Teaching, Learning and Other Miracles

An Excerpt from Chapter Three: "What I learned from my first day of Kindergarten"

... When I entered the inner sanctum of the kindergarten classroom on that first day, I believed that all would be well with the world from now on -- the hope of a child who had placed all of her gambling chips on a fantasy world called School. Yes, there was disappointment that School would have to be the English one many blocks away and not the French one just around the corner where all of my friends were going. But no matter. At least I would be there. I felt my heart beating as I was shown to my seat in the long row. It was intimidating to be in an English environment although I was not fully conscious of what I was really feeling at the time. All I knew was that everything that had been familiar to me was now gone, had now vanished by a linguistic sleight of hand. I was quiet as a mouse when the teacher began roll call. I wasn't the most confident child to begin with, given my background. And then came a sense of foreboding. Many family names slid easily off my teacher's tongue. Those were "Canadian" names: names that were easy for the teacher, names that were part of the same club. Some names were a bit different but those she could handle. I felt dread rising within me with each passing letter of the alphabet. And then finally she came to S. There was a Smith before me -- I could only imagine such good fortune. And then the ultimate tongue twister, the perfect name of not-belonging, a label of outsiderness.

But still I was unprepared for the cruelty to follow. As my teacher stumbled over the three consonants in a row, her face became redder and more upset. I wished she would have asked me how to pronounce my name. That would have ended her agony at once. As I was just about to say my name, she threw the list down on her desk, glared at me and said: "When you immigrants come to this country, why can't you just shorten your names to make it easier for us?" I might as well have been hit by a truck. The question reverberated in my ears like a thunderclap. I felt sick; I wanted the floor to open up in front of me and to just disappear. Instead, a sea of little faces all stared at me: some were smirking, but others were as just as frightened as I was. They too had "strange" names; it was just that mine came toward the end of the alphabet and by then the teacher had lost any patience she may have had. I took some comfort in the realization that I was not the only immigrant child in the class. There were other children there of displaced persons from the War. In fact playing in the schoolyard at recess meant being immersed in a multitude of languages and cultures --- at that time primarily from Eastern and Central Europe. Multiculturalism to me was as natural as breathing. Those of us who were "different" formed an immediate and unspoken alliance which would carry us through many difficult times.

When I got home that evening I approached my father and, trying to sound nonchalant, I asked him whether we could shorten our family name. He looked genuinely puzzled for a moment and then asked me whether my teacher had suggested this to me. I nodded and burst into tears. My father was usually a prisoner to his silent rage about that war. But every so often a ray of

sunshine would peer through his sorrow and one could witness what he might have been. And this was one such moment. Stepping outside of his woundedness for a while my father put me on his knee and gave me a hug. "You tell your teacher", he said, "that our name is as good as anybody else's and we're not going to change it -- it's our name." His act of defiance gave me back my dignity, and when I walked into class the following day I told the teacher what he had said. She looked annoyed but she never bothered me about my name again. I tell this story for all children in classrooms who understand how easy it is for a teacher or for others to steal their sense of self with a careless indifference. An action doesn't necessarily have to be monstrous to end up causing havoc and or injustice. It can start out very simply with not allowing you to hold onto your name.

Most of the teachers at that time, however well meaning they might have been, did not recognize the value of our cultural backgrounds. They made us feel as if we had an unfortunate burden to carry and that the faster we rid ourselves of it, the better it would be for everyone. But what I came to believe is in fact the opposite. (Sometimes "bad" teachers" can teach you as much or more than "good" teachers.) On that first day of Kindergarten I came to understand that a name is a very sacred thing. Maybe if you have never had your name threatened or mocked, you cannot understand the humiliation. It is, like any other violation, an assault on your personhood. Today, as a university professor, I teach my students about issues of language, culture and identity in educational contexts, and I tell the story of my first day in Kindergarten in almost every such course that I teach.

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An Excerpt from the Introduction

INTRODUCTION
For Love of Teaching

It is up to each of you to work out your own liberation.
-Siddhartha

(Page 1 and 2)
This book is an exploration of teaching and learning in schools as a sacred life journey, a quest toward liberation. It seeks to pay tribute to one of the greatest gifts we can offer all children in our society --- a really good public education. I want this book to speak especially to and for teachers who wish to make a real difference in the lives of their students. Each chapter concerns, in different ways, the act of creating and of being in classrooms as sites of cultural encounters and spaces for dreams and friendship and knowledge. I wrote this book because School for me, as a child, was a magical place where miracles happened. I was given unimaginable treasures: the caring of several teachers, their genuine interest in the betterment of my life. Perhaps I was simply lucky, but that isn't simple at all. Teaching and learning within the embrace of cultural and linguistic diversity became a road toward recovery --- an odyssey of hope in the midst of darkness.

This book is autobiographical to the extent that I offer my own particular and perhaps idiosyncratic view of education; it is about sharing an everlasting quest toward a more

compassionate way of understanding teaching and learning in the world. I hope that this book will speak to other teachers --- and students --- who find themselves, as I did, on winding and often treacherous paths, longing to discover meaning and a glimpse of their own potential in their lives at school. While I share some personal stories about my school teaching years, about my university teaching and about my research work, underlying all of these is the story of how language, culture and school serendipitously came together in my childhood to offer me a way to survive. My childhood school journey tells me that teachers can and do make a profound difference in the lives of their students. I hope that each chapter that follows will offer inspiration and direction to anyone who appreciates the priceless opportunity that a good public education can offer to students of all backgrounds, cultures, races and religions.

