligence and ingenuity were important.

I began my teaching career fully committed to both a Eurocentric curriculum and civil rights. I did not see them as contradictory. On the contrary, they enriched each other through the study of society-making. My use of Greek mythology and culture was neither didactic nor normative. We did not memorize facts about the Greeks, or drill and practice the names of Greek gods and goddesses. Nor did I waste time praising Greece as superior to other cultures. To me it was one among many I could have chosen as a starting point, but it was one that I knew well and that excited me.

I did not teach Greece in order to produce experts on Greek culture. My goal was to draw my students into the creation of new myths and the development of their own social visions. I encouraged them to rewrite old tales and change them. The goal was to have them draw upon their own experience and, through the structures of Greek mythology, classical fables, and other traditional genres, develop larger conceptions of the world.

Writing was a vehicle for exploring thoughts and feelings. It was a starting point, a way of setting things down so we could talk about them, dramatize them, and discuss how the world was and how we might make it different. The sheer volume of my students' writing, combined with the variety and complexity of thought it contained, elicited some unanticipated depth of response that required a major shift of my early lesson plans. The students at first responded out of their own experience when they talked about their block. When they wrote of reconstructing their environment, hope was drawn into the

mix. Now, through mythology, fables, poetry, autobiography, adventure, science fiction, and mysteries, their imaginations became inflamed and a hunger to write seized them.

I, too, had developed writing fever and began work on a book of my own. In the classroom I let writing time grow and grow, until there were days with no math or social studies or science. The students wrote about everything. Then we spoke about their work, in terms not of grammar and pronunciation but of substance and content. In February, before we moved into a new school building, the children wrote about their dreams for the new school; then we talked about what a good school might be like.

New School February 4, 1963

Delores
The changes I expect to be by going to the new school; Is that our room will look like something + have a new set of rules. The third change I expect to have is to change from a cold lunch of beans. Then quit the writing on the walls + keep us sanitary and clean! Enough is enough + I'm just fed up with not only beans with some teachers that are employed; Like Mr. Charles in room 401 + the teacher in 414.

Gregory
I expect many changes in the school but not much in me. I think the yard would not be so crowded. There will need more monitors in the yard, an office. Some kids will learn more some will learn less.

Theresa
First thing I am going to thank God that they're getting out of 103. I expect we won't have no beans and glue soup. I expect that we won't be on the top floor. I expect that we'll go home earlier and go to lunch earlier and when it is cold out side they will let us come in on line. And some other children will get a chance to be monitors. I expect we'll have movies in the classroom I expect new desk and chairs to write and sit on. I expect no writing on walls and I hope to graduate.

Belinda
I hope that in the knew school we will have a better program. One of the changes I would like is that we would have more activities. Many of the small children would have a separate play yard. It would be nice if we could have cake sales, parties where the children join in so we can feel we helped the school. I hope down in the lunch room we have a change of things. Like a new group of lunch ladies who don't steal the lunch. I don't think we should use spoons so much I think we should have knife and fork. I think we should have different kind of dessert

Connie
I expect P.S. 103 to fall and if it doesn't it has to be a miracle because people's great grandmothers were going to this school and I expect the new school to be like Cooper a little bit and in every way the food has to be nothing like 103. I don't expect to see children outside or inside of the school or street fighting all the time. I don't expect to see drawing all over the school or writing all over the walls and the most thing I don't expect to see which is disgrace, mess in the toilets that isn't flushed.

Regina
In the new school I expect the children to learn how to read and learn how to do arithmetic and learn how to spell more words. I expect the children not to tear down the whole building and not write on the walls, and not to throw paper, candy papers thumb tacks and I expect me to study more harder so that I can pass all the final examinations and try to graduate so that I can go to junior high school and I expect for to learn more arithmetic so that when I get in the seventh grade I might know some of the arithmetic. I expect to get more then we usually get like franks, rice, cornbread, chicken, greens, mash potatoes, sweet potatoes instead of beans.

Nancy
I expect that we won't have to walk up all these flights anymore. I expect to get into a new school and graduate I expect that we will get a better lunch. I expect that we will have new and better equipment. I expect that we will have new chairs and tables to sit on. I expect to have a new gymnasium. I expect to have a new auditorium. I expect to get hot lunches. I expect to be

served on plates instead of tin trays and plastic bowls and saucers. I expect to have napkins instead of paper towels.

I hadn't paid much attention to the lunchroom before reading the children's papers, but I decided to spend time there the next week. The children were right. Their soup was ladled out of what looked like large garbage cans. Each child was given a bowl and a soup spoon and had to line up for a bowl of gruel. It was absolutely Dickensian. The kitchen workers were angry and demoralized; the children rushed to finish, and if they took too long their spoons and bowls were seized from them. And the "lunchroom" itself was just benches in a dismal room with a few stoves. It was exactly how children were fed in the 1920s, according to my mother. Forty years later what should have been a decent and nourishing place for children to eat and socialize remained a minimalist soup kitchen. I resolved to take on the issue of food and children someday, and did get around to it ten years later. In those days I had to deal with the children's anger and hunger as part of all the other challenges behind my classroom doors.

Another example of the children's writing shows the passion and intelligence they brought to bear on troubling events during the civil rights movement. In May 1963, during the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's "Children's Crusade" in Birmingham, elementary and high school students in that city demonstrated against segregation. Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor retaliated with police dogs, fire hoses, and mass arrests. My students wrote about those events and tried to make sense out of them.

Rachael

I think that all the Negroes and all the whites are very brave to go down south and parade. I know that it is easy to fight but hard not to fight. Some people say that people will never get freedom but I know they will.

Phyllis

BIRMINGHAM ALA.

I think that the white people in Birmingham are not treating the colored right because every time a colored person goes

somewhere a white person says something bad about him. The white people always turn everyone else against the colored. The white people think they are so good but the colored are just as good. The whites are jealous of us because they think we will get a better education and they don't want us to get ahead of them if the Negroes get their freedom. They would treat the white better than they are being treated now.

Every man is created equal.

Deidre

I think that the white and the colored peoples should always be friendly with each other. And that they should not be slaves for the big shots. They should have their freedom like other people do now I don't know what the white and colored people have against each other. But I know that it is horrible it will be a miracle if the white and colored people come together to work and play like human beings and not like animals.

THE END

Rachael

I think that the whites should be friendly with the colored should be friends because after all colored came over from Africa to let the cotton and crops grow while the whites don't even know what's going on. It was also a colored man taught the people how to preserved plants and vegetables I think its just a horrible that they are like this.

Elsa

I think that it makes sense. The only way that anybody can win this fight is by using their brains and not their hands. The way they are going (the Negro) the whites will give in, because its a constant strain on people. Every body should join the freedom rides.

Allan

I think that the Negro in Alabama are right to be non-violent. Because if they fight back they couldn't get what they want. And I think that its a pity that people have to go out and parade for what they want. After the Bill of Rights and The Declaration of Independence was signed. I hope that the Negroes in Ala. And that the word segregastion disappears off the face of the earth.

John

INTEGRATION

I think the world should be completely integrated so that no matter what race color or creed you can go to any store and be waited on any restaurant and be served and go to any school and learn. Just as much as anyone else without being picked on or ridiculed.

Why! Because all men are created equal and because if everyone were all alike this world would be a great bore looking at yourself all the time and living just the same and hurting the same thing as everyone else

My students and I felt equally powerless to act in the South, and we knew that there were serious racial problems in the North. Writing and talking explicitly about segregation, nonviolence, and the need to act against racism was a way of engaging in the struggle within the classroom. My students had no problem writing their own versions of Greek myths one day and turning their attention to the civil rights movement the next day. Their energy, which in September had often expressed itself in random acts of disruption, was now focused on trying to understand the world.

