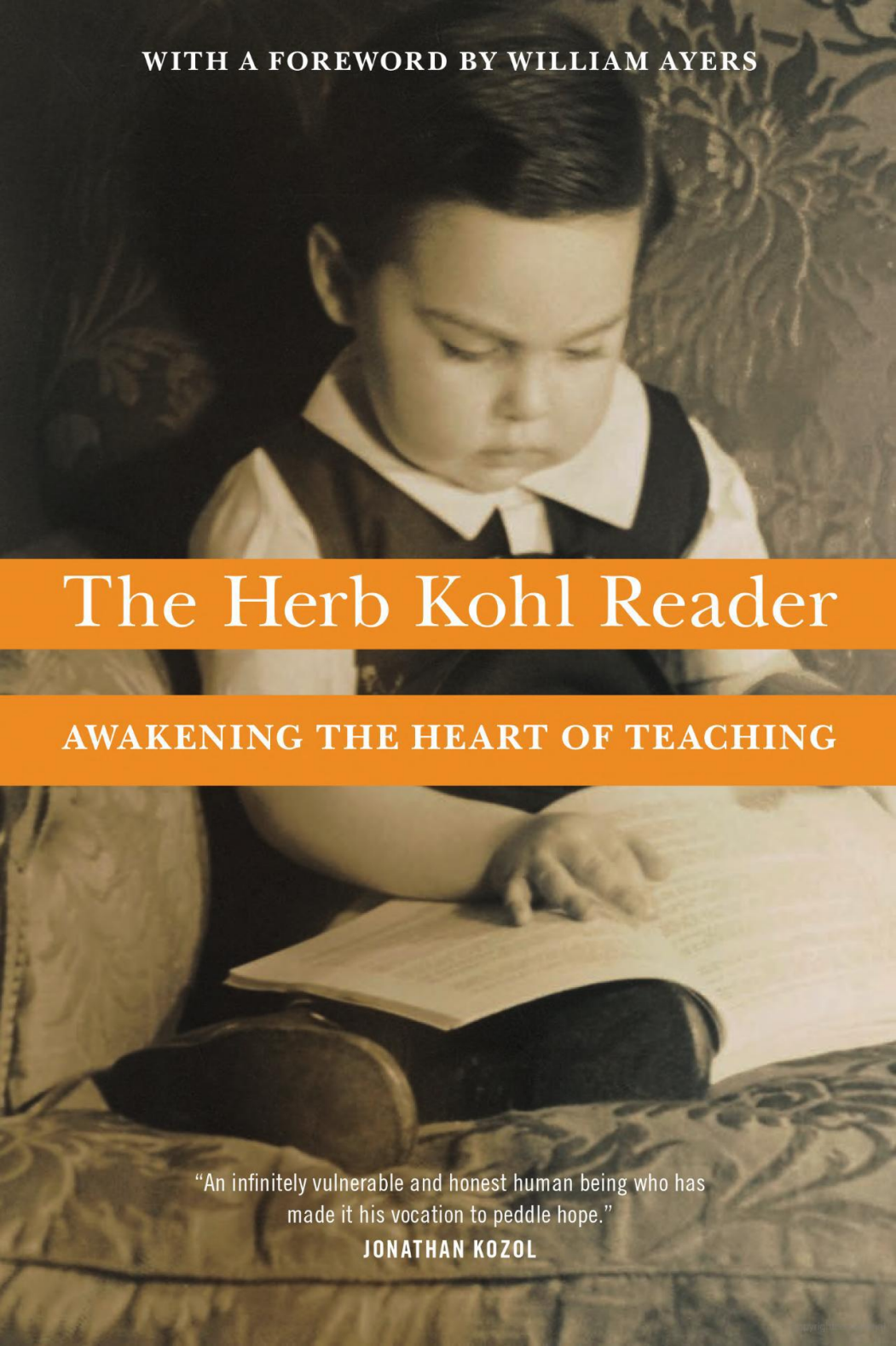
WITH A FOREWORD BY WILLIAM AYERS



The Herb Kohl Reader

AWAKENING THE HEART OF TEACHING

"An infinitely vulnerable and honest human being who has made it his vocation to peddle hope."

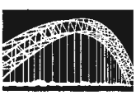
JONATHAN KOZOL

The Herb Kohl Reader

Awakening the Heart of Teaching

Herbert Kohl

With a foreword by William Ayers



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Foreword

HERB KOHL: POET LAUREATE OF TEACHING

A Tribute by William Ayers

I first met Herb Kohl in 1967 shortly after the publication of the now-classic *36 Children*, his riveting account of teaching sixth grade in a Harlem public school. I was a new teacher searching for affirmation while struggling to make sense of my own everyday classroom reality—challenges and setbacks, of course, and those tiny hard-won triumphs in acute if poignant contrast with my vast idealism and aspirations. I'd taken off on a summer quest to find every educator and education writer who had inspired me in the previous year—Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Paul Goodman, John Holt, Jerome Bruner, Barbara Biber, Stokely Carmichael, Jonathan Kozol, and Jay Featherstone to start. I was determined—immodestly, I suppose—to meet and talk with each one. Today I have no idea why I thought any of them would agree to set aside time for me, and yet, astonishingly, every one of them welcomed me graciously and with open arms.

I arrived in New York by bus, and my first phone call was to Herb. He invited me over, and when, an hour later, I rang the bell at the unassuming apartment on Eighty-eighth Street, Judy Kohl answered and led me into their tiny kitchen, where the three of us spent the rest of the morning. I mentioned the surprising and overwhelmingly positive reviews of *36 Children*, but Herb was skeptical: "Whenever you're praised for your 'youthful ideal-

ism,' look out!" He thought that the praise was patronizing at best and would soon enough be followed with criticism, opposition, "and maybe even a threat." We all laughed. "Anyway, I think they'd be happy if I shut up from now on, so let's see what they're saying in a couple of years."

His insights about this most complex, idiosyncratic, and mysterious craft had an immediate and lasting impact on me, but now, more than forty years and thirty-five books later, it's clear that Herb Kohl's influence has resonated, echoed, and multiplied and that he has directly touched thousands upon thousands of teachers and school people. He has not shut up—not for a minute, in spite of the opposition he anticipated—but has instead produced a steady stream of work that has turned into a torrent as the years have passed.

36 Children is the mother ship, a classic indeed, but no one should stop there—*Growing Minds* is my favorite book for new teachers, and *Golden Boy as Anthony Cool*, a photo essay and the first book to try to understand graffiti as more than vandalism, captures the spirit of a spiritless situation and the self-identification of young people who are rendered nameless and faceless and literally cast out. *"I Won't Learn from You"* does more than understand, explain, and offer concrete strategies to work with resistant students; it also provides a penetrating and sweeping critique of the content and the form of the established educational project in toto, raising the troubling possibility that the rebel kids are right and that our prescription for them (literally what we do to them) is wrong—and that they know it. *Making Theater*, *A Grain of Sand*, *A Book of Puzzlements*, and *Mathematical Puzzlements* are packed with the kind of workaday advice and practical arts that teachers can use off the shelf or adapt to unique circumstances, much like Kohl's "Good Stuff" column, which appears regularly in the radical teaching journal *Rethinking Schools*. *Painting Chinese* is a more reflective piece on how we learn; *The University for Our Time*, written during the upheavals of 1968, is a more visionary look at what is to be done in higher education; *Language and*

Education of the Deaf, an important manifesto in the "deaf power" movement and the struggle for dignity, identity, and deaf rights, is more incendiary; *From Archetype to Zeitgeist*, a smart and demystifying answer to the right-wing enthusiasm for all-inclusive lists of important knowledge, is more slyly subversive—all of these are bound together in a single teacher/writer who has managed to keep his vision and his idealism intact, along with his anger, someone still willing to speak the unwelcome truth to power, still trying to comfort the afflicted while afflicting the comfortable, still refusing the detached stance of the scholar or the cool pose of the cynic, insisting in words devout and large that we might still open our eyes and embrace the common good, and that, yes, we still might change the world.

In the past half century Kohl has emerged as a singular figure in education—unique in his reach, his grasp, his authority. Indeed, Herb Kohl is the poet laureate for generations of humanistic teachers.

In part this is because no one has touched every aspect of the enterprise—classroom life, curriculum and teaching, school reform, educational policy—with such luminous force. Like his Harvard classmate Jonathan Kozol, Kohl's writing addresses questions of policy and politics; like his mentors Paulo Freire and Myles Horton, he is fiercely focused on issues of racial and social justice; like fellow teachers Vivian Gussin Paley, George Dennison, and James Herndon, Kohl has a penetrating eye for the layered meanings generated and enacted in everyday classrooms; like his early contemporaries in the Mississippi Freedom Schools, he illuminates the link between individual change and social transformation; and, like his friends Maxine Greene and Jay and Helen Featherstone, he is a philosopher, a storyteller, an artist, an activist.

Herb Kohl's energy and influence stem from his location as a teacher in a classroom—a person on the move and in the mix among schoolchildren—so that his philosophizing and his activism, his stories and his art, emanate from a deep pool of expe-

rience in the real world of kids and communities. No other education writer, child advocate, or policy person has logged more time in the grit and grab of this place called school.

His exceptional importance flows finally from his ceaseless advocacy for a particularly precious ideal: the belief that, at its best, education is an enterprise geared toward allowing every human being to reach a fuller measure of his or her humanity. It's the irreducible and incalculable value of every human life linked to the teacherly work of unlocking and releasing the power of each person that has given Kohl's work its fundamental shape and direction.

Like other great educators, Herb Kohl constructed his teaching identity in the cauldron of a classroom; from the very start, his mind was focused, laser-like, on a group of youngsters in Harlem. How did they learn? What were their preferences? If they could choose, what would they do? What strengths and interests did they bring with them into the classroom? How could these be built upon and made into bridges toward deeper and wider ways of knowing? Could conversations about large goals and ethical purposes productively power life in school? More than any textbook or theory, more than adherence to a specific philosophy or ideology, Kohl invented and reinvented himself as a teacher through these kinds of questions, and his students were the essential co-creators.

Herb Kohl's teaching story is an epic, and it begins, as most do, in crisis: How can I possibly succeed, he asked himself, in a crowded and under-resourced classroom, a place with too many kids, too little time, and negligible support? How could he motivate a group of resistant students who seemed to hate the place? How could he be true to his deepest values and his broadest purposes in a place seemingly determined to undermine both? How could he even survive?

Feeling completely inadequate and overwhelmed, guided by nothing more than his own intuition, grounded in an unshakable belief in the incalculable value of every human being, Kohl be-

gan to improvise. Since he couldn't get thirty-six children to move in the same direction at the same time, perhaps he could split up the large group, to everyone's advantage. Since he couldn't inspire everyone with a single text, he would bring in lots of books, lots of art supplies and quirky stuff, and let the students choose. Since he didn't like or even recognize himself as a tightly wound taskmaster and petty dictator, he loosened up and slowed down, and he learned how to be with students in a more authentic way, more alive in his own enthusiasms, preferences, and responses. His classroom became a home; his students, family; and the vehicle for his teaching became stories.

And so he began: Write about where you come from. Write about the neighborhood, the street characters, your family, your grandparents, your dreams, your experiences. Who in the world are you? This tentative strategy began to power every aspect of classroom life. Who are you—in the world? What are your chances and your choices? No matter how marginalized, poor, or oppressed his students, Kohl refused a one-sided or patronizing view of their lives. In an unfair and ferocious world, people do get hurt, and they do get hit hard, but pitying the poor is another way of refusing to see these particular human beings in three-dimensional terms. There's always more to know: everyone is a dreamer of dreams, an unruly spark of meaning-making energy on a voyage of discovery and surprise, as well as a conqueror, a creator, an actor, an artist. Everyone in Herb's classrooms, simply by the act of walking through the door, had the right, indeed the responsibility, to be all of these and, most important, to tell his or her own story. The brute facts are never enough—disadvantaged or advantaged, poor or rich, victim or perpetrator—there's always more to say. And who has the right to tell your particular story? A powerful theme in Herb's teaching—really, an ethical pillar—is to trust your own story and never to allow anyone else to tell your story for you.

A large contradiction that productively punctuates much of Kohl's writing is the tension of working in real classrooms in real

schools and systems while fighting to hold on to and find ways to enact humane values and the best thinking about learning and teaching. This is a contradiction I've never resolved in my own teaching, but one that I think must be acknowledged and addressed continually as a space of struggle, a place to live, a tension illuminated by Kohl to teach into.

Teachers who easily put the tension to rest will find themselves less productive with students and ultimately dissatisfied with themselves. To say "My job is to get kids ready for the real world, for society as it is" or "My job is to water the little seedlings and watch them grow" is to misunderstand the contradiction and to reduce the complexity. "The real world"? Which one? When I was first teaching, I had an argument with colleagues who thought that since the real world was vicious, tough, unfair, competitive, and mean, we should turn our Head Start center into a boot camp for three-year-olds. How do we keep one foot in the mud and muck of the world as we find it, the world as it is, while the other foot strides hopefully toward a world that is not yet ours?

And on the other side, the watering-the-seeds side, I've known lots of teachers who wanted desperately to be kind and to be liked, and then failed to challenge kids to read. "I love these kids so much," one would say, "and their lives are so hard, I just want to nurture them." Failing to teach them to read is not exactly an act of love.

So the tension, as Kohl would have it, is: teach them to read as an act of love; struggle to nourish and challenge in the same gesture; respect the people who walk through the door, embrace them as fellow human beings, and invite and push them toward deeper and wider ways of knowing. This tension lives on every page of Herb's writing.

All conscientious teachers need to ask themselves what they need to know in order to be successful with this kid and with this one and with this one. Surely knowledge of subject matter, the curriculum, and the disciplines is an important part of the an-

swer, as is, of course, knowledge about the school and its expectations. And don't forget knowledge of yourself. But no less important is knowledge about the child and more: knowledge about the contexts and circumstances of his or her life—family, community, culture, and on and on—knowledge of the society and the world we're initiating youngsters into. This is not only vast, but also dynamic and swirling and expanding and changing.

All children need to develop a sense of the unique capacity of human beings to shape and create reality in concert with conscious purposes and plans. This means that our schools need to be transformed to provide children ongoing opportunities to exercise their resourcefulness, to solve the real problems of their communities. Like all human beings, children and young people need to be of use; they cannot productively be treated as "objects" to be taught "subjects." Their cognitive juices will begin to flow if and when their hearts, heads, and hands are engaged in improving their daily lives and their surroundings. Herb Kohl pioneered in naming and creating the space for that.