I also wrote this book for the many children in our classrooms today who have experienced violence, war, abuse, poverty, and other traumas and oppressions, and for the many teachers who teach them. Some of these students may fall by the wayside – too weary to continue on their journey toward the life force, beaten down by the brutality of it all. As a child of Holocaust survivors, I too grew up in the shadows of horror. As a teacher I remember seeing bewilderment, even terror, on the faces of many of the children in my classrooms. And I remember asking myself: "Did they suffer as much or more than I did?" What is the purpose of one's life as a teacher and educator? Surely it is to lighten the load of our students. And perhaps we can then lighten our own. We in the field of education, either as practitioners or administrators or theorists, need to honour and respect the struggle of all students and their parents who are trying valiantly to overcome personal difficulties. We need to reserve our greatest respect for them. And we need for them to know that we care. We need to offer them a meaningful and pluralistic curriculum in a trusting environment.

But perhaps what motivated me most to write this book was that School really became my childhood salvation, just as later, teaching became my life's work. A long time ago I needed to reach out to those who could offer me sustenance, and now I seek to return this gift to others who are seeking renewal, as I once did. And for me this takes place in classrooms and in schools --- sacred spaces of possibility and of transformation. My vision of an inclusive, culturally responsive educator is one who brings to the classroom a new story, his or her own story, a kindred spirit who offers students a pathway toward wholeness. Perhaps this may sound lofty but I know it to be possible because I lived it. The title of Parker Palmer's book "The Courage to Teach" describes it completely and holds a simple but powerful truth: teaching is not only about "information and technique"; it is about the "capacity for connectedness" -- what Paul Tillich calls "the courage to be." It is, as Emily Dickinson has put it, "the thing with feathers", or as Bill Ayers describes it, "an act of hope for a better future."

One of the main goals of this book is to explore the ways in which teaching as an act of courage and beauty forms the basis for creating a spirit of community within the classroom and beyond. In the end it is really about courage and love. The word courage derives from the Latin root for heart. It comes from the support of our fellow human beings, and so from creating connections. School should be a meeting place continually reinventing itself so that there is always room for more "others", for more choices, for more dreams -- a path toward repair and restoration. The power of the teaching-learning experience lies in its potential to connect us to our selfhood, to

cultivate our own identities as well as our integrity, talents, and inner passions and drives which lie at the very core of our being... (p. 1, 2)

(middle of page 5 and page 6).

... I firmly believe, as an educator devoted to working for cross-cultural understanding, that the authentic educational debates are those in which theory and practice are sculpted into a discourse devoted towards the striving for conflict resolution and peace --- moral integrity and a true respect for diversity --- a respect for all humanity in the name of those who have suffered and those who continue to suffer at the hands of oppression all over the world. We must come together to teach and learn about how to find an end to violence, poverty, oppression and war, no matter what colour of the rainbow we happen to be, and no matter where we are coming from. The ultimate goal of this book is to bear witness to the courage of teaching and learning within a context of vulnerability --- or as Elliot Eisner put it, "on the edge of incompetence." In such an atmosphere we begin to teach with true compassion. I am afraid to think of where today's children of difference, of poverty, of abuse, and of war will be if we do not offer them an education open to the rainbow of diversity and mindful of the challenges of a "humanity in ruins", in Samuel Beckett's words.

I also wrote this book because I believe that it is crucial to recognize that education is about creating an attitude of reverence, passion and a love of learning in each child: what Joshua Heschel calls "radical amazement." This is what we really require in order to uplift the human spirit both within as well as outside of the classroom. And we need to teach that the human spirit is meant to be uplifted. Worthwhile education is soulful education. Soulful education seeks to share, not to impose. It offers loving authority by setting reasonable boundaries, not brute discipline denying personal choice. In the end it is not so much about technique as it is about presence, about the awareness of our frailties and of our splendid potentials --- about creating a world more joyful, more creative, more articulate, more caring, more loving, and more peaceful than it is now. We are, after all, wanderers of the desert, and it is the majesty of the educational enterprise to find a purpose for our wanderings and turn it into an aesthetic, affirming endeavour. Again quoting Beckett, the contemporary artist in responding to "the chaos of experience" must "find a form that accommodates the mess." This is just as true for the contemporary teacher who must find artful ways in the classroom to offer a road toward redemption and coexistence.

Teaching and learning are a shared enterprise which demand acknowledgement of the bright and dark sides of humanity –- a space in the continuum of time where we give one another permission to listen, liberate, respect, transform, and to heal one other. I took the treasures that were given to me by some teachers and in turn gave them to my own students when I became a teacher. And now as a professor of education I continue to share this message with as many teachers, students and parents as I can, because I know that "there, but for the grace of God, go I." Only love and compassion can guide us through the hardships of our lives – perhaps now more than ever – and onto the other side where we can live in safer places of hopes and dreams. I found such a 'promised land' in the classroom -- that is my safe place in the world, in spite of any of its shortcomings. Indeed, I discovered early on in my career that teaching is not merely about curriculum objectives or pedagogical strategies, or subject matter, or lesson plans or state

or provincial guidelines. It is first, foremost and always about saving lives. This is what a "culturally responsive" education must ultimately address. Nothing more or less really matters.