Time was a major problem: When to write? How was I to fit in math and science, social studies and the industrial revolution? How could I, at least minimally, comply with my supervisor's demands and the curriculum guidelines of the system so I wouldn't get thrown out of the school? How to get other teachers, the assistant principal, and the principal as excited about the children's work as I was, and to get them to understand how brilliant the students were?

I carried around a portfolio of my students' writing and read it to anyone who was willing to listen or whom I could corner and force to listen. I must have read their papers to dozens of people—at parties, in restaurants, at dinners with friends. My principal wasn't interested.

A few of the other young teachers listened, but for the most part they didn't see anything important in the children's writing. They didn't, as I did and still do, see this writing as one key to help the children open up to learning and become strong enough in themselves to dare to oppose all the forces that conspire to force them to accept less than a full place in the society and the economy.

Nor did my colleagues comprehend how the content of children's writing suggested a complete revision of standard educational ideas about who the children were, what they knew, how they thought and could think, and how much they could learn if we only knew how to tap into their brilliance. The ideas the children wrote about, the feelings they expressed, and the dreams and schemes they spun out shaped my thinking about teaching and learning in ways that have permanently affected my life and work. The children developed the courage to show me and each other who they were and what their dreams were. These expressions of trust and hope became the driving force behind my commitment to children, whatever the systems, tests, and experts say about their performance or potential. The authentic voices of children are a challenge to the pious pronouncements of experts and politicians who believe that children can be reduced to test scores and manipulated to meet the needs of an economy that does not honor the value of their lives.

This selection is from the beginning of Arnold's fictionalized autobiography. I must have read it to dozens of people:

The Story of My Life: Foreword

This story is about a boy named Maurice and his life as it is and how it will be. Maurice is in the six grade now but this story will tell about his past, present, and future. It will tell you how he lived and how he liked it or disliked it. It will tell you how important he was and happy or sad he was in this world it will tell you all his thoughts. It may be pleasant and it may be horrible in place but what ever it is it will be good and exciting but! there will be horrible parts. This story will be made simple and easy but in places hard to understand. This is a nonfiction book.

WHERE I WAS BORN

In all stories they beat around the bush before they tell you the story well I am not this story takes place in the Metropolitan Hospital.

When I was born I couldn't see at first. but like all families my father was waiting outside after a hour or so I could see shadows. The hospital was very large and their were millions of beds and plenty of people. And their were people in chairs

rolling around, people in beds, and people walking around with trays with food or medicine on it. Their was people rolling people in bed and there were people bleeding crying yelling or praying. I was put at a window with other babies so my father could see me their was a big glass and lots of people around me so I could see a lot of black shapes. And since I was a baby I tried to go through the glass but I didn't succeed. All the people kept looking I got scared and cried soon the nurse came and took all the babies back.

The details and images in the writing amazed me: the baby's seeing shadows within an hour or so of being born and attempting to reach through the glass, as well as the sense of the chaos of the hospital. Arnold's ability to project himself into the baby's mind and to conjure up an emergency-room scene that must have been familiar to him from some more recent experience made the grammatical and spelling errors seem insignificant compared to the more important matter of recreating a world. This provided me with a dual challenge: how to nurture the students' writing while providing them with the skills necessary to do it well and correctly. I knew how easy it was to close down children's creative efforts through excessive correcting and criticizing, but I also believed it was important for them to know and be able to use the rules of standard English. It was, and still is, my conviction that student writers can break any grammatical or linguistic rule or convention they care to if they do it consciously. Many contemporary novelists, poets, and even journalists do it all the time. Knowing the rules of grammar, spelling, and syntax provides the license to break them while staying in control of your writing.

As my first full year of teaching class 6-1 at P.S. 103 progressed, I decided to respond primarily to the content of students' work and teach skills only when it seemed necessary. I wanted to keep the writing flowing and see how far it could take us. After reading Arnold's autobiography, the "My Block" assignments, and the fables and other writings I abandoned any sense of being able to predict or know the limits of what my students might do. As a first-year teacher I was overwhelmed by my students' imagination:

Barbara
Once upon a time there was a pig and a cat. The cat kept saying you old dirty pig who want to eat you. And the pig replied when

I die I'll be made use of, but when you die you'll just rot. The cat always thought he was better than the pig. When the pig died he was used as food for the people to eat. When the cat died he was buried in old dirt.

Moral: Live dirty die clean.

John

Once a boy was standing on a huge metal flattening machine. The flattener was coming down slowly. Now this boy was a boy who loved insects and bugs. The boy could have stopped the machine from coming down but there were two ladie bugs on the button and in order to push the button he would kill the two ladie bugs. The flattener was about a half inch over his head now he made a decision he would have to kill the ladie bugs he quickly pressed the button. The machine stopped he was saved and the ladie bugs were dead

Moral: smash or be smashed.

Barbara

Once upon a time a girl was walking up the street with her little brother. Her little brother loved to suck a pacifier all of the time. One day he met a little girl that loved to suck her finger. The little boy asked her how does you finger taste? The little girl said it tastes delicious. The girl asked how did the pacifier taste and the boy said delicious. They traded and the boy liked the thumb the best and the girl liked the pacifier best.

Moral: Enjoy them all.

Nick

Once upon a time there was two men who were always fighting so one day a wise man came along and said fighting will never get you anywhere they didn't pay him no attention and they got in quarrels over and over again. So one day they went to church and the preacher said you should not fight and they got mad and knock the preacher out

Can't find no ending.

These fables didn't emerge from the students' imaginations spontaneously. I read the class Aesop and James Thurber's *Fables for Our Time*. We invented variations on morals from dozens of traditional

fables. Together we transformed "A stitch in time saves nine" into the following:

> A stitch in time saves none.
> A stitch in time is fine if you don't have to go to work.
> A stitch in time saves glue.
> A hit on time saves nine. (A ball game.)
> A snitch in time gets everyone in trouble.

The students' work came from the internalization of the reading and class conversations. I had no specific expectations when I asked them to write their own fables; I assured them that anything goes. What was unusual about the writing was the frankness and humor with which the children expressed bitterness, cynicism, and a very hard sense of life. They weren't writing for me; they were writing the truths they lived. I realized that the freedom to speak out in this way was essential to any good education I could provide them.

Phillip's "A Barbarian Becomes a Greek Warrior" and other writings like it convinced me that the Greek and Latin vocabulary and the time I took to tell stories were not incidental diversions but central strategies for eliciting learning and developing the students' comfortable use of their imaginations. Phillip's novella began:

> One day, in Ancient Germany, a boy was growing up. His name was Pathos. He was named after this Latin word because he had sensitive feelings.

For most of the year I was unsure of myself. There was no road map to where the students and I were going. However, there was no question but that I would respond to the students' work with whatever ingenuity and resources I could summon. I chose not to follow the standard curriculum and the school system's demands since it was clear to me that these would lead to failure. Still, I didn't feel on solid educational ground. I was telling stories, spending mornings discussing events in the neighborhood, reading from Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths,* and whenever possible bringing in articles from the *New York Times* about the civil rights movement. Once I tried to lip-synch *Rigoletto,* an opera I knew and loved, with the class; students acted out the murderous events at the end of the opera. An-

other time I suggested the students build a large (five feet square and five feet high) model of a Sumerian ziggurat; we ended up with a messy mound that resembled a beginning archaeological excavation more than a functioning city complex.