Just imagine how much safer and livelier and more peaceful our neighborhoods and communities would become if we reorganized education in a fundamental way. Instead of trying to keep children isolated in classrooms, envision engaging them in community-building activities with the same audacity and vision with which the civil rights movement engaged them in desegregation work forty-five years ago: planting community gardens, recycling waste, creating alternative transportation and work sites, naming and protesting injustices around them, organizing neighborhood arts and health festivals, rehabbing houses, painting public murals. By giving children and young people a reason to learn beyond the individualistic goal of getting a job and making more money, by encouraging them to exercise their minds and their hearts and their soul power, we would tap into the deep well of human values that gives life a richer shape and meaning.

Instead of trying to bully young people to remain in classrooms isolated from the community and structured only to prepare

them for a distant, hostile, and quickly disappearing job market, we might recognize that the reason so many young people drop out of schools is because they are voting with their feet against an educational system that sorts, tracks, tests, and rejects or certifies them like products in a factory. They are crying out for an experience that values them as human beings.

Herb Kohl's teaching is values-based; it is generous and deeply grounded in cherishing happiness, respecting reason, and—fundamentally—honoring each human life as sacred and unduplicatable. His clarity about classrooms is not based on being able to answer every dilemma or challenge or conundrum that presents itself, but flows instead from him encouraging us to see classroom life as a work-in-progress—contingent, dynamic, in the making, unfinished, always reaching for something more. The ethical core of his teaching is about creating hope in his students. Because the future is unknown, optimism is simply dreaming, and pessimism merely a dreary turn of mind. Hopefulness, on the other hand, is a political and moral choice based on the fact that history is still in the making, each of us necessarily a work-in-progress, and the future entirely unknown and unknowable. Kohl's writing provides images of possibility and in that way rekindles hope in all of us.

This ethical core is also the political stance of an independent, revolutionary teacher. Herb Kohl is not an ideologue, a dogmatist, or a camp follower; he is, rather, one of those remarkable and rare individuals—eloquent, fantastically courageous, angry, driven by principle—for whom no power is too big to challenge, no injustice too small to fight. He is markedly on the side of profound, fundamental change, the kind of upheaval that would replace greed and repression and hierarchy and surveillance and control with community, peace, simple fairness, and love—all kinds of love for all kinds of people in every situation. Kohl's radical message is simple: choose love.

Herb's characteristic style is informal, his vehicle the simple story well told. His capacity to evoke a scene in his writing with

depth and detail, to focus on the local, is matched by his fierce insistence on holding on to the larger concentric circles of context—economic condition, historical flow, cultural surround, political power—in which people necessarily make sense and take action. Even as he describes a particular classroom and a specific interaction, the larger ethical purposes of his teaching are in full view. For Herb, as for many great teachers, story time is sacred because it deals so seamlessly with both the hardest realities and the most far-reaching imagined universes. Storytelling is the chosen tool for ferreting out and constructing the meaning in the rough-and-tumble of random events. Herb Kohl is a master storyteller, a weaver of worlds, a prophet of possibility. He reminds us that we are each other's business, we are each other's hope. Gather around.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past forty-five years, I have been teaching and writing. Sometimes the writing has been primary. Other times I taught and found myself too occupied with the work to write at all. I have also tried to balance work with family, and this is reflected in one of the sections of this collection. I've been fortunate enough over the years to write three books with my wife and one with one of my daughters. I've also had the pleasure and the challenge of occasionally having my own children in my public school classes.

However, my family is much larger than the wonderful nuclear family of which I am privileged to be part. It consists of all of my students: the ones for whom I had particular affection, the ones who vexed and challenged me, and even those few I couldn't figure out how to reach or teach. They've ranged in age from five to the mid-twenties, and now many are in their thirties, forties, and fifties.

My teaching was not initially shaped by any particular theory of education but has always been focused on what works with children. For me, theory flows from and is modified by practice. Over the years, through direct work with young people, selective reading, conversations with colleagues, and participation in a variety of school reform efforts, a theory of teaching and learning has begun to emerge. I have sometimes been called a romantic and don't deny that at the center of my work is faith that every student has a core of

creativity and decency that can be elicited through education. In addition, I see education as part of the struggle for social justice, and this has pervaded my thinking and practice. I have never separated my commitment to justice from my classroom practice or from my work within the larger educational community. For me, education is a moral practice manifested by the specific content and nature of instruction across subject areas, within the context of a caring learning community.

Central to my growth as an educator has been the conviction that if only the situation, learning climate, materials, and relationships were right, every child could and indeed would learn. Therefore the initial challenge is to discover what is right about students and then be ingenious in discovering what works for them. My philosophy of education, which is still emerging, is based on a strength model of children, not on a deficiency model. It's easy to learn what students can't or won't do from their test results, school records, and initial behavior in the classroom. It's harder to see into the corners of their selves where they are strong and compassionate, and then to break down the barriers to learning that have developed through their previous education or lives outside of the classroom.

The selections in this book illustrate my quest over the past forty-five years to teach children well and to share, through my writing, the experience of teaching well in the context of public education, in schools that are often hostile and uncomfortable places for teachers and students. The book includes selections from the more than thirty-five books I've written, divided into four sections. The first has to do with my development as a teacher. The narratives are quite specific and illustrate life in the classroom and the evolution of effective teaching, beginning with some spectacular failures. The second section is devoted to the practice of teaching. Some of these selections are more strategic and talk about planning, developing curriculum content, and teaching cultural and print literacy. One selection attempts to identify the basic skills essential for the development of

creative learning, intellectual sophistication, and democratic citizenship.

The third section is about fatherhood. One of the essential themes in the section is how to develop your own children in the context of a life devoted to social justice. This section also talks about the complex and often difficult balance between raising one's own children and teaching other people's children.

The fourth and final section contains speculations on the sociology of education, learning, and politics. It contains some of my latest thinking about pedagogical issues that are very pressing these days.

My first full-time public school teaching job was in 1962 in a fifth-grade class on the West Side of Manhattan. My students were Puerto Rican, African American, and Haitian and were placed in 5-7—the class at the bottom of the homogenously grouped fifth grade. I was required to teach all subjects, from reading and writing to science, history, and the arts. This gave me the freedom to cross over subject matter, learn many different disciplines, and experiment with ideas over a wide range of subjects, which suited my temperament quite well. As a college students I had majored in philosophy and minored in mathematics; I had taken classes on modern theater, contemporary fiction, astronomy, social sciences, and Italian painting. My mentors in the philosophy department complained about the wide range of classes I was taking and wanted me to take a full, almost exclusive program in philosophy and logic. They said that such classes would prepare me better for a future job in a university philosophy department. But I knew halfway through my time at college that I didn't want to live an academic life. I liked the Bronx, where I came from, and felt more comfortable on the streets than in the academy. I certainly didn't know how I could connect my academic life with my desire to go back home and work within my community at the time, and so I just followed my interests and didn't worry about what my tutors said. This eclecticism has served me well in fifth-grade teaching and in all my teaching and writing. I was and am

willing to try just about anything that has a chance of helping people learn. I also love to learn and am constantly in search of new ideas, inventions, techniques, and games.

I've jumped around a lot during my educational career. I'm pretty restless. I like to begin things, come to a level of comfort and mastery with the work, and then turn it over to others and move on to new challenges—always, however, in the field of education.

At the end of my first teaching semester (I began with the fifth grade in January), I was involuntary transferred to a school in Harlem and given a sixth-grade class that had thirty-six children in a classroom with thirty-five seats. The years I spent at P.S. 79 were wonderful. It was there that I began to master my craft and to become close to my students and their families. It was also there that I began to become an educational activist, working with community groups and other teachers to change schools, beginning of course with P.S. 79.

I eventually left P.S. 79 to run a storefront high school. A number of the students at the storefront were former students of mine.

At that time, I also became involved in curriculum reform and helped found the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, which is about to celebrate its fortieth anniversary. The Collaborative brings writers and teachers together to develop writing programs and curriculum and to send writers directly into the classroom. At the same time, I was involved in the Community Control of Schools struggle, working for the I.S. 201 Parent Governing Board.

In 1968 I moved to Berkeley, California, to teach for a semester at the university—a wonderful time for an activist to be in Berkeley. After the semester, a number of teacher friends and I created a small high school, Other Ways, as an alternative to the more formalistic Berkeley High School. We were not a free school but provided our students with small classes, a lot of

choice, a role in school governance, and a personalized learning community. We were like a family, which was very important those days when anti-Vietnam protests, racial conflict, the People's Park, and the occupation of Berkeley by the National Guard characterized our daily life. I learned to teach on the run, to set up a school that could be assembled out of the trunks of several cars (which became helpful to other people when I later worked with farmworker communities), and to develop student discipline and self-discipline under pressure. Our school was located in the center of the protest zone off Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, and we often had to relocate to parks, people's homes, churches, and community centers in order to keep the fabric of our learning community coherent and educationally effective.

The next adventure was running a small teacher education program, the Center for Open Learning and Teaching, with Cynthia Brown, which also involved teaching kindergarten and first grade full time in a Berkeley public school by special arrangement with the principal. My next teaching experiences were at a high school and a one-room schoolhouse in rural Northern California.

Around 1992 I took a break from teaching and worked on school reform with a grant from the Aaron Diamond Fund, and I then went on to work on the development of the New Visions small high schools within the New York City school system. After two and a half years working for George Soros's Open Society Institute as Senior Fellow for Education, I returned to California where, with the help of the dean of education, I was able to create a teacher education program, the Center for Teaching Excellence and Social Justice, at the University of San Francisco. Over the next five years, we credentialed one hundred new teachers, about 75 percent of them people of color. They are some of the most wonderful students I have ever had and, though the program ran out of money two years after I left, the students have a gathering each year at the Coastal Ridge Research and Education Center, which is located at my home in Northern California.

After spending the academic year 2005–2006 as a visiting professor at Swarthmore College, I returned to Northern California and am awaiting my next pedagogical adventure.

Throughout all of this time, I have managed to write more than thirty-five books. True to my eclectic nature, I have written about animal perception (with my wife), math and language puzzles, theater, and poetry. However, the preponderance of my writing has to do with teaching and learning and is rooted in my personal experience as an educator. I never set out to teach in order to write and often don't know what I'll write about until years after the experience takes place. Most of the selections in this reader are drawn from those books on teaching, learning, and educational thinking. It is a special pleasure for me to be able to bring selections from many of these books together and to share them with people concerned about children and learning.

Part I

Becoming a Teacher

The selections in Part I focus on my personal journey and how it led to my becoming a lifelong educator. This part also focuses on the more specific question of how one learns on the job to teach well, and how an understanding of teaching and learning develops through classroom practice. This is not to say that teacher preparation is irrelevant, but very little one does at teachers college is useful in facing one's own classroom of children who are initially strangers.

For that reason, teacher knowledge evolves through teaching and from direct involvement with individual students. Every classroom is a miniature social world set in family, community, cultural, social, and historical contexts. Managing the complex life within the classroom and creating a convivial learning community in which everyone participates willingly is a formidable challenge. It took me from three to five years to feel comfortable with my teaching style, with authority and discipline in the classroom, and with the adaptation and creation of curriculum that is challenging, exciting to students, and comes up to high standards of learning.

In addition to mastering these aspects of teaching, I found myself having to learn about the parents of my students, the community, and the complex social and historical influences on

everyday practice. Certainly this is a lot to demand of a young teacher, and the narratives in this part of the reader make it clear what a struggle it is to become a good teacher. But what I hope to convey above and beyond the difficulty of learning to teach well is a sense of the wonderful rewards of facilitating children's growth and earning their respect, admiration, and affection. When I first entered teaching, I felt I was embarking on a privileged and honored vocation. Now, many years later, I feel that there is no more rewarding way I could have spent my life.

The first selection in Part I is from an essay I wrote in order to help myself understand how my passion to become a teacher developed. It also illustrates how my love of storytelling became a central part of my teaching repertoire.

The second selection talks about my early teaching experiences at a school for the emotionally disturbed and as a substitute teacher in the New York City public schools. What I tried to do in telling stories about these experiences is to share aspects of becoming a teacher that I think other people, setting out on teaching careers even now, forty years later, can relate to and learn from.

The third selection is from perhaps my most well known book, *36 Children*. The book is about my first full year of having my own class, teaching thirty-six children in a public school built in 1898 and perhaps not repaired since. In that environment of falling plaster and leaking windows, having only thirty-five desks for my thirty-six students, I worked about twelve hours a day, within the classroom and at my apartment, to be of use to my students. The students did creative and complex work beyond my imagination and also taught me that even in a failing school in a poor and depressed community, great achievement and creativity can emerge. I also learned about the intelligence and resilience of the students and their parents and about the strengths their African American heritage provided them when it was recognized and respected in the classroom. It was during that year that my marriage with education was consummated. During that year, I also met my wife and got married. It was a year of dual blessings.

The final selection, from my career autobiography *The Discipline of Hope*, jumps about thirty years ahead and is an illustration of one of the bolder integrated programs I developed. I hope it shows that I did learn some things over the years. I know I am still learning.

THE TATTOOED MAN: CONFESSIONS OF A HOPEMONGER

From *"I Won't Learn from You": And Other Thoughts on Creative Maladjustment*

It was in November or December of 1949, in the early afternoon, about one-thirty or two, just when the grey Bronx dusk of early winter reminded me that asthma was only a few hours away. My afternoons those days were overpowered by fear of an attack, the same fear that brought on the attacks. Seventh-graders had to go to the library for a lesson on the Dewey decimal system. We all followed along, paying no attention to Mr. Robertson, who was probably drunk as usual. He wasn't in a rush either—going to the library meant one less teaching period for him.

The librarian went on about numbers and indexes, and talked about how wonderful reading was, or something. I was lost studying the nuances of my anxiety, wondering why it was worse this time of year, so bad sometimes that I almost cried on the way home from school. Those days anxiety and asthma settled around me like river fog, and I had no language or concepts to understand them.

Our assignment was to find a book, any book, return to our places at one of the tables, and fill out the Dewey decimal number, title, author, and some other information. Another walk-through assignment. I went to a shelf in the farthest corner of the room and picked a book at random: *The Tattooed Man* by Howard Pease, an intriguing title stolen from my dreams and an author whose name was foreign and mysterious, not Jewish or Irish or Italian, but what? Where do people get such names? Pease and the tattooed man were equally intriguing. I knew tattooed men

and masked men and invisible people. I read the subtitle, *A Tale of Strange Adventures Befalling Tod Moran, Mess Boy of the Tramp Steamer "Araby," Upon His First Voyage from San Francisco to Genoa, via the Panama Canal*, thinking of my own fantasies and dreams, my personal twists on the heroes and heroines that I followed on radio and in comic books.

My attention wandered back to the table, to Dewey decimal numbers, only instead of filling out the work sheet I wrote down the book's dedication "For Guard C. Darrah: This memory of rain-swept decks off Panama and the marching roads of France," feeling the rain, thinking how sweet it must be to be wandering, wondering about marching roads and rain-swept decks. I never finished the assignment and to this day have resisted learning how the Dewey decimal system works.