According to the curriculum experts I had read while taking classes to qualify for a teaching credential, sixth-graders had outgrown storytelling. They didn't need to make large-scale art projects. Discussing "my neighborhood" was part of the kindergarten curriculum, irrelevant for twelve-year-olds.

There still is a feeling among educators that storytelling and open-ended conversation have no place in a "serious" curriculum. For me, however, the idea that one should stuff as much "substantial learning" as possible into the limited time children spend in the classroom involves a grave educational miscalculation. When I began teaching I knew that intuitively, and now I feel secure in my conviction that education has to be shaped so that the timbre of students' voices can emerge. This is essential if substantial learning is to develop. The teacher's voice must emerge as well, and students must have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with their teachers. Students and teachers have to learn to speak to each other across culture, class, age, gender, and all the other divides that inhibit the development of intelligence and sensitivity.

Every new class presents that same challenge: how to create a situation in which teachers and students can speak with each other comfortably in their own voices and turn their attention to an open examination of content. My goal, as a teacher, is to allow all of us in the class to explore complex issues in ways that minimize ego involvement and social posturing. That means providing students the safety they need to develop intellectual relationships with each other and with the subject matter, relationships not mediated by worry over grades, laden with self-doubt, or burdened with the wounds of previous schooling. This implies creating a climate where the common focus is on what is learned, not on how one has performed. The objective is to have students come away from class with a sense that they have journeyed into some unknown territory and come home the stronger for it.

It's very difficult for a teacher, in the context of evaluation-obsessed and product-oriented schools and universities, to teach well if teaching well includes creating intimate, personal, and thorough

engagement with content. The screens created by grading systems, grade-point averages, career paths, and other forms of sorting and ranking people distort learning. This is as true in kindergarten, the middle grades, and high school as it is in college. If a teacher considers her or his work centered on the quality of learning, then other, structural aspects of the social organization of schooling have to be reconsidered. You cannot be indifferent to the infrastructure of learning as you plan your teaching. *Everything*—from the size, shape, and decor of the classroom to the time of day and the number of hours a week the class meets—affects how learning happens. Add to these the system of evaluation and the other learning obligations of the students, and you get a sense of how dependent learning is upon context and situation and how much craft is called upon if a teacher is to do an excellent job.

LISTENING AND LEARNING

To teach well you have to be able to listen carefully and learn from your students. You also have to come to know the community in which you work and be sensitive to the issues that people take seriously. That certainly wasn't true for me when I began teaching the sixth grade at P.S. 103 in Harlem in 1962. As a first-year teacher I spent a lot of time learning how to listen to my students and trying to understand their needs and lives. I learned, for example, that almost all the students in my class lived in extended families and that considerable authority lay with their grandmothers, who were major allies in helping me educate their grandchildren. I also learned about social and cultural differences within the class. Some of the children's families had lived in New York for generations; other children, born in the South, had been part of a recent migration north. A few were from the West Indies and one was from Panama. Family friendships and networks of support existed, but I had to discover them. Doing this meant spending time at the children's homes.

Larry was the first student to invite me to dinner. After that Ann and Ruth conveyed invitations from their parents. I readily accepted. When Judy and I started dating we were both invited to dinners and family gatherings.

I will never forget that first dinner at Larry's three-and-a-half-

room apartment on the fourth floor of a walk-up on 116th Street. I was an honored guest; an elaborate table was set for me in the middle of the living room, which doubled as a bedroom for the two youngest of Larry's five sisters. Larry's mother, Mary, his grandmother, and several neighbors had made a fancy meal for me. There was fresh cornbread and a spread of potato salad, fried chicken, vegetables, cooked greens, chicken, ribs, and sausages, all garnished with an amazing hot sauce. The centerpiece of the table, which was set for ten, was a bottle of Manischewitz wine, purchased out of respect for my Jewishness. Though I detested that particular wine, I drank the glass Mary offered.

In our conversation it emerged that no teacher had ever come to dinner before and that everyone in the building wanted to know what I looked like. The gap between the children and the people who taught them astonished me. With the exception of one of the other sixth-grade teachers, who had grown up in the neighborhood, none of P.S. 103's teachers or administrators spent any time in homes in the community.

Before we sat down to dinner the phone rang—or at least, that was what I thought I'd heard. The sound was muffled and it was hard to tell where it was coming from. Mary and I were talking about Larry and I was praising his creativity while avoiding the issue of his wild flights across the classroom, knocking things off people's desks in an effort to amuse everyone and disrupt whatever else was going on in the classroom.

Alison, the oldest, asked Mary what to do and then went to the kitchen and pulled a telephone out of the bread box. Larry explained: "They don't let us have a phone."

It seems that the welfare system had decided that for someone on AFDC, telephones were out of the question—even if, like Mary, you had seven children in school. Answering the phone with a guest like me in the house was a dangerous thing. This was a revelation. What were simple events for me, like answering the telephone, had been turned into furtive activities for many of the children's families. The episode provided insight into the kinds of pressures the children lived with every day and made me understand why getting emergency phone numbers for the children was so charged with secrecy. The numbers couldn't appear on school records, which might be checked by the welfare department.

Dinner was wonderful. All the children had a spark, a brilliance and wildness, that a good teacher has to love. They are the kind of children who challenge you in class, sometimes by annoying you but mostly because their minds are racing with ideas and they want to talk, to know, to touch things, to play, and to learn. They don't have patience for the formal rituals of learning, but want to jump into the process itself without any preliminaries or ceremonies.

Dinner conversation started with school, then turned to Larry's father, who had died a few years earlier, and to hopes for the children. At first I felt very uneasy. It was a cold evening, so the burners on the stove were lit to warm the apartment, since there was no working central heating in the building. Every corner of the small apartment was crammed with clothes and toys and books. Eight people were stuffed into the three and a half rooms and, except in the living room where everything had been cleared for me, there was no space to move or breathe. The whole apartment had been rearranged for my visit.

I was twenty-five and being treated as if I were an expert, a professional who knew how to educate their children, a person of importance. This was hardly true. I was a novice, an apprentice, and as much of a learner as the children were. The awkward part of the evening came from the disparity between what the family thought of me and what I wanted to be as a teacher and the actual struggles I was having in the classroom.

The conversation turned from school to the civil rights movement in the South, and then to neighborhood gossip. During that evening and many others like it, with other students' families, I learned about the vibrant, complex, and often difficult lives of people in the neighborhood. And I came to honor and to care about them—to care not just about my students but about their sisters and brothers and parents as well. I developed friendships that lasted beyond the time I spent teaching at P.S. 103, and my involvement in the community led me into political and social struggles in East Harlem over the next seven or eight years.

Judy and I stayed in touch with the family for about ten years, from 1962 when Larry was in 6-1 until about 1972. Larry came to live with Judy and me in Berkeley, California, in 1968 and 1969. He worked at Other Ways, a high school I ran there, and for a while wrote poetry. In 1968 he joined a group of our students who trans-

formed their own poetry into songs using rhythm backgrounds provided by other students on congas. The group traveled to teachers' conferences throughout the country, performing and talking about changing schools. I believe they were among the forerunners of current rap artists.

Judy and I also stayed close to the family until we moved to California. In 1967, when I ran a storefront learning center in East Harlem and became the founding director of the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, they were moved by the welfare department to Brooklyn. The house they were assigned to was bigger than their apartment, but the neighborhood was much more dangerous and the children's lives became more difficult. Three of the children died young.