There have only been a few times in my life when I was certain that a book was positioned in a library or bookstore for the sole purpose of my discovering it. This was one. I never begged a librarian to borrow a book before that day, but succeeded in getting *The Tattooed Man* loaned to me for two weeks though students were not allowed to check out books and take them home. That was barely enough time, for I've never been able to read a book that I loved quickly. My style is to linger over the words, question the text, stop reading when my mind is full or when I want time to understand the ideas, guess the writer's next trick, or anticipate the characters' next responses.

That night after homework I picked up the book and joined Tod Moran in San Francisco, where "sea fog hazed like spindrift along the San Francisco waterfront." I couldn't figure out what spindrift was from the context, and only recently looked up its meaning. The word feels right to me when I think of Tod Moran and remember that night when I was drawn into his world and traveled with him to a city smothered in mist, listening with him to "the distant clang of cable cars, the hoar crys of newsboys, the dull rumble of trucks and drays passing in the gloom like ghosts." That sentence stopped me. I read it over, then over again, and

spoke it out loud, quietly so my parents and brother couldn't hear. It conjured up a picture in my mind that was more intense than most of my dreams. Howard Pease's words created a world; they were magic and set me on fire with a burning desire to become a writer.

Since that night the necessity of writing has never left me. I still can't explain how or why it happened and often wonder whether the need to write was always in me waiting for some—any—beautiful words to activate it or whether, if my junior high school librarian had not decided to acquire a copy of *The Tattooed Man*, I would still be waiting to be inspired.

I was twelve, San Francisco was a dot on the map of the United States, and drays and cable cars were unreal vehicles contiguous with the horses and submarines of my dream adventures. Only Tod Moran was not like my dream companions. He had a real brother who had mysteriously disappeared at sea. On a ship called the *Araby* he met a tattooed man who knew of his brother. And Tod knew that he, the younger brother, had to find and redeem his older brother. This was not the stuff of comic book dreams. It was reality, the reality of literature, more dimensional, deeper, and more moving than anything I had encountered in comic books.

Tod Moran went to sea and he wasn't even seventeen. That meant only five years for me to wait. When, on page 20, I learned that Tod got a job as mess boy on the *Araby*, I stopped reading for five days and thought about my future, which had suddenly become real to me and not merely composed of heroic fantasies and halfhearted plots to run away from home. I began to think of the actual world as bigger, more variable, and more accessible than I had imagined and realized that I too could change my life and live in different ways and in different places. My imaginings didn't have to be confined to unreal and unrealizable domains.

From the time I was about eight until I was twelve, I often put myself to sleep with guided fantasies of romance and adventure. These fantasies never intruded upon my daytime existence and

were called forth by a specific ritual. First tuck under the bedcovers; next turn on my back and look up at the ceiling for the reflection of the Lexington Avenue elevated subway.

On Jerome Avenue the subway was elevated several stories above ground. The apparent contradiction between being elevated and underground was resolved for me every weekend when on my trip to Manhattan I stood at the window of the front car of the train and experienced its plunge underground at the station past Yankee Stadium. At that moment the lights went out, and the dark interior of the train became one with the darkness of the tunnel. I imagined, and I know my friends also imagined, demons and dybbuks and spirits unleashed on the train for that forty-five seconds that the whole world was dark. When I was about thirteen, I thought of writing a science fiction story about a train from the Bronx to Manhattan that became suspended in time the moment it went underground.

The el was part of my thinking as well as part of my nighttime ritual. It was a metaphor of passage, from the Bronx to Manhattan, and from daytime into my nighttime adventures and fantasies. Once I was in the right position to see the el's reflection on my bedroom wall, I had to wait. The third part of my ritual couldn't begin until I heard the train leave the 176th Street station and saw the lights reflected by each of the train windows pass over my bed, sometimes outlined so distinctly that I could make out the silhouettes of the people sitting at each window. After the magic lights had passed, I closed my eyes and called forth my fantasy companion and teacher, the Masked Rider. Sometimes he immediately appeared in dream time and I was already there with him. Other times he was waiting and it seemed as if I walked into the dream and joined him.

I have tried to reconstruct some of the feelings of that experience, and remember that the Masked Rider was faceless and rode a dark horse. He was friendly, very skillful with weapons, but nonviolent, and had many adventures during the three or four years he was willing to come when I summoned him. I was his

companion, and on particularly good nights I experienced myself stepping into my dream or fantasy and asking him where we were going that night. Most of our adventures involved a sweet, accepting young woman who could like you without controlling you. I'm not sure that I was aware that my dreams were experiments with love outside the family, but in retrospect they were preparing me for leaving home spiritually as well as physically.

I remember somehow knowing about the Masked Rider's past, though he never explicitly talked about it. He was found as a child wandering across a vast plain wearing a dark mask. No one was bold enough to unmask him and he never showed his face to anyone. He had never even seen his own face. He lived on a dark edge of the world, alone with a bundle of sacred objects, a sword, and a rope. He had stones that resembled faces, a root that was a clenched fist, four beautiful steel knives, a few empty jars, and a vial of black sand. The most sacred object was a small clay head worn featureless by time, a faceless relic the Masked Rider found when he was a child. He sometimes rode a black, featureless horse. At those times they were one, horse-and-rider, all in black.

During the day I listened to *Captain Midnight* on the radio. I also listened to *The Shadow*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *The Thin Man*. The Masked Rider was my personal reconstruction of the freedom and power these programs represented for me. My encounters with the Masked Rider were not like other dreams over which I had no control. I was both in a fantasy world and semi-awake outside of that world, aware of what was going on. I could at times experience the adventures we had together and at other times witness my own adventures. I could even give advice to the me in the dream, and somehow in dream logic it made sense for me to exist on both planes simultaneously, within and outside the fantasy. My double and I lived through all of those adventures together.

During our adventures the Masked Rider rescued the young, nurtured them for their own sake, and left them to grow strong. And he showed me how to be caring and tough at the same time.

There are times when I've wondered whether the dream of being a teacher of young children, which I've nurtured since I was twelve or thirteen, isn't intimately connected with my admiration for the Masked Rider and my desire to be as nurturing to others as he was to me.

I never told anyone about the Masked Rider, for two reasons. First, I was afraid he would disappear; and second, I was afraid people would think I was crazy.

With both *The Tattooed Man* and the Masked Rider, I was learning to move through and beyond the world as I knew it and imagine other, more congenial and exciting possibilities. Over the years, I've also encouraged my students to learn how to dream beyond the world they lived in and imagine ways in which life can be made fuller and more compassionate. The ability to see the world as other than it is plays a major role in sustaining hope. It keeps part of one's mind free of the burden of everyday misery and can become a corner of sanity as one struggles to undo the horrors of an unkind and mad world.

Nurturing children's abilities to imagine ways in which the world might be different is a gift we owe all children. This can be done in many ways. Telling children stories, for example, allows them to enter worlds where the constraints of ordinary life are transcended. The phrase "enter into" is not merely a metaphor: children step into good stories, just as I stepped into the world of the Masked Rider, and listen as if in a trance. Phrases like "Once upon a time" or "Long ago in a land far away" are ritualistic ways of informing children that reality is being suspended and fantasy taking over. When I've taught kindergarten, story time was sacred. If someone came in and interrupted an absorbing story, the children would look up as if awakened from a dream and would often chase intruders away. It seemed as if a violation of their inner space had occurred, some involuntary awakening from another world.

Those times I've taught high school, poetry has been my vehicle for honoring the imagination. The legitimate breaking of the

bonds of factuality offered by poetry has helped me overcome adolescent cynicism about the power of fairy tales and myths.

I remember making up stories and telling them to my three children when they were young. The stories I had heard from my grandparents at their ages didn't seem right for my children. The stories I wanted to tell involved the children themselves or at least surrogate characters who represented them. The stories revolved around four characters. Three—Mimi, Tutu, and Jha—were modeled on the children: Mimi on Erica, who was six at the time; Tutu on Tonia, who was seven; and Jha on Joshua, who was four. The fourth character was called Overall. He lived underground in a worldwide network of sewers that went under oceans, deserts, and mountains as well as cities. He appeared as steam and spoke with a Yiddish accent. He was, for me, a representation of all the humor, bitterness, rage, gentleness, roughness, and intelligence of the Yiddish world of my grandparents and of the Bronx I knew as a child. He may also have been an embodiment of the asthmatic fog that was both suffocating and nurturing during my Bronx childhood.

Overall was my way of trying to share with my children, in a story setting, the flavor and spirit of a part of their inheritance they could never directly experience. Overall had one peculiar power that figured in all of the stories I made up over the three or four years that the stories continued: whenever and wherever there was real trouble for the three young adventurers, a manhole cover appeared on the ground and Overall steamed up through the holes in the cover, coming to the rescue.

Overall also presented each of the children with a present: detached eyeballs that they could carry around and use to see things they wished to see. They could look into the eyeballs and see distant places, could plant the eyeballs in places where they wanted to spy on what was going on, and could even see into the past and sometimes the future. In the case of the future, however, the eyeballs became teary and the images were cloudy and indefinite so that future vision was unreliable.

The eyeballs were only part of the powers I, as storyteller,

granted Mimi, Tutu, and Jha. Erica is a Capricorn, so she, Mimi, got the power to climb the steepest hills and to butt through the hardest materials, and the ability to solve riddles. Tonia is a Cancer, so Tutu had the power of moving sideways as quickly as forward or backward, of grabbing on to things and not letting go until she got what she wanted, and of having immense patience and the ability to think through complex problems and come up with interesting solutions. Joshua is a Scorpio, so Jha had the power of sudden stinging attack, the ability to make caves and tunnels underground, and a sharp intellect that let him understand other people's thoughts and feelings.

Each story began as a simple voyage on a ship in mid-ocean or in the middle of a forest or the depths of a city like New York. I would set the scene and then ask the children where they wanted to go. They helped me spin out the story and teased out of me all kinds of enemies and friends, characters to people the story world. I always kept Overall for particularly difficult times and always gave him a story or two to tell, one that was directly set in the Bronx where I grew up and obliquely related to the situation. They had to be patient, to learn his ways of teaching by storytelling. As the tales grew in complexity and the children demanded I remember details and take up a telling at exactly the point it was dropped, I realized the importance of our half hour or hour together. I could introduce them to what I remembered and loved about my growing up through the character of Overall. They could frame adventures out of their fears and anxieties. We could embark on adventures and voyages together, and our imaginations played with the possible. As long as none of the characters was killed, we could go on indefinitely imagining worlds and testing powers. I was drawn into the tales even on days when I felt no stories in me. The children provided the energy for the telling and remembered all of the little details that made the world come alive. At times when my imagination failed, they also took up the telling and contributed to the making of that alternate world.

Even now, more than thirty-five years later, with the details of all of the stories forgotten, Overall is alive for all of the children, as are Mimi, Tutu, and Jha. The circle within which the tales were created was magical in a way. The children could experiment with being strong; I could memorialize my grandparents and pass on something of their world. In addition, the four of us could enter a world of the possible and keep alive the idea that the world did not have to be the way it was and that we could exercise powers that could lead to its transformation.

I also try to tell empowering stories when I teach, and I encourage students to create their own tales and imaginings. In periods of stress, when people don't take the time to tell or listen to stories, they sacrifice their imaginations and allow hope to slip away. I've never had any problem trading formal learning for storytelling in my classes, and I believe the students have been richer for it. After all, seeding hope is at the center of the art and craft of teaching.

Creating hope in oneself as a teacher and nourishing or rekindling it in one's students is the central issue educators face today. After forty-five years of teaching, trying to reform public schools, and continuing to work in a framework of hope, I have had to examine the sources of my own hope and my struggles with the temptation to despair and quit. They go back to the Bronx, to the Masked Rider and the Tattooed Man. They also go back to adults who passed through my life those days in the way poems do now—as sources of images that tutor my sensibility and tease my usual ways of looking at the world into new images of the possible.

I remember an old man who walked through our neighborhood two or three times a week crying, "I buy old clothes." I must have been seven or eight at the time. He had a sack of rags tied into a bundle strapped to his back, and I remember thinking he was a hunchback with magical powers. Over the years I've built up memories of him and stories about his life, though I have no way of knowing how much my image resembles the man himself

or his life. For me he has a high-pitched voice, a long thin nose, and very dirty though sensitive hands.

He wasn't the only peddler in the neighborhood, but other than the scissors- and knife-sharpening man who carried his grinder on his back, he was the only one on foot. There was an ice man with a tired horse that the old people used to joke about, and an Italian fruit and vegetable man with a horse-drawn wagon that smelled of apples, peaches, onions, and fresh soil. There was also the egg and butter man who was modern and carried his produce from upstate to the Bronx in the back of his station wagon.

The "I buy old clothes" man was my favorite. I liked to follow him close enough to talk with him if I dared. Other kids followed him at a distance and made fun of him. They were afraid to get too close since he was our bogey man, the person who, the grown-ups told us, always knew what you were doing and had curses that could cause harm at unexpected moments. The people in my parents' generation both demonized him and were ashamed of him. He was one of us—a Jew—but too Old World, too poor, too unashamed of his peddling. He was not a good model, in our parents' minds, for we were to be a generation headed out of the ghetto to college and the professions.

I was scared of him too, but also loved him because the scorn, disdain, mockery, and foolishness he encountered didn't seem to bother him at all. He had secrets that I wanted to know and, scared as I was, I was determined to talk to him. I don't know if I ever did, but at some point during my adolescence I constructed a short exchange we might have had, one which has stuck in my memory. I told him I knew what he was buying, but that I wondered if he was also selling something, and his response was, "Hope, I'm selling hope."

He was a hopemonger. I have never forgotten that—hope can be sold, it can be taught or at least spread, it can survive in the strangest and most unlikely places. It is a force that does not disappear. I keep that idea as a counter to the cynicism of reality-

mongers, who try to sell the idea that compassion is a form of weakness and hope and justice are illusions. It is a guiding principle of my teaching and writing, one that provides the moral grounds of the struggles I have been involved in over the past fifty years.

The image of myself as an "I buy old clothes" teacher, a monger of hope, still delights me. One of my fantasies during the 1970s was to send hobo reading teachers across the country to help solve the problem of illiteracy and make themselves available to help eliminate poverty. These teachers would set themselves up on the streets, in parks, on basketball courts, in marketplaces, in front of schools, and offer reading lessons and writing services while they mongered hope.

Thinking about education and learning outside of the context of formal institutions and the way they define people is central to the ability to see the strengths in people and look beyond their failures and despair. This is particularly true when trying to understand what children might become if the world were a more decent place. Looking at a child, understanding something of who she or he is or might become, is not a simple neutral act or a matter of finding the right objective test or experimental situation. Central to what you see in someone is what you are looking for. If you want to find a child's weaknesses, failures, personal problems, or inadequacies, you'll discover them. If you look at a child through the filter of her or his environment or economic status, and make judgments through the filters of your own cultural, gender, and racial biases, you'll find the characteristics you expect. You'll also find yourself well placed to reproduce failure and to develop resistance in some children, a false sense of superiority in others. On the other hand, if you look for strengths and filter the world through the prism of hope, you will see and encourage the unexpected flowering of child life in the most unlikely places.

BEGINNING TO TEACH

From *Growing Minds: On Becoming a Teacher*

Growth

Ever since I was a child, the details of growth have fascinated me. I remember wondering how babies learned to walk and talk, how grownups learned to dance, read, and drive cars and trucks, but mostly about how buildings grew on empty lots. My father, grandfather, and uncles were all in the construction business and often they took me to their jobs and let me wander around. I saw structures rise, saw the guts of buildings assembled and then concealed. My relatives always had many jobs going simultaneously, each in a different state of development. On one the site was being cleared, on another the basic structure was being created. Some jobs were almost done and plasterers, lathe workers, and cabinetmakers were putting in the details and painters finishing the surfaces.

In time, the work my relatives did became a central metaphor for my perception of growth in people. I didn't want to work with bricks and steel and wood, but with children. Yet as a teacher I've always thought of myself as part of the construction business. All of us are in different stages of completion or renovation, and none of us is ever without the need for some kind of building. A teacher has to become a construction expert, someone who knows how to help draw together skills and resources to create a harmonious functioning whole, or who knows how to renovate a structure that is dysfunctional or damaged.

Growing Minds is factually accurate, except that names and individual traits have been changed where necessary.

My father's expertise was renovation. One Sunday he and my grandfather took me to a job they were thinking of bidding on. The job was to put in stores on the first two floors of an old twenty-story apartment building and to convert the next five floors to offices. My grandfather had the blueprints of the building, which he read without effort even though he never learned to read English. I watched both of them carefully because they were doing things that seemed very strange to me. My grandfather would go to a certain place at the front of the building and bang a long nail through the brickwork. My father tapped on the wall in several places. Then they took a ladder out of the truck and climbed up the face of the building about a story and did the same things. I could feel that they were becoming very tense but couldn't figure out what was happening until my grandfather said, "Those son-of-a-bitches dropped half the beams. This thing shouldn't be standing up anymore."

My father explained to me that some builders eliminated a beam here, a girder there, to make more profit. He added that you could never trust plans to reveal the actual structure of a building. You had to probe the building itself, let it reveal itself. If you bid a job simply on the basis of the blueprints, you'd likely end up cheated and put your workers in danger.

In looking at young people growing, I've learned to apply the same ideas. A child is not an abstraction that can be fitted neatly into some scheme or theory, for growth never quite fits the laws of development psychologists invent. You have to discover who a child is by tapping and probing gently before a plan for construction or reconstruction can be developed. And you have to love to see a beautiful structure emerge, to have pride, as my father and grandfather did, in doing a good job.

Of course, people are not buildings and that's what makes observing their growth so interesting. Buildings do not build themselves, but people do. Understanding the complex relationships between self-growth and nurturing growth is essential to becoming a good teacher. Further, the love of nurturing and observing

growth in others is essential to sustaining a life of teaching. This implies that no matter what you teach or how you present yourself to your students, you have to be on the learners' side and to believe that they can and will grow during the time you are together. I am not sure of how that belief develops, yet it is characteristic of every fine teacher I've known.

During my first few years of teaching I tenaciously held to the belief that if only I tried hard enough, every one of my students would read, write, calculate, and, even better, find some aspect of knowledge to master in depth. Some students, however, challenged that belief (or, more accurately, article of faith) to the extreme—indeed, the harder I tried to get them to learn, the more resistant they became. James Donald, for example, seemed to resent any implication that he was teachable. He was sixteen, two years older than any other student in my sixth-grade class and more than four years older than most of them. He spent the entire day sitting rigidly at his desk, fists and jaws clenched. He never looked at me, refused to respond to questions, refused to laugh at what other students found funny. He didn't play tricks and wasn't defiant. He just sat in his remoteness, driving me to try the craziest tactics to get him to try to read or write. Grades didn't mean anything to him, even praise didn't seem to touch him. He was doing his time, and despite my greatest efforts he didn't pick up a book or pencil or crack a smile throughout the whole year. The only thing he did with pleasure was play an aggressive, not graceful, but extremely focused and effective game of basketball.

This happened during my third year of teaching. I didn't have children of my own yet and still could give twelve hours a day to my students. Every day after school I ran a basketball league. James was one of the stars even though he didn't talk, not even on the court. He took on the biggest, toughest players and intimidated them all. He played smart basketball, anticipated other people's moves, passed so accurately he always had as many assists as points even though he was high scorer in most games. He was all intelligence on the court. Yet I couldn't do anything with him in the

classroom. It would have been easy to quit on James, but I found myself reaching for new methods, techniques, ideas. Even though I found nothing that worked with him, I felt I was learning ways to reach other resistant, educationally damaged youngsters.

I met James about four years after he left my class. He had just finished his junior year at a high school in the Bronx and was all-city honorable mention in basketball. James was friendly for the first time since I'd known him, though his fists and jaws were no more relaxed than they were in the sixth grade. He told me he had loved to watch me try to teach him, that it was a battle of wills and he had been determined to win. But he also told me that he had listened even though he never responded to me and that he had taught himself to read and write well enough to stay in high school and play ball. He also thanked me for not throwing him out of the class.

Students like James have continued to confirm my perhaps irrational belief that all youngsters can learn despite any handicaps and that good teaching consists to a large degree in being obsessed with helping others grow.

Altruism: The Calling to Teach

I believe the impulse to teach is fundamentally altruistic and represents a desire to share what you value and to empower others. Of course, all teachers are not altruistic. Some people teach in order to dominate others or to support work they'd rather do or simply to earn a living. But I am not talking about the job of teaching so much as the calling to teach. Most teachers I know, even the most demoralized ones, who drag themselves to oppressive and mean schools where their work is not respected and their presence not welcome, have felt that calling at some time in their lives.

Between the ages of ten and twelve, many children have running-away-from-home fantasies. This was certainly true for me and for my friends growing up in the Bronx in the late 1940s. Bobby dreamed of going down to the seamen's hall and shipping

out to Hong Kong on a tramp steamer. Ronnie wanted to hitchhike to Chicago and become a boxer. Marilyn swore she would join the Haganah and be a freedom fighter in Israel. My fantasy was so bizarre that I was afraid to tell it to my friends. I wanted to run off to a small rural town in the Midwest and become an elementary school teacher.

No one in the family ever suggested I become a teacher and none of my relatives were teachers. I had two teachers, however, who were as sensitive to the growth of their students as my father and grandfather were to the quality of the structures they built, and who inspired me to want to teach. Mrs. Cooper was my kindergarten teacher. I don't remember anything about her class, but I do remember vividly meeting her on the street throughout my elementary and junior high school days and chatting with her about all my classmates and their brothers and sisters. She never forgot the name or face of any student she taught during her forty years at P.S. 82 and used to say she was more interested in how her former pupils grew after they left her than how well they did in her class. She was the repository of the neighborhood's memory and helped arrange class reunions, connect people with jobs, and provide information about marriages and births and deaths. She had only good to say about her former pupils. No matter how they turned out, they were still kindergarten children to her, beginning to learn their way in a difficult world. Considering the number of people who asked for her advice or who shared information with her, she seemed to me more active as a teacher after her retirement than even during her days in kindergarten.

Mrs. Cooper was respected by everybody in the neighborhood and welcome in every home. She was a model of kindness and generosity in the midst of a harsh, sometimes violent environment, and I remember wanting to command similar respect when I grew up. She made teaching seem like the most honored work one could do.

The other teacher who influenced me was Mrs. Lennon. She revealed to our fifth-grade class that the world was much larger

than and different from the Bronx. Of course, we had all been told or read that the world had many peoples and cultures, and also that the arts were important. But Mrs. Lennon showed us. She described her travels and told us about the people she met and talked to. I think my romantic notion of the Midwest as a place of freedom and beauty came from her description of several small towns at the foothills of the Rockies where she had vacationed and made a number of friends.

Every day in class we listened to classical music and looked at classical or modern paintings. She read from novels to open the day and usually closed the day with a poem. I didn't understand or like most of what she presented to us, but I didn't resist it since I could see that she put her whole being into her presentations. She hummed with the music, would tell us to listen to the violins or trumpets, would repeat a line or two of poetry several times, almost singing it. And she told us not to bother trying to like or understand what she exposed us to, just to open ourselves up and listen and look. She explained that she was just planting seeds and that it would take time for them to grow in us. I had never known anyone so serious about art, literature, and music or so curious about the way people lived. Somehow these seeds she planted, some of which sprouted within me, as well as her obvious love of the thirty-nine eleven-year-olds she shared her experiences with, led me to believe that a teacher's life was exciting. You could travel and learn, you could start in the Bronx and maybe even become a teacher in the Midwest, showing what you know about New York and at the same time learning about the country and the mountains. You could help other people learn things about the world that they never imagined existed and share your enthusiasms.

Inspired by her, I decided to try teaching and recruited my younger brother and his friends as students. At eleven, my image of what teachers did was fairly simple. A teacher told students things they didn't know and showed them how to do things they couldn't do. In addition, a teacher had to make sure the students learned what they were told and that they didn't fool around too much.

I decided to teach Ted and four of his friends how to play checkers. I knew how to play checkers and they didn't, and I felt confident that I could control five seven-year-olds. Thus I met all my criteria for qualifying as a teacher and saw no reason why I shouldn't succeed.

My first and last session with Ted and his friends was a disaster. I set up the checkerboard and explained how the pieces are placed and how they move. Ted and Jay listened carefully and moved the pieces diagonally, just as I'd shown them. Jumping was next. Jay seemed to get the idea, but Ted jumped three spaces, jumped his own pieces, jumped from black to red, jumped everywhere but where he was supposed to. I was beginning to lose my patience when I noticed Tommy and Paul. They were supposed to be waiting patiently at the other board. Instead they were building towers out of checkers and throwing marbles at them. The checkers were all over the room. I don't know why it took me so long to discover that. By the time I got them to pick up the checkers and set their board up, Ted and Jay were building towers. I remember getting angry at my brother, calming down, and then getting really angry at him the next day when he told me that he and his friends had known how to play checkers all along and that they had decided to take lessons from me in order to annoy me by pretending not to learn. It was the first but certainly not the last time in my teaching career when the students were in control.

The Persistence of My Fantasy

My fantasy about being an elementary school teacher maintained its strength throughout college, though I never told anybody about it until the week before my graduation from Harvard. My tutor asked me what I wanted to do after graduation and in a moment of intimacy I shared my dream with him. He laughed and expressed a viewpoint I was to hear many times after that: "People don't go to Harvard to become elementary school teachers."

After graduation I spent a year on a scholarship at Oxford and

then returned to New York, where I studied philosophy at Columbia University. Elementary school teaching was still on my mind, but graduate school was comfortable and I put off making a decision about teaching until I passed my comprehensive exams for a Ph.D. in philosophy and was a year or two away from settling down as an assistant professor at some university. The thought of sitting in classes and seminar rooms and talking about sense data and other philosophical esoterica for the rest of my life was grim. I wanted to be among children, to meet all kinds of people, to live in a world more like the Bronx than Harvard.

At the age of twenty-four I took the step I'd always wanted to take. I didn't go to that small town in the Midwest, but first to a school for severely disturbed children and then to a ghetto community in New York. Now, after forty-five years of teaching, I live in a small rural town in Northern California and still work with elementary and junior high school youngsters.

What was it that made teaching children more romantic to me than medicine, business, mathematics, or other careers I've flirted with? And why is it that teaching young children is as interesting and challenging now in Point Arena, California, as it was in Harlem and Berkeley and the other places in which I've taught? The only answer I find even partially satisfactory is that the romance of teaching is related less to individual students than to the phenomena of growth itself. It is wonderful to witness young people discovering that they can have power and to be able to help them acquire the skills and sensitivity they need to achieve the goals they come to set for themselves.

Wanting to teach is like wanting to have children or to write or paint or dance or invent or think through a mathematical problem that only a few have been able to solve. It has an element of mystery, involving as it does the yearly encounter with new people, the fear that you will be inadequate to meet their needs, as well as the rewards of seeing them become stronger because of your work. And as is true of the other creative challenges, the desire to teach and the ability to teach well are not

the same thing. With the rarest of exceptions, one has to learn how to become a good teacher just as one has to learn how to become a scientist or an artist.

After withdrawing from graduate school at Columbia, I went to the New York City Board of Education to apply for a teacher's license. In 1960 there were hundreds of teaching jobs available in the city schools, and I assumed my education alone qualified me for one of them. The first secretary to the assistant superintendent in charge of licensing and credentials gave me several forms to fill out. She looked over my forms and told me to wait. An hour later, another secretary took the forms and told me she'd be right with me. After another hour, she returned and referred me to a third secretary, who handed me a sheet of paper informing me that I had no education courses and therefore didn't qualify for any teaching job in the system. I began to explain to her that I had taught math during summer school at Harvard, had experience working with youngsters, and knew a lot about literature and science. She paid no attention and simply referred me back to the first secretary, who told me that the best thing was to enroll at Teachers College, Columbia, or at the ed school at NYU. I pleaded to talk to someone higher up and was politely informed that everyone was busy and that there was nothing for me to talk about anyway, that qualifications were qualifications. Trying to get someone to listen to you at 110 Livingston Street was like trying to kick down the Empire State Building.

There was no way I would return to college at that point in my life. A friend of mine told me that private schools didn't have the same requirements as public schools, and so I got a private school directory and went from school to school asking if a job was available. I began alphabetically and got down to the *L*'s before hearing of a teaching job that was open and didn't require a credential. I heard of it through the League School, which served severely disturbed children. The secretary there, who was the opposite of the public school gatekeepers I'd encountered, told me of an opening at the Reece School for the Severely Disturbed.

I went immediately and was hired after a half-hour interview with Mrs. Reece. It was Thursday and I was to begin on Monday. I asked if there was any preparation to make. Mrs. Reece assured me that I'd learn on the job.

My First Job

I was a teacher at last. Even though the salary was three hundred dollars a month and I didn't have the slightest idea of what or how well I'd do with my students, I remember walking, practically skipping, down Lexington Avenue from Ninety-fourth Street, where the school was, to my apartment on Eighty-fourth, feeling giddy with excitement. Being paid to teach—doing what I'd dreamed of doing and being paid too—how wonderful could the world be?