The loss of gifted people, the loss of students to violence and poverty, is often felt by teachers as a personal loss. We must know and care enough about our students to grieve for them as well as take part in their joys. It is this personal bond that harnesses the energy to teach creatively despite the often negative momentum of the system in which we teach. The bond between teacher and student is a special kind of intimacy, based on personal commitment of energy and affection to the lives of others. It is easy to understand this kind of reaching beyond oneself in the case of one's own family or lover but the situation is more complex with one's students. It is almost as if the family life cycle is repeated each year, with the birth of a new relationship, the development of mutual bonds and common activity, growth, and finally separation. That is the emotional structure of the life of most teachers (though there are schools that function more like communities and in which teachers and students spend a longer time with each other).

There is a special quality in the parting of teachers and students who care about each other. For the teacher, it has to do with the pleasures of witnessing growth and knowing that one's work has some lasting value. Knowing and caring about your students is not merely an academic matter but is essential to shaping learning for them and a challenge to take them into your life and fight for their survival and growth as if they were your own children. This is not all pleasure; the more intensely you care for your students, the more you grieve for them when they are brutalized by a violent world and the more enraged you become when an unfair distribution of the chances

for a decent life contributes to the destruction of one of your students.

I am astonished that teachers are not more militant, considering the number of young people lost on the streets these days. I believe that one key to making sustained changes is finding teachers who care about their students and are willing to become personally involved with their lives. The craft of teaching can develop; the love it requires cannot be legislated or trained.

At one time or another I spoke to almost all of my students' parents and had dinner with or visited about half of them. I got to see lives in disarray and lives held together by faith and ingenuity. Ann's home was a haven, a calm, beautifully cared for place with an atmosphere of love and welcome. So were most of the places I was fortunate enough to be invited into. My picture of the neighborhood, of the children and their families, was complex, though what framed the whole was the problem of being Black in the United States. Not one person I met had escaped the wounds of racism or had not, in some admirable way, resisted the dehumanization perpetuated by white society. All this was new to me, and very troubling. To my mind, the education I was trying to provide was color-blind, and yet the world obviously wasn't.

It took at least half of that school year, 1962–63, for me to feel confident as a teacher. The constant outpouring of intelligence, sensitivity, and creativity in my students' work, from their "My Block" essays to the fables and stories they wrote, kept challenging me to push things further and further. Some children embarked on long forms of writing; the class produced novels and plays, volumes of short stories, and memoirs. They explored genres from science fiction to romance. I couldn't bring enough books to class to keep up with the children's insatiable desire to read.

In March Judy and I were married at the Bronx County Courthouse. Both of us were so caught up in the lives of the children that it seemed natural to take only half a day off to get married. The children and their parents threw a wonderful surprise party for me the next day when I came in.

That year ended in a peculiar way. P.S. 103 was moving two blocks up Madison Avenue and changing its number to P.S. 103/79. The principal decided that the sixth grade had to move right away so that in June the new school could have its first graduating class. The

first and second grades were moving too. But since the building wasn't completed, the third and fourth grades had to be left behind until the next school year. By that time I knew many children in every grade, and I listened carefully to the bitter complaints of those left behind. The divided school was like a family moving from a slum tenement to a suburban home and leaving the middle children behind. I suggested that instead of rushing to have a new graduating class for P.S. 103/79 we have a last graduating class for P.S. 103, and I volunteered to stay with my class in the old building. It would be a way to express appreciation for the sacrifice of the older children and wish the younger ones well.

The principal turned me down. I tried to fight the decision but there was no mechanism for talking to parents or staff or making the issue public, so we moved. From March to April a number of the left-behind children spent hours at night and on weekends breaking windows and vandalizing the new building, which soon looked no better than the one it replaced.

I spoke with my class about the dilemma of the students left at the old school and they decided it was our responsibility to do something about it. We began visiting P.S. 103 and inviting some of the third- and fourth-graders over to visit us. The children's concern for each other should have been reflected in the administration's attitudes, but it wasn't. At that time Judy was a substitute teacher in one of those fourth grades; I visited with her and her students a few times. The demoralization of both students and staff at the old building was agonizing to witness. I never imagined, when I dreamed of becoming a teacher, that I would have to witness such disorganization, lack of learning, and feelings of abandonment and neglect in a school. I was full of admiration and sorrow for all the children and teachers who forced themselves to come into that half-empty, filthy building, which was in such a state of disarray that the custodians had abandoned the empty classrooms to the rats and the roaches. It was amazing that the school administrators could turn the move into a new building into an experience of humiliation and rejection, while seeming completely untroubled.

My class's efforts to visit the left-behind children and bring them over to the new school for visits were discouraged. With all the other pressure I felt as a first-year teacher, I gave up trying.

However, that experience made me sensitive to the children who are abandoned when an experiment takes place or a special program comes into a school or a school district. I always ask myself, "Are there leftover children?" and, "How can anything that is good for some group of children be made available to everybody?" And now I am willing to fight for the abandoned and left-behind children even if it means risking my job.

Listening and learning as a teacher has many consequences. It makes you conscious of the environment you work in—aware not merely of whom and where you are teaching but of the social structure imposed upon your work. In many ways it is dangerous for teachers to listen too carefully or learn too much, because doing so often leads to opposing conditions under which no sensible person could teach and no healthy child could learn. I discovered how teachers, for the sake of mere survival, have learned not to listen and not to learn things that would force them into action. Those of us who did listen and learn became involved in school reform movements that continue to the present.

My involvement in school reform has always arisen directly from my work with children and my relationships with people in the communities I served. It has not arisen from books or theories, although I read a lot and honor the task of creating theory as a way of understanding and communicating the ideas that emerge from practice. As a consequence, most of the attempts at school reform I have been involved with are either community-based or grow out of direct work with children. I've never been in the business of school reform—and it *is* a business, more so in the 1990s than ever before. People have systems to sell, and yet I've never encountered a system that meets the needs of all children or that measures its success on the basis of how every child does. Just about every attempt at school reform seems to try to fit the child to the system rather than help teachers, students, and communities build education that works for them. I believe that is why testing is so prevalent. Educational experts don't trust children, communities, and teachers enough to let them judge the effectiveness of education. School bureaucrats are afraid of children's voices, community control of schools, and critical scrutiny of their work so, for the sake of survival, they use tests, no matter how biased, to evaluate the results of specific efforts and remove the

evaluation process from the people most directly affected by programs. "Objective" testing is often a ruse to protect people who do not have a moral commitment to see education work for all children.

The end of my first full teaching year was marked by a sixth-grade graduation both grand and pathetic: grand in that everyone, from the children and their parents to the entire staff and administration, was dressed up as if for a college commencement ceremony; sad in that the staff knew from experience that this was the only graduation ceremony most of the students would ever participate in.

I was assigned to guard the main doors to the school during the ceremony. The principal was worried that a number of teenagers or nonparents from the community might crash the event. I thought they should be invited, be allowed to show pride in the young graduates, but they were seen as the enemy even though most of them were products of the school and had passed as much as seven years of their lives there.

The principal's fears were realized. Two teenagers came to the door and tried to enter. I said that all of the tickets to the ceremonies were taken and they had to stay outside. One of them got very angry; I could see that he was getting ready for a confrontation that I wasn't prepared for. I couldn't understand why I was arguing with him or preventing him from walking into the ceremony, and I felt like a fool enforcing a rule that made no sense to me. In addition, I was scared. If I feel morally right I'm usually able to face down my fear, but not for something as trivial, wrong, and bureaucratic as guarding the school against the community. I backed down and told the young man that I'd escort him and his friend in and find them seats. He told me to fuck off and left muttering something I decided not to hear.