Elation gave way to anxiety Sunday night, and by Monday morning I had visions of being rejected by a class of twenty-five bizarre children. What was a severely disturbed child and what did he or she do in school? What could be done for them? Did they grow like normal children? Would my job merely be custodial or would there be excitement to it? I walked slowly up Lexington Avenue to school Monday morning wondering if I really wanted to teach that much.

The school was located in a three-story brownstone and the classroom I was assigned to work in was on the top floor. I was introduced to Sarah, the other third-floor teacher, who was my supervisor. The class we were to share was unlike anything I'd ever experienced during my own schooling. There were only five ten- and eleven-year-old boys in the class and I was expected to work with only two of them and help out with a third. Sarah had an organization chart that showed me how every minute of the day was to be spent and gave me copies of the workbooks my students were using at the moment. From that first day throughout my stay at the Reece School I was a "by-the-book" teacher and

followed the school's routine and its curriculum. It was a secure if not particularly creative way for me to begin my career, especially as my students' behavior required constant monitoring and they needed regular, predictable tasks to perform.

John and Fred were the boys assigned to me, and Harry, the most remote and the saddest child in the class, was with me part time. Sarah worked with him the rest of the day, as well as with Roger and the several Tommy Rinaldos we had to contend with. Tommy was a concentrated energy force who lived many lives on many planets, and his condition often determined how our day went. There were times when he was charming and other times when he became so wild and obsessed with images and phantoms that he had to be held down. He might become the Tommy Rinaldo Broadcasting Company and predict doom for the world as he tore through the school destroying everything in sight and crying at the same time. Or he would hold conversations with the generals in his imaginary army, Sisbeer and Cubrio. He was also the boss of the Rinaldo Construction Company, saw cities built and wrecked while describing the actions in minute detail to the rest of us. And there were moments when he would embrace Sarah or me and beg us to have his men go away, or would fall asleep exhausted after living through the battles raging inside himself. I admired the beauty and the power of his language and the force of his fantasies and was touched by his occasional gentleness and weakness. After one of his rampages he would fall limp and sleep for hours. I remember him waking up once and telling me that it was time to declare a National Leave Rinaldo Alone Week.

Even though Tommy wasn't officially my student, I dreamed of helping him become a poet or a builder, or just reducing his pain into livable and sharable form. I talked to him, at times held him while he broadcast declarations of war and proclamations of peace, and tried to get inside his world or to interest him in mine. But by the time I left the Reece School, I had given up on him.

He seemed to me to be surrounded by doors that had no keys, by one-way windows, by empty space. Somehow he had decided not to grow but to rage on until he collapsed.

Thinking about my three students, John, Fred, and Harry, and about Tommy, reminds me of a quote I found in a collection of letters from the English poet Sir John Suckling: "And Jack, if you would make a visit to Bedlam, you shall find that there are rarely two there mad for the same thing." No two of my students were mad for the same thing. Each of them was terrified of the world and had built up a system of protection that though bizarre and sad kept him from falling to pieces completely.

Recently I came upon a report I wrote in 1961 that gives a specific sense of how my first teaching days went. Here are a few excerpts:

> The day begins ritualistically. Each student gets settled in his own way, then sits at his own table and gets ready to work. At exactly 9:00 (it would upset Harry if we began a minute before or after 9) we begin academics.
>
> Fred puts his arithmetic book on the table and awaits his assignment. He immediately gets to work when told to, but cannot start without instructions. John has a more difficult time getting settled and so I speak to him, teach him whatever is new, or set him at work on familiar material. After about 15 or 20 minutes he is settled enough for me to shift my attention to Fred and teach him new work, or what is more usual, help him with problems that require understanding as well as mechanical calculation.
>
> About 9:45 Fred finishes his arithmetic and begins spelling. He can understand directions by himself if he has come across similar ones before, but has to be eased through anything new or different. While Fred is doing spelling, John spends time practicing script writing, which he is still in the process of acquiring. Academics lasts until 10:15 or 10:25 depending upon Fred and John's ability to concentrate and work profitably. Fred is on Book 5 in spelling and is beginning to encounter dif-

ficulty; John has some troubles in Book 3, due more to attention difficulties than to a lack of understanding.

The rest of the day went on in much the same way. There was nothing particularly interesting about the educational content of the material I was required to teach. The students, however, had such individual styles and needs that I was obliged to learn quite quickly how to change the curriculum so that it would be useful to them. John worked best with material that was visually interesting; Harry needed to learn in even more structured and organized ways than the texts we had; and Fred needed funny writing that dealt with feelings. After a few months, I found myself reworking the basic curriculum into three different curriculums, a tendency I've never lost.

My initial anxiety over teaching disturbed children disappeared with prolonged contact with the students. They eventually emerged as eleven-year-old children, somewhat different from most eleven-year-old children, with greater pain, disorientation, and confusion, but nevertheless distinct and interesting people.

Teachers College and Student Teaching

After six months at the Reece School, I began to think about public school teaching again and about working with so-called normal children. The slow rate of change of my students depressed me. I'd see a tiny positive difference negated by a change in the weather or in the emotional constellation of the class. I saw the children's fear of change overwhelm their desire to grow. I also knew I was beginning to do kind and decent work. But it wasn't enough, was too slow, too removed from the world of lively, articulate children I wanted to work with. I kept thinking of the secretary at the New York City Board of Education and resigned myself to going to Teachers College, Columbia, and taking courses, any courses, that would get me a regular elementary school credential and a job in the public schools.

Every beginning teacher has to face similar questions: What kind of child do you want to spend five hours a day with? How many children do you like to work with at one time? What age do you enjoy being with? The central question teachers have to answer for themselves is: What kind of growth do you want to nurture?

My wife is an excellent teacher of severely disturbed children, takes pleasure in observing small increments of growth, and has the patience to see them disappear and reappear. She likes to work with small groups. I'm different. I like large groups and enjoy noise and defiance, and dramatic change. Teaching friends of mine all have their preferences: Some like to work with adolescents, some with very young children. Some change every three years in order to experience growth on different age levels. Others are subject obsessed and enjoy stimulating scientific, mathematical, literary, or historical understanding. What we all realize, however, is that our most effective teaching arises from being in a situation where the growth we nurture is something we find beautiful to witness.

My time at Teachers College dragged. I spent the summer of 1961 taking classes on the teaching of arithmetic and reading, on curriculum development (which taught us how to make our own Ditto masters), on educational counseling (which told us to be nice to children), and on children's literature (which exposed us to books that, it seemed to me then, were written to avoid exposing children to poetry and fiction that dealt with life in complex and controversial ways). My professors gave the impression that they knew how to mold one into a good teacher. All you had to do was be nice, be organized, fit into the system as it was, follow the methods you learned at Teachers College, and you'd have a long and happy career.

The content of what was being taught to us was vacuous, the skills and techniques could have been mastered by a high school sophomore and the psychology found in any Miss Lonelyhearts column. The reality of life in the classroom, the complexity and variability of children, the effect of the school and community on

the teacher, the role of culture in learning—these were never dealt with and I cannot recollect anything specific about those classes other than that they were boring. The classes I hoped to learn the most from, those about the education of disturbed children, were the worst. They talked about categories of disturbance, about interventions and therapeutic strategies, and said nothing pertinent or helpful about John, Fred, or Harry.

If it wasn't for the nurturance, good sense, and eventual protection of my supervisor Dorothy McGeoch, I never would have survived Teachers College and gotten a teaching credential. Throughout my experience I have always been lucky to find one or two teachers who helped me to grow the way I came to help my students. Without those teachers and colleagues, none of us sustain a life of teaching. It makes good sense when going to a new school to take time to look for such a colleague, to find someone whom you want to learn from and share what you know with.

I had two student teacher placements instead of the more usual one. My first placement was at P.S. 140, right opposite Peter Cooper Village, a middle-class development on Manhattan's East Side. I was assigned to a well-ordered, smoothly functioning, traditional sixth-grade classroom. The day opened with reading the headlines and one article from the front page of the *New York Times* and went step by step through group reading, individualized reading, spelling, math, social studies, art—what seemed to me an endless series of disconnected lessons that students had to go through. Here were normal children doing just what my students at the Reece School were doing. At Reece it was clear that the structure and the workbooks existed as much to control behavior as to teach anything. It hadn't occurred to me until I had spent six weeks at P.S. 140 that the same thing was being done to normal students. Every day was the same, every lesson the same, every question like every other. I didn't hear student voices except on the playground and in the lunchroom. The teacher, Mrs. Jay, only spoke to the students about formal matters (absence notes, parents' permission forms, etc.) or when she gave orders or asked

questions about a lesson. I wanted to object to what I saw, to try to have conversations with my students and find out what interested them. They looked so lively and alert on the playground. Fortunately Dorothy McGeoch convinced me to keep quiet and do what I was told. She reminded me that my goal in student teaching was to pass the course, not reform the school. I could try that, she said wryly, when I got my credential and was doing real work.

I almost survived 140. However, I made a number of inadvertent mistakes that led to the involuntary termination of my student teaching two weeks before it was to have ended. The first mistake was to treat the principal informally. I had always been able to relate to my professors and colleagues at the Reece School on a first-name basis and didn't realize that formal address was required in exchanges between student teachers and staff and administration.

Another mistake was fraternizing with students. I said hello to every youngster I passed on the street, in the yard, or in the hall. After a while some children began asking me questions about myself or telling me the neighborhood or school gossip. I didn't realize it made the other teachers as well as the administrators around the school angry to see me chatting with the students, and it wasn't until I left the school that another student teacher told me that the principal had held me up as an example of how a teacher should not behave. He informed the other teachers at the school that eating lunch with the students and playing with them on breaks instead of having coffee in the teachers' room was unprofessional behavior that contributed to the breakdown of discipline and respect and could not be allowed in an orderly school.

Mrs. Jay, my supervising teacher, didn't like to have me in the room. I was too arrogant toward her, an attitude that I now see as foolish and one that may well have kept me from learning from her. She contrived to have me work with a small number of her "slower and difficult" students in a small conference room down the hall. I was given four students—Stanley Gold, the biggest and oldest boy in the school, who it turned out was half Jewish and half Puerto Rican; Betty Williams, who was African American;

Robert Moy, who was Chinese and had recently arrived in the country; and Ana Suarez, who was Puerto Rican. With one exception, they were the only minority children in the class of thirty-five.

When I first heard of the arrangement, it felt like being demoted to the Reece School—one teacher and four deviant youngsters. However, it proved to be a gift. I couldn't have learned more about children, culture, and learning in such a short time than I did from working with those four lively, intelligent, defiant, and thoroughly delightful youngsters.

As soon as we left the classroom the four came alive, chatted about what was going on, asked me about myself, particularly why I wanted to be a teacher. Once I sat down to read with them, some unexpected things began to happen. Betty didn't know the alphabet, or even how to hold a pencil. I asked her how long she'd been in school, since everything about formal learning seemed so foreign to her. She told me that this was her first year, that she had come from a small farm community in the South where the children didn't go to school much. When Betty first came to school in September, there was a suggestion she be put in the first grade, but that was abandoned because she was so tall. She spent her time in the sixth grade in the back of the room, flipping through picture books.

Betty was my first teaching success. I taught her how to hold a pencil, read stories to her and had her copy them, gave her flash cards using words she wanted to know, and watched her learn to read. She wasn't dumb or a failure—just a child who hadn't learned to read and was learning at twelve, not a bad age to begin formal reading instruction.

Working with Betty showed me the futility of trying to teach reading solely through phonics. Betty grew up in the Deep South, and she and I simply didn't pronounce *a*, *e*, *i*, *o* and *u* in the same way. In fact, between my Bronx accent and her Southern accent, there were few words that sounded identical to us. The meaning of sentences and the content of stories, however, made it easy to overcome these differences. Betty and I spoke about books and

understood each other perfectly. The more we talked about books, the more interested she became in reading well. Our lessons were planned around questions she raised about reading. I began to realize that she was my best source of information about teaching her to read. As long as she could specify what caused her reading problems, I could help her. If endings like *-ion* or *-ally* were a problem, I could simply tell her how they were used and pronounced. If combinations like *-oa* or *-ae-* or *-ea-* created confusion, it was easy to undo them as long as she could point to them. Through teaching Betty and the other three youngsters that were assigned to me, I learned how to use students' knowledge of their own learning problems as a major source for designing educational programs.

Betty's mother met me one day after school. She told me that Betty was very happy about learning to read and she wondered if I could give her materials so Betty could practice more at home. In her eyes I was a real teacher, though I knew I was only improvising. Nevertheless, I bought six inexpensive simple reading books at a remainder bookstore, six pencils and a pencil sharpener, a notebook and a pack of three-by-five index cards, and packaged them in a plastic box with Betty's name stenciled on it. That was her personalized reading kit and from what I heard several years later from another student, she had used it and taught herself to read.

Robert Moy, another one of my four, also fascinated me. I tried to administer a Gates Reading Test to find out his level and gave up one-fourth of the way through. He couldn't read any English, could hardly pronounce the sounds of the language. There was a math section on the test and I tried that since there was no reason to assume he couldn't do math because he couldn't read English. He scored 100 percent or the equivalent of twelfth-grade level in math. A few days later I gave him an eighth-grade math test and he scored in the ninety-ninth percentile, yet in class he was in a fourth-grade workbook because he couldn't read the verbalized math problems. I remember feeling at the time that the

main difference between the Reece School and P.S. 140 was that in 140 the adults were doing crazy things to sane children instead of the other way around.

I noticed some Chinese writing on Robert's book and asked him if he wrote Chinese. Yes, he knew over a thousand characters and would be delighted to teach them to me. I shared my discovery about Robert's writing ability with my supervising teacher and she made a note of it, to use, as she told me, during the China unit she was planning for the second half of the school year. She didn't say anything to Robert. I watched as he systematically went about learning bits and pieces of English. He may not have been well schooled at 140, but somewhere he had been educated well. He just needed to be pointed in the right direction and given a few basic instructions in order to learn to read skillfully.

The students I got closest to in that class were Ana Suarez and Stanley Gold. Neither had a reading or a math problem. Older than the other students, they were leaders in the small ghetto a few blocks from the school and had no relationship with most of the students in P.S. 140, which was at that time over 80 percent white. The teachers, they claimed, didn't like them and so they "refused to do any work, period," as Stanley said.

I brought Ana romances and gothics, which she loved. After learning that Stanley's father was a woodcarver and Stanley a talented artist, I got him some art instruction books. That was my first reading class—Betty copying Dr. Seuss, Robert teaching me Chinese, Ana reading romances and talking endlessly about the story, while Stanley drew and read about art.