After the ceremony the staff had a party and celebrated the end of a hard year. After a few drinks, conversation turned to how terrible and stupid the students were and how silly the parents looked in fancy clothes. The chatter depressed me; I felt alienated from the group, as did several other teachers who cared about the children and had worked very hard all year. Those teachers and I, along with Judy and several other spouses and friends, went out later for a few drinks. We determined that the next year things would be different and better for the students. Then we told teaching tales, those funny,

self-deprecating stories that teachers tell each other by way of recognition that they love their work.

My class for the next year was 6-7, the bottom rung of the sixth grade. It was smaller, with twenty-seven students, but presumably much more difficult to handle. Students were put in the class for one of the following reasons: they had failed in or been thrown out of other classes in the fifth grade; they were identified as having learning problems; they were Spanish-speaking and couldn't manage the English-only curriculum; they were older than other sixth-graders, having either started school late or been left back somewhere in their school career; or they had some history of violence and were in school on a form of probation. Most of them could barely read—though several could read well and had the reputation of being too smart for their own good.

On the whole, the class was a wonderful teaching challenge and, with a half-year of substitute teaching and a full year of teaching behind me I was excited about beginning again in the fall of 1963 with greater experience and more resources. I felt free to experiment more broadly with curriculum and space and time in my classroom. And new educational ideas were stirring within me, provoked by my students' writing; my growing knowledge of the community and greater understanding of how children thought; the events of the civil rights movement and the hopes created by the early days of the Kennedy administration; and my discovery of Sylvia Ashton-Warner's book *Teacher,* which had just been published in the United States, and Homer Lane's *The Children's Commonwealth,* which had recently been reprinted. I believe these were the first books about education that influenced my teaching.

Ashton-Warner's book helped me early on in my struggle to figure out the best way to enrich my students' learning. Perhaps this was because the book was a story of specific children as well as an account of how one might reach other children by learning about central concepts and themes in their lives. I think what appealed to me mostly was Ashton-Warner's respect for the four- and five-year-old children she taught, her uncanny ability to listen to them, and her faith that the list of key words they chose to learn would help her learn about the substance and content of their imaginations.

A child's "key vocabulary" consists of the words that tap into her or his inmost experience. These are words that children ask to learn when given the choice. Children connect reading with experience, and although there are some words most children request, no two lists are alike. If a child learns a word a day, after three months she or he has a new vocabulary of at least forty words and the teacher has a tentative portrait of the children's world, fears, and dreams.

The power and importance Ashton-Warner ascribed to children's own organic language and the books they created influenced me to push writing and speaking in my own classroom. *Teacher* confirmed what I was discovering through reading my students' work and helped me trust my own teaching instincts. These words of hers have stayed with me over the years, a reminder of the power of imaginative expression to transform children's worlds and provide a hedge against the overwhelming violence they too often encounter:

> I see the mind of a five-year-old as a volcano with two vents: destructiveness and creativeness. And I see that to the extent that we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one. And it seems to me that since these words of the key vocabulary are no less than the captions of the dynamic life itself, they course out through the creative channel, making their contributions to the drying up of the destructive vent. From all of which I am constrained to it as creative reading and to count it among the arts.
>
> First words must mean something to a child.
>
> First words must have intense meaning for a child. They must be part of his being.
>
> How much hangs on this love of reading, the instinctive inclination to hold a book! *Instinctive!* That's what it must be. The reaching out for a book needs to become an organic action, which can happen at this yet formative age. Pleasant words won't do. Respectable words won't do. They must be words organically tied up, organically born from the dynamic life itself. They must be words that are already part of the child's being.

The power of her children's writing didn't surprise me, as I had already discovered, through the work of the children in 6-1, the amazing range, variety, and complexity of young people's imaginative work. The specifics of Ashton-Warner's techniques weren't of interest

to me at that time, though I've found successful ways to adapt them for older learners since. What she planted in my mind was the power of listening to your students, reading their work carefully, and learning what was important to them and to their community. I believe that her faith in five-year-olds could easily be extended to twelve-year-olds, and over my teaching life I have come to believe that it is never too late to learn and love learning, nor is it ever too late to rechannel the energy coming out of the vents of destructiveness and open up the creative vents.

In another, equally important way Homer Lane, too, influenced me and confirmed the path I had set out on as a teacher. In his book *Talks to Parents and Teachers* (first published in 1928) Lane describes his work with young British delinquents at the Little Commonwealth, where he developed a student-governed democratic learning environment. The trial I had students conduct in my 6-1 class was influenced by this early experiment with student democracy. Homer Lane actually ran a whole living and learning community for young people on the basis of one person, one vote, himself included. Though this doesn't work well in a classroom with young children, Lane's experiment was a challenge, especially when it came to issues of discipline and the development of mutual respect and responsibility in a school or classroom setting.

These remarks by Lane stayed with me as I reflected upon the basis of my teaching after a few years in the classroom:

> Even confirmed anti-social tendencies in children may be released by educational methods. The energy occupied in destructive activities is always capable of being turned into social service. Harsh repressive methods will not do this, although the energy may sometimes by long confinement in a reformatory be subdued by fear. The problem of correction is, however, not one of destroying the energy of mind which is so much needed by society, but of transforming it from vicious behavior into social service.

Lane gives dozens of examples of this transformation of defiant and often self-destructive behavior into participation in students' democracy. Though none of my students had been in prison and only a few had had problems with the law, they had been confined to bad

schools, trapped in poor communities, and thoroughly accustomed to functioning in a chaotic and undisciplined way in school. I had to take this energy, work with it, and make an educational environment that my students felt compelled to defend and protect.

Lane kept my courage up—as, later on, did other writers, such as Fritz Redl, August Eichorn, and A. S. Makarenko, all of whom discovered ways of turning defiant behavior into democratic self-governance among children who had lost hope. Moving children from a school life in which they feel unwelcome and are angry and resistant to learning, into one that allows them to let their guard down and dare to be intelligent and compassionate is very difficult. Beyond patience, it requires a great love for your students and an inner strength that I wasn't sure I had. Reading about other people who had gone through similar—though often much more difficult—situations and succeeded with their students provided me with more strength than I ever got from books on teaching techniques, curriculum methods, or educational philosophy. I've always felt comfortable with the management of curriculum. The management of love in the classroom is much more difficult. However, as Lane said, also in *Talks to Parents and Teachers:*

> When authority, in [the poet] Shelley's sense of power, is recognized for what it is the only revolution that is of any vital importance will begin to take place, and it will take place in the hearts of men. This will affect not only the attitude of parents and teachers to children, but also the attitude of men and women towards each other and to themselves. Then it will be seen that love (the creative impulse) is a deeper and stronger instinct in human nature than fear, upon which the fabric of our society is at present constructed, and that love is indeed, as Shelley declared it, synonymous with life.

HOW MANY CHILDREN?

For those people unfamiliar with the New York City schools or the way teaching careers develop within that system, I should mention that "P.S." stands for "Public School"; the numbers that designate elementary schools run from 1 up into the 200s. Each borough's

schools are numbered, starting from 1, for a total of more than 600 elementary schools within the system. In my New York City elementary school career, which was confined to Manhattan, I did six weeks of student teaching in the fall of 1961 at P.S. 41, which is on East Twenty-second Street; got my first teaching job, at P.S. 145 on Amsterdam Avenue and 105th Street, in January 1962, the middle of the school year; and was involuntarily transferred to P.S. 103 on Madison Avenue and 118th Street for the fall of 1962. P.S. 103's number was changed to P.S. 103/79, for reasons no one seemed to know, in the spring of 1963, when the old building was replaced by a new one two blocks away. Three schools and four numbers in less than two academic years.