My relationship with Stanley Gold led directly to my being removed from 140. Stanley and I prepared an art project to present to Mrs. Jay's class during the morning I would be expected to run the whole class by myself. Mrs. Jay would evaluate my student teaching on the basis of the math, language, and art lessons presented then. I decided to put math and art together and do a lesson on how cathedrals stand up. I was intoxicated with the cathedrals I'd seen in France, and Stanley had shown me pictures

of carved models of churches his father had made. For the lesson, Stanley was going to draw on the chalkboard a schematic of a cathedral with flying buttresses and then do a scale drawing of Chartres that compared it in size with the school and the Empire State Building. The math component of the lesson was an introduction to scale and relative proportion. The whole thing was to take up the first hour of class time. The lesson couldn't have worked, but I didn't know it. The class wasn't prepared for an open-ended discussion about anything, much less about flying buttresses; the math was too sophisticated; I had no experience working with a whole class and no sense of how to maintain control. To make matters worse, that day Mrs. Jay was absent and a sub appeared at the door at eight-forty. Stanley and I had been in the room since eight o'clock, he drawing on the board and I setting up the materials for my other lessons. The sub looked at Mrs. Jay's lesson book and let me take over.

The class came in and settled down. I began talking about the plans for the morning and then asked if anyone knew what a cathedral was. Six hands went up, three people shouted, someone made a strange noise. If Mrs. Jay was there, none of that would have happened, and it might have been possible for me to rescue part of the lesson because of the control her presence exerted. But with a sub in the room, I got more loudness than openness. After fifteen minutes the sub walked to the front of the room, banged a ruler on the desk, and in an experienced voice informed the class that she not only knew how to maintain order but demanded it instantly. She got her silence and then turned to Stanley, then to the buttressed church on the board, and commanded, "Erase that." He refused, she commanded again, and Stanley turned to me and asked if I was going to make him erase it. I saw our whole relationship dissolving, felt the possibility of his withdrawing from me as he did from all his other teachers, and I turned to the sub, saying something like "It stays." She then commanded me to erase the board. I refused and she stormed out of the room.

Somehow I fumbled through what was left of my lesson plans

until recess. After my class left the room, the principal came in and told me to take the rest of the day off.

When I returned the next day, there was a note taped to my locker in the student teacher's lounge, informing me to go to the principal's office. The locker was emptied of all my books and materials, which the principal later presented to me in a neatly sealed box while instructing me that I was never to return to P.S. 140 again, for any reason. I had violated the sacred law of the teaching profession: Never under any circumstances support a student against another teacher in the presence of students. I was not even allowed to say good-bye to the class.

Halfway out of the building, I started crying quietly. It felt as if I was being sent away from home, from what I loved more than anything else. The place, the children, the energy, the best and the worst of that school, all of a sudden were precious, and now I would never get my credential and be part of it.

Dorothy McGeoch rescued me. She somehow managed to bury the principal's report and get me assigned to Walden School, a small progressive private school on Central Park West. However, every moment I could manage was spent with Stanley or the Suarez family and their friends in the neighborhood of P.S. 140.

The Public Schools at Last

When I finally obtained my credential and got hired at P.S. 145 in February 1962, it seemed a long journey had ended. My calling to teach had been confirmed and I was ready to practice my craft behind the doors of my own classroom.

I had begun to get an idea of how I would like to see a classroom function. Conversation would be essential, for students must have a chance to talk about what they were studying and about their lives as well. The teacher would be part of the conversation, more informed about issues of content but also a listener and a learner. The students shouldn't all have to do the same thing at the same moment and shouldn't always have to be

watched. Life in the classroom should be more like life at home or in a restaurant, a playground, or any place where activity occurred without constant surveillance. This implied that I would allow the students to be independent so that they would not feel at war with me and the school.

Small-group learning, individual projects, class discussions and events, and fun were some of the ingredients I wanted to develop in my work. I also wished to incorporate interesting content, compelling reading and drama, exciting math and science ideas and experiments, historical explorations and re-creations, even philosophy. I also wanted to mix the subjects together—to study light, for example, from a perspective that was artistic, scientific, and literary.

To teach this way, some classroom reorganization, in terms of space, time, and behavior, would be necessary, but the specifics of how to create an open classroom were very vague to me. I had never seen or read about a working model of that kind of learning, a situation I now find ironical, given that my M.A. in education is from Teachers College, where such models were created and refined from the 1920s to the 1950s. I sometimes wonder how much finer a teacher I might have been if my degree was taken in '32 instead of '62.

I began my career in P.S. 145 with a sense of how I'd like to encourage the growth of my students but with no sense of the specifics of organization, management, discipline, pacing, and transformation of interesting content into a challenging curriculum. My strengths were energy, enthusiasm, knowledge in many different areas, a love of books and learning, a delight in being in the presence of children, an almost fanatic determination not to fail as a teacher, and a faith in my fifth-grade students' ability to learn no matter how limited they seemed when I first encountered them. My class had managed to wear out half a dozen teachers by the time I took over in February. A third of the students spoke only Spanish, the class itself was a dumping ground

for problem students, and there were no books in the room. No matter—I was full of confidence, even of a sense of destiny.

My first week of teaching left me in despair, almost wishing I'd finished my doctorate in philosophy and could teach Wittgenstein to a group of docile graduate students. The first mistake I made was to introduce myself to the class as Herb instead of Mr. Kohl. I had done so at Walden and it seemed like a good idea. But twenty blocks away at P.S. 145, the only adults you called by their first names were those you didn't respect and were trying to bait. In one short week I went from informal Herb, with an open collar and sweater, to Mr. Kohl, with a suit and tie, a very controlled manner, and an unnatural stern look. My students had quickly taught me that I had to establish my authority before I could teach them anything.

In fact, after several weeks I found myself doing everything I had sworn never to do in the classroom. The day began with students copying something I'd written on the chalkboard. After that they'd fill in purple Ditto forms with simple math examples, then read out loud, then go to recess and repeat the process. In my heart I wanted to talk to my students, to share what I knew with them and find out who they were and what they knew. Yet all I was doing was filling up time and trying to get through the day without a scene.

Yet there were scenes—fights, thefts, furniture overturned or thrown around, papers torn up, pencils broken. Occasionally there were moments when one student or another did start a conversation with me or follow a suggestion I had made or, most wonderful, look happy and relaxed in the room. I took to studying faces and gestures in ways I'd never done before. Every moment of silence in the room was a time for me to observe, to guess (usually wildly and incorrectly) about who these children were who were forced to be with me five hours a day.

After a while little things happened that made our lives together better. Vincent made a joke about my hair and I laughed. Gloria said that teachers don't laugh, so I couldn't be a real

teacher. Another time, Carlos told me that the reason Victor was so shy in class was that he had just come from Puerto Rico and couldn't speak any English. I asked Carlos to be my interpreter and set aside twenty minutes a day for my students to teach me Spanish, even though my principal told me that speaking Spanish in class was against Board of Education rules. Little by little I felt that I was becoming myself in the classroom and abandoning my stance as the Teacher.

One girl's mother had a back injury and was in traction in the hospital. She was from Puerto Rico and couldn't eat the institutional American-style food served to her in the ward. Her family was worried about her health. She was weak and hungry and her back wasn't getting any better. One lunchtime, her daughter Rafaela, who was one of the few quiet children in my classroom, asked me if I would do her a favor. She wanted me to sneak *pasteles* and other tasty Puerto Rican food to her mother at the hospital. It would fit in my briefcase, she said, and no one would question a teacher.

Why did she ask me? I wondered if she picked up something that first inept day when I introduced myself as Herb. More likely, she was desperate and I was the only one left to turn to. Whatever the reason, the day I visited the hospital I had the best-smelling briefcase you can imagine and Consuelo, Rafaela's mother, had a wonderful dinner.

Everyone in the class knew I'd broken the hospital rules, did something they thought was dangerous, and didn't ask for any money or other return. They began to open up because of that and other gestures that led them, as they later told me, to like being in class. They'd appreciated my making pencils available for children who couldn't afford them, allowing them to pass notes if it didn't interfere with anything, giving them time to talk before work began, providing colored paper for them to cover their books with, letting them take home books and games I brought to school, and trusting them to be able to run the film-strip viewer by themselves.

One of my ways of relating to them got me in trouble again. I had maintained my habit of saying hello to every student I met and of stopping to chat with students before and after school. One day the principal called me into his office and delivered the familiar reprimand that I was getting too close to students, and that it was undermining their respect for me. My experience, I said, was that the opposite was true, that those small gestures of friendship and concern were the basis for genuine respect. An older teacher who had overheard our conversation told me at lunch that I'd never last at that school.

It was true that one could hardly tell from my students' unruly behavior during class that we were beginning to know and care about each other. But before and after class were different. Students came early and stayed after school to talk with me, the same students, often, who acted the most defiantly and crazily during the school day.

The two notable ones were James T. and Felipe, whom the rest of the class called the Dynamic Duo, after Batman and Robin. There were days when I felt that I was in a match against the Duo, with the rest of the class as audience and judge. I didn't want to win it, but I couldn't lose, either, if I was to be of any use to the whole class. How was I to end this confrontation without victors or vanquished, without loss of face on anyone's part? I was encountering the central problem of discipline in the classroom.

James T. and Felipe were veterans of school wars and knew dozens of strategies that effectively demoralized their teachers. I knew that the problems they created had to be solved within the classroom, not by the principal's office. Fortunately the two boys were as interesting as any children I've known, and when I got home after school and thought about the day, I would have to laugh at how smart they were about taking control of the class away from me. Unlike the children at the Reece School, they knew what they were doing, and could talk their way out of the havoc they created. When it suited them, they could also be serious, intelligent, and sensitive. But for a while, having fun at my expense was their main game.

One Monday, for example, I was preaching to the class about how important it was to study animal life. I had bought a fifty-gallon aquarium over the weekend and brought it to class. My idea was to have goldfish, guppies, and algae eaters to study, as well as water plants and perhaps some snails. James T. and Felipe listened attentively for a change. When the bell rang for lunch, the Dynamic Duo gathered a few other boys and two girls, Gloria and Haydee, who always ran with their gang. They were talking excitedly about fish and aquariums. I couldn't make out what they were saying, for it was a mixture of English, Spanish, and Haitian French. At lunchtime the whole bunch asked to borrow the class wastebaskets and then took off. I knew something was up because they had left their lunches behind in the classroom.

I found out what the gang had in mind when I returned from lunch and almost slipped on the water that was flooding out of our aquarium. A stream was heading under the door and probably down the hall toward the principal's office. The aquarium was overflowing, the four faucets of our two blocked-up sinks were on full force, and in the aquarium and the two sinks were dozens of overgrown goldfish, actually carp, that the gang had caught in the wastebaskets on their fast trip to a nearby pond in Central Park.

The smallest fish was six inches, the largest could have been close to two feet. The fish were too big for the sinks or the aquarium; several were flapping around on the floor, gasping for air. James T. and Felipe turned to me, beaming, and said, "See, Mr. Kohl, you don't need to buy no fish. We took care of it."

At that point, Gloria, Haydee, Josi, and John came into the class with a garbage can filled with yet more carp. They told me they had dumped the can's contents in front of some rich apartment house because they had people there who always cleaned up the garbage. I didn't know whether to blow up or laugh, to resign my job or congratulate the class for stocking the aquarium, and try to cover for them and myself. I simply did not know what to do. Felipe rescued me. He told me not to worry, that all the dead and big fish would be taken home and eaten. James T. added that it

would be a whole system, just like I was talking about in the morning. Nothing would be wasted.

I managed to get through the afternoon, but have no idea how. We ended up with an aquarium that contained three greedy seven- or eight-inch-long carp that ate bits and scraps of everything including the few guppies and goldfish I foolishly tried to introduce.

In a way the aquarium was like our class. Several large fish overwhelming all the others and a teacher who, though bigger than the students, was always on the verge of being eaten up by the class.

James T. and Felipe were the kind of children who some cynical educators would classify as hyperactive, educationally handicapped, retarded, disturbed, learning disabled, and so forth. They were all of these in class, and in their lives none of these. They hated school, had experienced five and a half years of bad teaching, and acted out their hostility to stay sane in an insane situation. I watched them grow, from tossing books around the classroom to sneaking looks at them and by June asking me for help in reading after school. They changed slowly, yet compared to the children at the Reece School, they seemed to be leaping forward.

James T. turned out to be a very skilled artist. He told me that when he saw colors he could taste them in his mouth, and I once caught him dipping his fingers in our tempera paints and licking them. I surprised him one day by giving him a box of pastels. I made up some story that the school was providing special art material to students of talent to help decorate the halls. James T. made several beautiful pastel drawings. A particular favorite of mine (which I still have) is a drawing of Moby Dick on black construction paper. The black underlies the pastel white whale, deep blue water, and pale blue sky, giving the whole an appropriately ominous feeling.

I mounted a number of James T.'s pastels on poster board and hung them in the hall. This got me in trouble several weeks later when the district art supervisor came into my class and in front of the students told me to take down James T.'s posters. I remembered what had happened to me with the sub in 140 and decided

to stall. I muttered something that could have been taken for assent, but explained that we were about to take an important phonics test. By this time I'd learned that phonics always takes preference over any other matter.

The supervisor didn't give up easily on the pastels and was waiting in my classroom when I returned from dismissing the class. The assistant principal accompanied her. Lois was a very sympathetic woman who protected her teachers. I could see James T. and Felipe hiding behind the swinging doors down the hall. The supervisor advised me that pastels were a sixth-grade medium and that since I was teaching fifth grade, my students couldn't use pastels. She showed me a passage in the school district's art curriculum manual that confirmed her contention and insisted again that the offending art be removed. She also wanted to confiscate the pastels in my room. I politely objected, pointing out that the 5-1 class, of so-called gifted students (my class was 5-7, the bottom of our grade), used pastels. My motivation was to show my students and particularly James T. that he could do work that was as good as or better than that of some of the students in 5-1. She said that the only reason 5-1 was allowed to use pastels was that they all read and did math on a sixth-grade or better level. By now I was getting angry and was about to argue that art and reading skills had no direct relationship, that the development of any skill could lead to confidence in other areas, that there was no set sequence of the use of art materials, that . . . Lois put her hand on my shoulder and shrugged. Her eyes told me what I quickly realized. We were in an educational madhouse and my students and I would be the losers if I protested any further. James T.'s work came down. The supervisor even demanded that I turn over the pastels, but since they were not the brand bought by the school I was able to keep them.

James T. and Felipe burst into the room when my visitors had left. They wanted to know why I had given in and accused me of not caring about them. James T. picked up the box of pastels and carefully selected one of his favorite colors, a deep red, and broke

it. Before he could destroy the set, I grabbed it and told him it was mine, not the school's, and he couldn't treat my property that way. I also told him that the drawings had to come down or I'd be fired; it was as simple as that. I wanted to stay with the class, not be fired, and would hang them up in the classroom if it was okay with the assistant principal. He could also keep the pastels and use them in class; they were a gift. He said he'd think about it and the two of them left.