During the first years of my teaching career I began to know my students and their communities better and to see the effects of my work. As the thirty-six children I taught in class 6-1 at P.S. 103 grew older, I was confronted with major reasons for shifting my thinking about learning and culture. During the summer of 1963 and the next school year, there were major events in the lives of a number of these students and in the society. Just two weeks after the school year ended in June, I got a call from a welfare worker who had befriended one of the children in 6-1. She told me that he and his brothers and sisters had been removed from their home and were in a temporary shelter on Fifth Avenue and 105th Street. It was a case of child neglect.

I immediately went up to the shelter and, after spending a few hours going office to office, managed to convince someone to let me talk to the child. I was led into a large open hall. There must have been over a hundred children in the room, which was filled with sleeping mats, blankets, suitcases, clothes, and a random assortment of other possessions that the children had been allowed to take with them. It was a summer roundup, it seemed, of children the welfare department deemed neglected. I was told that this happened every summer when school was out. Many children were found wandering the streets unsupervised; they were accompanied home by social workers and probation officers. If the home was chaotic and the parents in disarray, the welfare department had a right to remove the children.

I asked where the children would be sent, but no one seemed to know. They might go back home, they might be put in foster care, or

even, someone told me, sent to juvenile hall—a youth prison—until someone in the family claimed them or some placement was found for them. Some of the luckier ones might find themselves going home to new neighborhoods and apartments if the welfare department decided to provide better living facilities for the family. There was no clear authority and no clear criteria for action.

I called Judy and we started phoning around, trying to find decent placements for the children. We visited their mother, who did indeed need some care herself. Finally we found decent placements for all the children.

Several other children from 6-1 had problems during the summer, as did some former students of mine from P.S. 145 and from my student-teaching days at P.S. 41.

Through 1963 I had kept in touch with students from all three classes I'd worked with. But my mind was on my new class and the challenges it presented. So early on in my teaching career, after only two years of full-time involvement in the schools, I faced dilemmas that caring teachers everywhere experience: how far into your personal life and career do your love and responsibility for former students extend? What is the nature of the affection between teacher and student, and how long can it continue? And how big can your family get? How many children can you have and nurture over a lifetime?

These questions go to the heart of the relationship between teacher and student. For me, there are some central obligations of teaching that go beyond concern for the mastery of content, beyond the academic support of students. These obligations have to do with the personal quality of life in the classroom and involve giving yourself as fully as possible to every student, playing no favorites, and being as supportive and ingenious as you can in the quest to bring out what is strong and special about each youngster. This is not easy, since there are some students who just about drive you crazy and other students who make it clear that they don't like you and want nothing from you but to be left alone. Equally, there are times when you develop a deep emotional bond with students that tempts you to treat them in special ways. These bonds may arise from personal identification with a child or from ways they support and validate your work. It's easy to begin to care for someone who acknowledges your help or whose work indicates enormous growth that you know

you contributed to. And then there are some children whom you simply find beautiful or brilliant or inspired. Teaching is an emotional matter as well as a moral and academic one; being with children day after day over a school year means that the emotional tone of your presence affects the nature and quality of what is achieved in the classroom.

I remember this being made explicit years later when I was teaching a combined kindergarten and first-grade class in Berkeley in 1972. My oldest child, Tonia, was six at the time; she could have been in my class but I was afraid of the pressure being there might put on her, so I had her placed in a class next door to mine. In retrospect, that was a dumb decision. I had underestimated the pressure of *not* being in my class, of wondering every day what I was doing with other parents' children. After a few weeks Tonia made it clear that she wanted to be with me. We got her transferred into the class and I told her this was fine, only she couldn't call me Daddy in the classroom.

Once she slipped and then apologized for calling me Daddy. One of the girls objected and said that my daughter should be able to call me Daddy anytime she wanted to, only I shouldn't favor her. That was perfectly reasonable, and I agreed. However, a boy named David added a twist: he started calling me Uncle Herb (all the children called me Herb), and it stuck. I was "Daddy" to Tonia and "Uncle" to everybody else. David made it possible for all of us to be related without having to violate the special relation between father and child. Everyone in the class knew that I was their teacher, not their father, but they also wanted to be related to me in a familial way. They were explicit about the need for an intimacy which, though personal, wasn't parental.

It's important to reflect upon the nature of the emotional bonds between teachers and parents, as well. These bonds have changed for me over my teaching career. When I was younger, and especially before I met Judy and became a parent myself, much of my social life revolved around the parents of my students. This first happened when I was a student teacher in a sixth-grade class at P.S. 41 in the fall of 1961. My supervising teacher assigned me a small group of students for individual tutoring. One of the children was African American; one was Chinese and had recently arrived in the United

States; two were Puerto Rican. They were the only students of color in the class of thirty children, but not the only ones with reading problems, so it was noticeable to everyone in the class that at least one criterion for being in my group had to do with ethnicity.

I still remember all of them. James Chou was a good mathematician; he knew how to read and write Chinese and had mastered about a thousand characters (I still have samples of his calligraphy), but couldn't speak much English or read or write it. Betty Johnson was a delightful storyteller and could read and write with some effort; she was a fair student. Her problem was that she was a few years older than the other fifth-graders and her social life was more sophisticated and complex than theirs. Also, she was poor and the rest of the children (except for those in my group) were middle-class and white. Betty was socially and culturally isolated in the class, and my supervising teacher saw to it that that isolation was completed by academic isolation. Betty was sent out of the class whenever possible and passed most of her time, when she wasn't in my group, doing errands for the principal.

Robert Levin, who was half Jewish and half Puerto Rican, was, at thirteen, the oldest student in the school and the one who seemed to produce the most fear in the teachers. His name was mentioned in tones usually reserved for people like Dillinger and the James Gang, though no one ever told me anything he did wrong. I saw him with quite different eyes. He was an artist, quiet and very observant. His father had been a sign maker in Puerto Rico, and Robert knew woodworking and a bit of drafting. I got to know him pretty well because I had set up a complicated art-related project for a sample lesson I had to plan and teach by myself. Robert volunteered to do the artwork, so I delivered the art material to his apartment one weekend. I got to meet his mother and chat with both of them in that informal environment.

Robert was indeed much more mature than the other students at the school, yet he had a history of failure since arriving from the island. At first, the problem was just that he didn't have the language. Then it was that he was bigger than most of the other students. Then it was that he was Puerto Rican in a white middle-class public school where most of the children lived in the middle-class and upper-middle-class housing developments of Peter Cooper Village and Stuyvesant Town. Robert's final problem was that he was a Puerto Rican

with a Jewish Puerto Rican father who was cultured and a member of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. Robert did not tolerate even casual racism and often got into trouble for confronting white students whose offhand comments reflected the racism of their parents.