The next morning James T. and Felipe were waiting for me at the classroom door. James T. had drawn an elaborate sheriff's badge, which Felipe presented to me. It said: "Honorary Student."

Felipe could make leaps like that. His mind and his temperament were poetic. I liked to play language games with the class when they were under control. There was one particular exercise where students had to do variations on the metaphor "He had a heart of gold" by using the form:

_____	had a	_____	of	_____
[name]		[body part]		[animal/ vegetable/ mineral]

Typical responses were:

She had a heart of stone.
He had a head of rocks.
He had a fist of steel.

Felipe's responses were:

James T. has a finger of yellow blood.
Gloria has a half face of gold and another half face of angry.

James T. loved yellow and occasionally used his finger to apply yellow tints to some of his work. Gloria was well known for being two-faced—sweet, kind, fickle, and dangerous.

James T. and Felipe weren't the only children who taught me how to teach them and gave me hints about what interested ten- and eleven-year-olds. One day Lilian, one of the few quiet children, was looking through my salesman's case that I kept full of learning materials. Carrying the case to school had become a habit after a few weeks at 145, when I realized how much children love to discover new things without having to be told they must learn about them. The case usually contained books, magazines, games, magnets, magnifying glasses, free samples, newspapers—anything I thought might interest the class. The children were allowed to look through it and borrow something after they had handed their finished work in to me and waited while I graded it. That day Lilian came upon a blueprint of one of my father's old jobs, which I had asked for. She spread the blueprint on the floor and began puzzling out what was on it. Carlos Gomez, whose father was the janitor of a large apartment house, immediately recognized it as the floor plan of a building. His father had taught him a bit about blueprint reading and he attracted a crowd of about a dozen admiring classmates as he revealed the mysteries of architectural drawing to Lilian.

Carlos was usually quiet and studious. He always finished his work quickly, always asked for more, never wanted to pause and chat. This was the liveliest I'd seen him, and watching the scene in the back of the room caused me to wonder what was locked up in all the children, what they knew and could contribute. How to find out? How to do so when so much of my energy went into controlling them and filling in forms and doing workbooks just to get through the day in moderate peace?

I taped the blueprint to the blackboard and explained that my father was a builder. Vincent asked if he would come to visit the class. Gloria wanted to know if he was better looking than I was. It was almost three o'clock and so instead of explaining at length, I described the function of a blueprint and assigned the students the task of drawing a blueprint of their apartments for homework. It was the most successful assignment I'd given so far.

When the students brought their assignments in the next day, it was clear that something special had happened. Just about everyone had drawn a coherent representation of where they lived. A number of students had got help from brothers and sisters. Some used top-down perspective, others mixed different perspectives; different labeling systems were invented. We spent the entire morning looking over the drawings and talking about them. Many of the children knew each other's apartments and picked up on a missing window or misplaced chair or table. We concluded the discussion by drawing floor plans of the classroom.

The morning was one of the few I experienced at 145 that gave me a glimpse of what a good classroom could be like. If I had been more experienced, it would have been possible to follow up and develop a more extended curriculum revolving around building construction, model making, scale drawing, and symbol systems in general. But the burden of daily routine, the fear that reading, writing, and arithmetic wouldn't be adequately mastered if I followed the students' interests and planned around them, and the simple fact that learning to teach was exhausting work that left little time to research and plan, sent me back to my usual routine the next day.

But by June the first two hours of the morning were won. We talked and read together. I took my Spanish lesson. We discussed history, science, and art. No one acted too disruptively. The last hour of the morning was a strain on all of us. It was my most rigid time of day, and whenever possible I extended recess and left for lunch early.

The students won the afternoon. By one o'clock I was too exhausted to entertain, discipline, or teach the class. But eventually this time became fun for all of us. They could paint, draw, sculpt, do science experiments, read or do math, get individual help from me, listen to music, and occasionally dance. The only conditions were that they couldn't fight (they did occasionally) and they had to put everything away and clean up before three (they didn't occasionally). Contrary to my fears when I agreed to let the students have the afternoon to themselves, they didn't all paint the whole

time, or sit filing their nails, or argue. Some students chose to do math, others science or reading, as well as art. The art itself became increasingly interesting and I began to bring in books on techniques and set them problems. The students used me too—asked for help, for resources and ideas. I still felt guilty about these "loose" afternoons, but they provided an important stage in learning how to maintain control without being coercive and how to teach skills in a creative and informal context.

June was the best teaching time I'd ever had and I was already looking forward to September. In one of the final faculty meetings, the principal gave a talk about how he wanted an open exchange between himself and the staff and asked if anyone had any comments on the school's reading program. There was silence in the room. One teacher yawned, the others kept their eyes away from the principal and their hands down. But I raised my hand and went on about how there was no coherent reading program at the school and offered ideas I'd heard or read about that could help our students. The principal smiled and thanked me for my input, but his eyes made it clear that I should have kept my mouth shut. The woman sitting next to me, an older teacher who had been very helpful to me in my first two months, whispered, "You won't be here next year."

She was right, of course. I was involuntarily transferred out of P.S. 145 with the feeling that I was being thrown out of a garden I'd worked on just as the blooming season was beginning and before the ripening of the fruits.

EXCERPT FROM *36 CHILDREN*

My alarm clock rang at seven-thirty, but I was up and dressed at seven. It was only a fifteen-minute bus ride from my apartment on 90th Street and Madison Avenue to the school on 119th Street and Madison.

There had been an orientation session the day before. I remembered the principal's words. "In times like these, this is the most exciting place to be, in the midst of ferment and creative activity. Never has teaching offered such opportunities . . . we are together here in a difficult situation. They are not the easiest children, yet the rewards are so great—a smile, loving concern, what an inspiration, a felicitous experience."

I remembered my barren classroom, no books, a battered piano, broken windows and desks, falling plaster, and an oppressive darkness.

I was handed a roll book with thirty-six names and thirty-six cumulative record cards, years of judgments already passed upon the children, their official personalities. I read through the names, twenty girls and sixteen boys, the 6-1 class, though I was supposed to be teaching the fifth grade and had planned for it all summer. Then I locked the record cards away in the closet. The children would tell me who they were. Each child, each new school year, is potentially many things, only one of which the cumulative record card documents. It is amazing how "emotional" problems can disappear, how the dullest child can be transformed into the keenest and the brightest into the most ordinary when the prefabricated judgments of other teachers are forgotten.

The children entered at nine and filled up the seats. They were silent and stared at me. It was a shock to see thirty-six African

American faces before me. No preparation helped. It is one thing to be liberal and talk, another to face something and learn that you're afraid.

The children sat quietly, expectant. *Everything must go well; we must like each other.*

Hands went up as I called the roll. Anxious faces, hostile, indifferent, weary of the ritual, confident of its outcome.

The smartest class in the sixth grade, yet no books.

"Write about yourselves, tell me who you are." (I hadn't said who I was, too nervous.)

Slowly they set to work, the first directions followed—and if they had refused?

Then arithmetic, the children working silently, a sullen, impenetrable front. *To talk to them, to open them up this first day.*

"What would you like to learn this year? My name is Mr. Kohl."

Silence, the children looked up at me with expressionless faces, thirty-six of them crowded at thirty-five broken desks. *This is the smartest class?*

Explain: they're old enough to choose, enough time to learn what they'd like as well as what they have to.

Silence, a restless movement rippled through the class. *Don't they understand? There must be something that interests them, that they care to know more about.*

A hand shot up in the corner of the room.

"I want to learn more about volcanoes. What are volcanoes?"

The class seemed interested. I sketched a volcano on the blackboard, made a few comments, and promised to return.

"Anything else? Anyone else interested in something?"

Silence, then the same hand.

"Why do volcanoes form?"

And during the answer:

"Why don't we have a volcano here?"

A contest. The class savored it, I accepted. Question, response, question. I walked toward my inquisitor, studying his mischievous eyes, possessed and possessing smile. I moved to con-

gratulate him, my hand went happily toward his shoulder. I dared because I was afraid.

His hands shot up to protect his dark face, eyes contracted in fear, body coiled ready to bolt for the door and out, down the stairs into the streets.

"But why should I hit you?"

They're afraid too!

Hands relaxed, he looked torn and puzzled. I changed the subject quickly and moved on to social studies—How We Became Modern America.

"Who remembers what America was like in 1800?"

A few children laughed; the rest barely looked at me.

"Can anyone tell me what was going on about 1800? Remember, you studied it last year. Why don't we start more specifically? What do you think you'd see if you walked down Madison Avenue in those days?"

A lovely hand, almost too thin to be seen, tentatively rose.

"Cars?"

"Do you think there were cars in 1800? Remember that was over a hundred and fifty years ago. Think of what you learned last year and try again. Do you think there were cars then?"

"Yes . . . no . . . I don't know."

She withdrew, and the class became restless as my anger rose.

At last another hand.

"Grass and trees?"

The class broke up as I tried to contain my frustration.

"I don't know what you're laughing about—it's the right answer. In those days Harlem was farmland with fields and trees and a few houses. There weren't any roads or houses like the ones outside, or street lights or electricity. There probably wasn't even a Madison Avenue."

The class was outraged. It was inconceivable to them that there was a time their Harlem didn't exist.

"Stop this noise and let's think. Do you believe that Harlem was here a thousand years ago?"

A pause, several uncertain Noes.

"It's possible that the land was green then. Why couldn't Harlem also have been green a hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago?"

No response. The weight of Harlem and my whiteness and strangeness hung in the air as I droned on, lost in my righteous monologue. The uproar turned into sullen silence. A slow nervous drumming began at several desks; the atmosphere closed as intelligent faces lost their animation. Yet I didn't understand my mistake, the children's rejection of me and my ideas. Nothing worked, I tried to joke, command, play—the children remained joyless until the bell, then quietly left for lunch.

There was an hour to summon energy and prepare for the afternoon, yet it seemed futile. What good are plans, clever new methods and materials, when the children didn't—wouldn't—care or listen? Perhaps the best solution was to prepare for hostility and silence, become the cynical teacher, untaught by his pupils, ungiving himself, yet protected.

At one o'clock, my tentative cynicism assumed, I found myself once again unprepared for the children who returned and noisily and boisterously avoided me. Running, playing, fighting—they were alive as they tore about the room. I was relieved, yet how to establish order? I fell back on teacherly words.

"You've had enough time to run around. Everybody please go to your seats. We have work to begin."

No response. The boy who had been so scared during the morning was flying across the back of the room pursued by a demonic-looking child wearing black glasses. Girls stood gossiping in little groups, a tall boy fantasized before four admiring listeners, while a few children wandered in and out of the room. I still knew no one's name.

"Sit down, we've got to work. At three o'clock you can talk all you want to."

One timid girl listened. I prepared to use one of the teacher's most fearsome weapons and last resources. Quickly white paper

was on my desk, the blackboard erased, and numbers from 1 to 10 and 11 to 20 appeared neatly in two columns.

"We're now going to have an *important* spelling test. Please, young lady"—I selected one of the gossipers—"what's your name? Neomia, pass out the paper. When you get your paper, fold it in half, put your heading on it, and number carefully from one to ten and eleven to twenty, exactly as you see it on the blackboard."

Reluctantly the girls responded, then a few boys, until after the fourth, weariest, repetition of the directions the class was seated and ready to begin—I thought.

Rip, a crumpled paper flew onto the floor. Quickly I replaced it; things had to get moving.

Rip, another paper, rip. I got the rhythm and began quickly, silently replacing crumpled papers.

"The first word is *anchor*. The ship dropped an *anchor*. Anchor."

"A what?"

"Where?"

"Number two is *final*. *Final* means last, *final*. Number three is *decision*. He couldn't make a *decision* quickly enough."

"What *decision*?"

"What was number two?"

"*Final*."

I was trapped.

"Then what was number one?"

"*Anchor*."

"I missed a word."

"Number four is *reason*. What is the *reason* for all this noise?"

"Because it's the first day of school."

"Yeah, this is too hard for the first day."

"We'll go on without any comments whatever. The next word is——"

"What number is it?"

"——*direction*. What *direction* are we going? *Direction*."

"What's four?"

The test seemed endless, but it did end at two o'clock. What

next? Once more I needed to regain my strength and composure, and it was still the first day.

"Mr. Kohl, can we please talk to each other about the summer? We won't play around. Please, it's only the first day."

"I'll tell you what, you can talk, but on the condition that everyone, I mean *every single person in the room*, keeps quiet for one whole minute."

Teacher still had to show he was strong. To prove what? The children succeeded in remaining silent on the third attempt; they proved they could listen. Triumphant, I tried more.

"Now let's try for thirty seconds to think of one color."

"You said we could talk!"

"My head hurts, I don't want to think anymore."

"It's not fair!"

It wasn't. A solid mass of resistance coagulated, frustrating my need to command. The children would not be moved.

"You're right, I'm sorry. Take ten minutes to talk and then we'll get back to work."

For ten minutes the children talked quietly; there was time to prepare for the last half hour. I looked over my lesson plans: Reading, 9 to 10; Social Studies, 10 to 10:45, etc., etc. How absurd academic time was in the face of the real day. *Where to look?*

"You like it here, Mr. Kohl?"

I looked up into a lovely sad face.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean do you like it here, Mr. Kohl, what are you teaching us for?"

What?

"Well, I . . . not now. Maybe you can see me at three and we can talk. The class has to get back to work. All right, everybody back to your seats, get ready to work."

She had her answer and sat down and waited with the rest of the class. They were satisfied with the bargain. Only it was I who failed then; exhausted, demoralized, I only wanted three o'clock to arrive.

"It's almost three o'clock and we don't have much time left."

I dragged the words out, listening only for the bell.

"This is only the first day, and of course we haven't got much done. I expect more from you during the year . . ."

The class sensed the maneuver and fell nervous again.

"Take out your notebooks and open to a clean page. Each day except Friday you'll get homework."

My words weighed heavy and false; it wasn't my voice but some common tyrant or moralizer, a tired old man speaking.

"There are many things I'm not strict about but homework is the one thing I insist upon. In my class *everybody always* does homework. I will check your work every morning. Now copy the assignment I'm putting on the blackboard, and then when you're finished, please line up in the back of the room."

What assignment? What lie now? I turned to the blackboard, groping for something to draw the children closer to me, for something to let them know I cared. *I did care!*

"Draw a picture of your home, the room you live in. Put in all the furniture, the TV, the windows and doors. You don't have to do it in any special way but keep in mind that the main purpose of the picture should be to show someone what your house looks like."

The children laughed, pointed, then a hand rose, a hand I couldn't attach to a body or face. They all looked alike. I felt sad, lonely.

"Do you have to show your house?"