During my second weekend of visiting Robert and his mother and finishing up my project, I ran into another student, Alma Rodriguez, on the street. Alma was with two of her sisters: Graciella, who was in fourth grade, and Emilia, who was about fourteen and was in junior high school. They pushed Alma up to me and forced her to make introductions. Alma was the shyest student I had encountered until then. She would not look directly at me, although once in a while I caught her looking my way in the classroom. Her sisters were not shy at all; Emilia invited me to meet their parents, Gloria and Julio, who told me that afternoon that they had heard all about me from Alma. Evidently my group was a great success, though I wasn't sure why. I had James teach everyone Chinese characters; Betty told stories while the others collectively transcribed or illustrated them; and Robert illustrated some simple bilingual stories that Alma wrote. I improvised these learning situations, knowing from my own growing up that learning new things emerged from doing, in new ways or contexts, what you already knew and loved. There was no theory behind it. I just watched the students and tried to build new lessons on the basis of how they responded to my experiments.

I felt at home in the Rodriguezes' railroad flat. There were always lots of people around. A pet turtle would emerge unexpectedly from under a chair or the couch. An uncle or neighbor would wander in. Julio and his friends played music and sang on the weekends, and Gloria was always busy cooking, sewing, or chatting with friends. Sometimes we would move outside to the stoop and play dominoes or cards and listen to music. I felt like a member of the family and also became a learner as my students and their families became my teachers.

I grew even closer to the family when Gloria, who worked at a doll factory in Brooklyn, threw out her back and was hospitalized in traction. She had never eaten the "American" food the hospital served, and the children and Julio were told that it was against the law to bring her Puerto Rican food. For days she refused to eat anything and got very sick. Consequently I volunteered to sneak her good Puerto Rican food under the pretext of making parent-teacher

visits. I made up a bogus project with an academic-sounding name and wrote out a description of it on borrowed Columbia Teachers College stationery. The hospital staff let me come and go as I pleased, with Gloria's food in my ample briefcase. Fortunately a number of the nurses were Puerto Rican and felt I was performing a medically appropriate procedure, so we were never turned in.

After Gloria came home I was never allowed to leave her apartment without taking some food home with me. This was wonderful and familiar: the same thing happened (with Italian food) every time I visited my aunt Addie Gallardo and her husband, Rocco, in the Bronx. I knew food was an important personal and family matter and felt honored to be included in the circle of both Addie and Gloria's caring.

After my student teaching ended and I got my first job, at P.S. 145 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, I still visited the Rodriguezes on weekends. I got to know other members of the family and was invited to weddings and larger family and social gatherings. In the family I became El Maestro, "The Teacher," a title that thrilled me then (and still does), though in those days I did not feel I had earned it. A few times, before I met Judy, I was fixed up with older cousins; I went out with them, though nothing ever developed.

Throughout the time I knew her, Alma remained shy. I became more friendly with Emilia. When I ran a summer project at Teachers College during the summer of 1962, she was my teaching assistant. I stayed in touch with her and the family while I was teaching at P.S. 103, and I introduced Judy to the family when we began going out. I still have pictures of Julio playing his guitar and singing at our wedding reception.

During my first two years of teaching, other families and other communities, too, became part of my life. In March 1962, while I was teaching at P.S. 145, my students Jaime and Consuela invited me home to meet their parents. Jaime and Consuela lived across the hall from each other, and most of the people in their building and the one next door were relatives.

I didn't spend much time visiting their parents during the school year but was in the community every weekday that summer. A few days after the school year ended, the police picked up a number of my students and their older brothers. I was told that this was part of an annual summer roundup: as soon as school was out the police

would pick up young men they identified as potential troublemakers, citing them for minor violations such as loitering or creating a public nuisance. The exact charges didn't make much difference, as there was no intent of bringing anything to court. The arrests were usually made on Friday night; the kids were kept in jail over the weekend and then released. It was a warning that the police wouldn't tolerate anything during the long summer.

Worried for my students, I responded by developing a summer program for some of them and their relatives. I ended up with students who ranged in age from five to fourteen and were all cousins of either Consuela or Jaime, both of whom were also part of the program. Actually my project wasn't really a program but an improvised learning community, in which I had the kids take responsibility for each other. For the sake of Teachers College, whose facilities we used, I dubbed the program an each-one-teach-one summer community education experiment. Each child in the program was both a learner and a teacher. Children read with each other and told stories. If one child knew how to read on one level that student taught someone else who wasn't quite there yet. The group was convival enough that a junior high student felt no humiliation about being taught phonics by an eight-year-old.

At the end of the school day I often had dinner with Jaime's family. They ate early, because Jaime senior worked the night shift and had breakfast when everybody else had dinner.

Jaime Cortes was a very bitter man and it took a while for him to trust me. But he was delighted that I was willing to help his son and nieces and nephews, and I realized that the family meals were initially a way of paying me back for that work. Friendship came later.

What happened with the Rodriguezes and the Corteses has, over the years, continued to happen with the parents of many of my students. They feel that public school teachers do not go out of their way for poor children or children who have a hard time adjusting to the social and cultural system of the schools. Therefore, when a teacher does recognize their children as having worth and intelligence they feel grateful and go out of their way to return the gift with whatever they can afford.

Jaime and Maria Cortes fed me well and I learned to appreciate the nuances of Puerto Rican cooking. The family came from the south of the island and many of the men had been fishermen at

home. The fish and pastelles they prepared and the large family meals reminded me of my grandmother's meals in the Bronx, especially the ones she prepared when there was a strike and people came in exhausted and hungry from the picket lines. Eating was celebration and nourishment came from the company of others as much as from the food.

Jaime senior loved to tell stories, and my presence at dinner gave him the chance to pull out all the old tales that the family was tired of hearing. He told me about growing up on the island; I especially loved the stories of how people encountered the spirits of their ancestors when they were out fishing, and of miraculous rescues at sea. I also heard many healing stories and first encountered the medical powers of *curanderos* and *curanderas* through those conversations.

I loved to share stories about my grandparents and the Yiddish world I grew up in, as well as stories of the foibles of the children of the rich and famous that I'd picked up at Harvard. I believe that after a few weeks I shared as much about my life as the Corteses did of theirs.

After a while our conversation turned to racial, cultural, and political issues. Jaime had served in the U.S. Army during World War II. He told me about the racism he faced during basic training in the South, and of the fights between whites and Puerto Ricans throughout the war. Just when the animosity began to wane and some camaraderie to develop, the firing war ended; he returned to the States, only to face the race war once again. Jaime believed that after the war racism was more intense than before. Many soldiers who came home from Europe and Asia felt that by risking their lives for the country they had become full citizens. They mistakenly assumed that the victory in the war would also have been a victory for democracy at home. Instead they found attempts to "return to normal."

Returning to normal meant, for the white soldiers, getting back to business as usual and taking advantage of the new economic opportunities of the postwar period. For African Americans and Puerto Ricans, a return to normal could only mean a return to segregation, poverty, and resistance.

For his part, Jaime had no intention of returning to normal. He felt he had earned his freedom and often got in trouble for going where he wasn't wanted, speaking out too boldly, and making demands that, as he told me, people constantly said were "ahead of the

times." He was attracted by Puerto Rican nationalism and had friends who were members of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. However, he wasn't entirely persuaded that Puerto Rico would be best served by independence from the United States. The question of what it meant to be both a Puerto Rican and an American haunted him. He knew the history of his nation and hoped his children would learn about Puerto Rican culture and history and be proud of who they were. He pressed me—what was I doing to help children feel strong in their own culture? I had to admit that I hadn't thought about that being part of my work.