Two boys snickered. *Are there children ashamed to describe their homes?—have I misunderstood again?* The voice in me answered again.

"Yes."

"I mean . . . what if you can't draw, can you let someone help you?"

"Yes, if you can explain the drawing yourself."

"What if your brother can't draw?"

"Then write a description of your apartment. Remember, *everybody always* does homework in my classes."

The class copied the assignment and lined up, first collecting everything they'd brought with them. The room was as empty as it was at eight o'clock. Tired, weary of discipline, authority, school itself, I rushed the class down the stairs and into the street in some unacknowledged state of disorder.

The bedlam on 119th Street, the stooped and fatigued teachers smiling at each other and pretending *they* had had no trouble with their kids relieved my isolation. I smiled too, assumed the comfortable pose of casual success, and looked down into a mischievous face, the possessed eyes of the child who had thought I would hit him, Alvin, who kindly and thoughtfully said: "Mr. Kohl, how come you let us out so early today? We just had lunch . . ."

Crushed, I walked dumbly away, managed to reach the bus stop and make my way home. As my weariness dissolved, I only remembered of that first day Alvin and the little girl who asked if I liked being "there."

The books arrived the next morning before class. There were twenty-five arithmetic books from one publisher and twelve from another, but in the entire school there was no complete set of sixth-grade arithmetic books. A few minutes spent checking the first day's arithmetic assignment showed me that it wouldn't have mattered if a full set had existed, since half the class had barely mastered multiplication, and only one child, Grace, who had turned in a perfect paper, was actually ready for sixth-grade arithmetic. It was as though, encouraged to believe that the children couldn't to arithmetic by judging from the school's poor results in teaching it, the administration decided not to waste money on arithmetic books, thereby creating a vicious circle that made it even more impossible for the children to learn.

The situation was almost as dismal in reading—the top class of the sixth grade had more than half its members reading on fourth-grade level and only five or six children actually able to read through a sixth-grade book. There were two full sets of sixth-grade readers available, however, and after the arithmetic

situation I was grateful for anything. Yet accepting these readers put me as a teacher in an awkward position. The books were flat and uninteresting. They only presented what was pleasant in life, and even then limited the pleasant to what was publicly accepted as such. The people in the stories were all middle-class and their simplicity, goodness, and self-confidence were unreal. I couldn't believe in this foolish ideal and knew that anyone who had ever bothered to observe human life couldn't believe it. Yet I had to teach it, and through it make reading important and necessary. Remembering the children, their anxiety and hostility, the alternate indifference, suspicion, and curiosity they approached me with, knowing how essential it is to be honest with children, I felt betrayed by the books into hypocrisy. No hypocrite can win the respect of children, and without respect one cannot teach.

One of the readers was a companion to the social studies unit on the growth of the United States and was full of stories about family fun in a Model T Ford, the first wireless radio in town, and the joys of wealth and progress. The closest the book touched upon human emotion or the real life of real children was in a story which children accepted a new invention before their parents did, even though the adults laughed at the children. Naturally, everything turned out happily.

The other reader was a miscellany of adventure stories (no human violence or antagonists allowed, just treasure hunts, animal battles, close escapes), healthy poems (no love except for mother, father, and nature), and a few harmless myths (no Oedipus, Electra, or Prometheus). I also managed to get twenty dictionaries in such bad condition that the probability of finding any word still intact was close to zero.

The social studies texts (I could choose from four or five) praised industrial America in terms that ranged from the enthusiastic to the exorbitant. Yet the growth of modern industrial society is fascinating, and it was certainly possible to supplement the text with some truth. I decided to work with what was given me and attempt to teach the sixth-grade curriculum as written in

the New York City syllabus, ignoring as long as possible the contradictions inherent in such a task.

The class confronted me, surrounded by my motley library, at nine that second morning and groaned.

"Those phoney books?"

"We read them already, Mr. Kohl."

"It's a cheap, dirty, bean school."

My resolve weakened, and I responded out of despair.

"Let me put it straight to you. These are the only books here. I have no more choice than you do and I don't like it any better. Let's get through them and maybe by then I'll figure out how to get better ones."

The class understood and accepted the terms. As soon as the books were distributed the first oral reading lesson began. Some children volunteered eagerly, but most of the class tried not to be seen. The children who read called out the words, but the story was lost. I made the lesson as easy as possible by helping children who stumbled, encouraging irrelevant discussion, and not letting any child humiliate himself. It was bad enough that more than half the class had to be forced to use books they couldn't read.

The lesson ended, and a light-skinned boy raised his hand.

"Mr. Kohl, remember that ten minutes you gave us yesterday? Couldn't we talk again now? We're tired after all this reading."

I wasn't sure how to take Robert's request. My initial feeling was that he was taking advantage of me and trying to waste time. I felt, along with the official dogma, that no moment in school should be wasted—it must all be preplanned and structured. Yet why shouldn't it be "wasted"? Hadn't most of the class wasted years in school, not merely moments?

I remembered my own oppressive school days in New York City, moving from one subject to another without a break, or at most, with a kind teacher letting us stand and stretch in unison; I remember Reading moving into Social Studies into Arithmetic. How hateful it seemed then. Is it a waste to pause, talk, or think between subjects? As a teacher I, too, needed a break.

"You're right, Robert, I'm tired, too. Everybody can take ten minutes to do what you want, and then we'll move on to social studies."

The class looked fearful and amazed—freedom in school, do what you want? For a few minutes they sat quietly and then slowly began to talk. Two children walked to the piano and asked me if they could try. I said of course, and three more children joined them. It seemed so easy; the children relaxed. I watched closely and suspiciously, realizing that the tightness with time that exists in the elementary school has nothing to do with the quantity that must be learned or the children's needs. It represents the teacher's fear of loss of control and is nothing but a weapon used to weaken the solidarity and opposition of the children that too many teachers unconsciously dread.

After the ten minutes I tried to bring the children back to work. They resisted, tested my determination. I am convinced that a failure of will at that moment would have been disastrous. It was necessary to compel the children to return to work, not due to my "authority" or "control" but because they were expected to honor the bargain. They listened, and at that moment I learned something of the toughness, consistency, and ability to demand and give respect that enables children to listen to adults without feeling abused or brutalized and, therefore, becoming defiant.

I tried How We Became Modern America again. It was hopeless. The children acted as if they didn't know the difference between rivers, islands, oceans, and lakes; between countries, cities, and continents; between ten years and two centuries. Either their schooling had been hopeless or there was a deeper reason I did not yet understand underlying the children's real or feigned ignorance. One thing was clear, however, they did not want to hear about the world and, more specifically, modern America from me. The atmosphere was dull as I performed to an absent audience.

"The steam engine was one of the most important . . . Alvin, what was I talking about?"

"Huh?"

He looked dull, his face heavy with resignation, eyes vacant, nowhere . . .

The morning ended on that dead note, and the afternoon began with an explosion. Alvin, Maurice, and Michael came dashing in, chased by a boy from another class who stuck his head and fist in the room, rolled his eyes, and muttered, "Just you wait, Chipmunk."

As soon as he disappeared the three boys broke up.

"Boy, is he dumb. You sure psyched him."

"Wait till tomorrow in the park."

The other children returned and I went up to the three boys and said as openly as I could, "What's up?"

They moved away. Alvin muttered something incomprehensible and looked at the floor. As soon as they reached the corner of the room the laughter began again. Maurice grabbed Michael's glasses and passed them to Alvin. Michael grabbed Alvin's pencil and ran to the back of the room as one of the girls said to me:

"Mr. Kohl, they're bad. You ought to hit them."

Refusing that way out I watched chaos descend once more. Only this time, being more familiar with the faces and feeling more comfortable in the room, I discerned some method in the disorder. Stepping back momentarily from myself, forgetting my position and therefore my need to establish order, I observed the children and let them show me something of themselves. There were two clusters of boys and three of girls. There were also loners watching shyly or hovering eagerly about the peripheries of the groups. One boy sat quietly drawing, oblivious to the world. As children entered the room they would go straight to one group or another, hover, or walk over to the boy who was drawing and watch silently. Of the two boys' groups, one was whispering conspiratorially while the other, composed of Alvin, Maurice, Michael, and two others, was involved in some wild improbable mockery of tag. Alvin would tag himself and run. If no one was watching him he'd stop, run up to one of the others, tag himself again, and the chase was on—for a second. The pursuer

would invariably lose interest, tag himself, and the roles would be switched until they all could collide laughing, slapping palms, and chattering. The other group paid no attention—they were talking of serious matters. They looked bigger, older, and tougher.

There wasn't time to observe the girls. The tag game seemed on the verge of violence and, frightened, I stepped back into the teacherly role, relaxed and strengthened with my new knowledge of the class, and asked in a strong quiet voice for the homework. I felt close to the children—observing them, my fear and self-consciousness were forgotten for a moment. It was the right thing. The girls went to their desks directly while the boys stopped awkwardly and made embarrassed retreats to their seats.

I am convinced that the teacher must be an observer of his class as well as a member of it. He must look at the children, discover how they relate to each other and the room around them. There must be enough free time and activity for the teacher to discover the children's human preferences. Observing children at play and mischief is an invaluable source of knowledge about them—about leaders and groups, fear, courage, warmth, isolation. Teachers consider the children's gym or free play time their free time, too, and usually turn their backs on the children when they have most to learn from them.

I went through a year of teacher training at Teachers College, Columbia, received a degree, and heard no mention of how to observe children, nor even a suggestion that it was of value. Without learning to observe children and thereby knowing something of the people one is living with five hours a day, the teacher resorts to routine and structure for protection. The class is assigned seats, the time is planned down to the minute, subject follows subject—all to the exclusion of human variation and invention.

I witnessed the same ignorance of the children in a private school I once visited, only it was disguised by a progressive egalitarian philosophy. The teachers and students were on a first-name basis; together they chose the curriculum and decided upon the schedule. Yet many of the teachers knew no more of their

classes than the most rigid public-school teachers. They knew only of their pupils and their mutual relationships in contexts where the teacher was a factor. It was clear to me, watching the children when the teacher left the room, that the children's preferences "for the teachers" were not the same as their human preferences (which most likely changed every week). That is not an academic point, for observation can open the teacher to his pupils' changing needs, and can often allow him to understand and utilize internal dynamic adjustments that the children make in relation to each other, rather than impose authority from without.

After the first few days of the year, my students are free to move wherever they want in the room, my role being arbiter when someone wants to move into a seat whose occupant does not want to vacate or when health demands special consideration. I have never bothered to count the number of continual, self-selected seat changes in my classes, yet can say that they never disrupted the fundamental fabric of the class. Rather, they provided internal adjustments and compensations that avoided many possible disruptions. Children fear chaos and animosity. Often they find ways of adjusting to difficult and sensitive situations (when free to) before their teachers are aware they exist.

Only fourteen of the thirty-six children brought in homework that second afternoon, and twelve of them were girls. One of the boys, I noticed, was the quiet artist. Here was a critical moment that plunged me back into the role of participant and destroyed my objective calm. What was the best reaction to the children's lack of response, especially after I'd been so pompous and adamant about homework the first day? How many of the twenty-two missing homeworks were the result of defiance (perhaps merited), of inability, of shame at what the result might reveal? Was there a simple formula: *Good = do homework* and another *Bad = not do homework?* Or would these formulas themselves negate the honesty and sincerity that could lead the children to find a meaningful life in school? At that moment in the classroom I had no

criteria by which to decide and no time to think out my response. It would have been most just to react in thirty-six different ways to the thirty-six different children, but there was no way for me to be most just at that moment. I had to react intuitively and immediately, as anyone in a classroom must. There is never time to plot every tactic. A child's responses are unpredictable, those of groups of children even more so, unless through being brutalized and bullied they are made predictable. When a teacher claims he knows exactly what will happen in his class, exactly how the children will behave and function, he is either lying or brutal.

That means that the teacher must make mistakes. Intuitive, immediate responses can be right and magical, can express understanding that the teacher doesn't know he has, and lead to reorganizations of the teacher's relationship with his class. But they can also be peevish and petty, or merely stupid and cruel. Consistency of the teacher's response is frequently desirable, and the word "consistency" is a favorite of professors at teacher training institutions. Consistency can sometimes prevent discovery and honesty. More, consistency of response is a function of the consistency of a human personality, and that is, at best, an unachievable ideal.

I've said many stupid, unkind things in my classroom, and insulted children when they threatened me too much. On the other hand, I've also said some deeply affecting things, moved children to tears by unexpected kindnesses, and made them happy with praise that flowed unashamedly. I've wanted to be consistent and have become more consistent. That seems the most that is possible, a slow movement toward consistency tempered by honesty. The teacher has to live with his own mistakes, as his pupils have to suffer them. Therefore, the teacher must learn to perceive them as mistakes and find direct or indirect ways to acknowledge his awareness of them and of his fallibility to his pupils.

The ideal of the teacher as a flawless moral exemplar is a devilish trap for the teacher as well as a burden for the child. I once had a pupil, Narciso, who was overburdened by the perfection of adults, and especially, of teachers. His father demanded he believe

in this perfection as he demanded Narciso believe in and acquiesce to absolute authority. It was impossible to approach the boy for his fear and deference. I had terrified him. He wouldn't work or disobey. He existed frozen in silence. One day he happened to pass by a bar where some other teachers and I were sitting having beers. He was crushed; *teachers don't do that.* He believed so much in what his father and some teachers wanted him to believe that his world collapsed. He stayed away from school for a while, then returned. He smiled and I returned the smile. After a while he was at ease in class and could be himself, delightful and defiant, sometimes brilliant, often lazy, an individual reacting in his unique way to what happened in the classroom.

It is only in the world of Dick and Jane, Tom and Sally, that the *always* right and righteous people exist. In a way, most textbooks, and certainly the ones I had to use in the sixth grade, protect the pure image of the teacher by showing the child that somewhere in the ideal world that inspires books all people are as "good" as the teacher is supposed to be! It is not insignificant that it is teachers and not students who select school readers, nor that, according to a friend of mine who edits school texts, the books were written for the teachers and not for children for this very reason.

Of course the teacher is a moral exemplar—an example of all the confusion, hypocrisy, and indecision, of all the mistakes, as well as the triumphs, of moral man. The children see all this, whatever they pretend to see. Therefore, to be more than an example, to be an educator—someone capable of helping lead the child through the labyrinth of life—the teacher must be honest to the children about his mistakes and weaknesses; he must be able to say that he is wrong or sorry, that he hadn't anticipated the results of his remarks and that he regretted them, or hadn't understood what a child meant. It is the teacher's struggle to be moral that excites his pupils; it is honesty, not rightness, that moves children.

I didn't know all of this when I decided that second day to forget the twenty-two undone homeworks and remark that the first homework wasn't that important. I was just feeling my way.