My conversations with Jaime opened up a whole series of educational questions that had never been touched on at Teachers College or in staff meetings at P.S. 145. In addition to reaffirming what I learned growing up with my grandparents, who couldn't read or write English—which was never to mistake intelligence for schooling —Jaime set me to thinking consciously about the social and cultural dimensions of my work. He was an intellectual, and he pushed me intellectually. He wanted to know how I analyzed the curriculum and how it affected Puerto Rican students. He wanted to know what I thought about the New York City public schools' English-only policy and affirmed that it could only damage Puerto Rican students. I revealed to him all my frustrations about the school, and he wanted to know how far I was willing to challenge the system. This was hard for me to know: I wasn't a good teacher yet and felt overwhelmed by the everyday classroom demands on me. Besides, my job at P.S. 145 was the only work I had ever done that I could unambiguously say I loved. I didn't want to jeopardize it lightly or quickly.

Our conversations and growing friendship and my sense of being part of the community around P.S. 145, as well as my thoughts about incorporating bilingualism and Puerto Rican culture into the classroom, were abruptly terminated toward the end of August 1962. I received a letter from the New York City Board of Education informing me that I had been involuntarily transferred out of 145 and assigned to a new school, P.S. 103 in Harlem.

I had already known who would be in my new class at 145. Now all my plans for them became irrelevant. I would teach sixth grade, not fifth, and it was unlikely that I would have any Puerto Rican students in my class (indeed, there were none).

Several teachers at 145 had told me, late in the school year,

that they knew I would be transferred. The principal didn't like my socializing with the students or getting too close to the parents, though I suppose the same thing would have been fine had I done it on Long Island, where the principal lived and sent his children to school. I was picked out as a potential troublemaker and was dealt with in the usual way. It was okay for poor children of color to fail; teachers who stirred things up had to be sent to Harlem, where worse schools than his would chew them up.

I believe that in many ways the principal was right. I do speak out and sometimes stir things up. Getting rid of me by sending me to P.S. 103 as punishment was like throwing Brer Rabbit into the briar patch. But I didn't feel that way the summer before school began. I felt abandoned and rejected. I had lost not just a teaching position but a community I was beginning to love. I tried to hold on to the connections and enter a new community as well, but the combination was impossible to sustain.

In September 1962, at the beginning of my year at 103, I had to face the question of what exactly was my connection as a teacher to the community I served, and to all the children I would come to love over a lifetime of teaching. I threw myself into teaching and, as I mentioned before, became involved with the families of my students. But there had to be a breaking point; there simply wasn't enough time to spend with all the people whom I enjoyed being with and who seemed to enjoy my company. For me, at twenty-five, it was very flattering and moving to be so connected with my work and with people whose children I served. However, my social life in the community had to be tempered by my obligations and commitments as a teacher. I worked with new children each year and had to give each class the same love and energy. Nostalgia for former students and classes was not fair to my present students, nor did it interest me. I found my commitment to teaching was primary. I could not keep a social life going that inhibited my teaching. So, slowly, I came to remove myself from the community of 145, though for as long as we remained in New York City Judy and I kept up a relationship with the Corteses and the Rodriguezes. (In fact, when I was working at Teachers College, Columbia, from 1965 to 1967, a cousin of Jaime's and her fiancé were my research assistants.)

I have thought about my relationships with students and their parents a lot these days. Sexual relationships between students and

teachers are in the news, as are questions of the sexual exploitation of children. I'm appalled by some of the cases that have been exposed, but I worry a great deal when suspicion of the potential for abuse is extended to any personal closeness between teachers, students and parents. This suspicion has sanitized the student-teacher relationship, which, if anything, needs to be *more* personal than it has traditionally been. It's ironic that at a time when teachers are being urged to care more for their students and create higher achievement scores they are also being warned to stay away from close contact with students and keep their relations formal and safe.

I find it essential to know each of my students in an individual, personal way, and feel that my ability to teach them is enriched by knowing their families as well. I need to speak with students informally, chat with them when no other people are around, provide special tutoring services on occasion, introduce them to people outside of school who can help develop their talents or show them what it means to be a successful adult. Yet in the past few years I have felt uneasy about doing some of this. Along with the erosion of trust in the public schools there is a general distrust of teachers, which I sometimes feel in communities where my family and history with teaching are unknown.

Still, the personal is at the heart of my work with children, and I have found that efforts to get to know people in the community are essential to being a teacher. I believe we need to demonstrate our concern for the children not merely through test results but through involvement in their lives and care for the well-being of their families. We have to be, at the very least, honorary members of the communities we serve as teachers. A teacher has to be more than a technician or a visiting stranger who is in the community for work and for nothing else. Many of the problems of public education would be solved if teachers were more visible presences in the communities their students live in, with personal commitments to those communities. This is not always possible, especially when schools serve a multiplicity of communities; but even so, teachers can know parents, can make an effort to be present when there is trouble or when important events happen in the community. Teaching for me has never been an 8:40-to-3:30 job; if a teacher is to be effective, I don't believe it can be. We need not more child time in the classroom, but more teacher time in the community.

I don't like ending relationships, so I have kept in touch with students from almost every class I've taught over thirty years. August seems to be the month when former students contact me. During August 1996, as I'm writing this, I've heard from about twenty of my former students. Two students from Carleton College visited on their way back from a Chicano students' conference. A former elementary school student called to say she was getting married, and another called to say one of the other students had died. A number of teachers who were graduate students of mine called for advice about doctoral programs and to keep me posted on their own students and the foibles of their school districts. Two called to ask if I knew of any interesting teaching jobs. Three former college students called to talk about their dream of creating their own school, and two former high school students called to ask for help shaping their college schedules for next year. I also got one call from someone who got the job of their dreams and wanted to share that with me. It is a delight, though too often tinged with pain, to be able to touch all these lives; it is an affirmation that the energy that goes into teaching comes back throughout life.

By my third year of teaching, after working at P.S. 145 and teaching 6-1 at P.S. 103/79, I had begun to understand how to maintain relationships with former students and their families that did not interfere with the energy and attention a new group of children demanded. So long as my focus was on the present class, former students and their parents understood, better than I originally did, that there was a clear and unambiguous line between being a teacher and being a parent or a friend. I was expected to move on to other children while maintaining casual friendships with those who'd come before. It wasn't as hard as I had anticipated, once I realized that there was a rhythm to my life as a teacher that meant getting close to young people for a fixed period and then, while caring about them and continuing to be interested in their lives, withdrawing and refocusing my attention on the next educational challenge.

My concerns with children have always been pedagogical and not psychological. I have never seen myself as a healer or a counselor, though at times healing and counseling become part of the job. I am concerned with learning, with acquiring skills and understanding, and with eliciting all the creativity and intelligence possible from my students. I become very close to them—but within the framework of

their learning and their growth. It is important to make this distinction, because many young people who enter teaching do so to heal hurting children or to overcome social and political oppression. I believe in those things, but what characterizes good teaching above all is concern for the process and content of learning. If I taught in a perfect and untroubled society, I would still be challenged by helping children learn. As it is I teach with what exists and try to make things better. But it is learning and growth that are at the center of my thought and work.

The first time I was consciously aware of this teaching cycle as an integral part of my own life was in September of 1963, when I taught 6-7, the year after the class I wrote about in *36 Children*. In many ways that year was pedagogically more interesting than the earlier ones; I was beginning to understand how learning could be structured for the children and how schools might work. That year also brought my teaching solidly out of Greece and into twentieth-century America.

On September 15, 1963, four African American children were killed when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed by white racists. The need to shape learning on the basis of the complex interaction of academic content and current social reality was forced on me that year, as I voyaged with my students through school boycotts, freedom schools, protest demonstrations, and the assassination of a president.