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LESSONS ALONG THE WAY

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In 1960 I attended second grade at Bullock School, a one-room school down the road from our farm. Since I had spent first grade in town where each grade had its own room with at least twenty students, I knew life at Bullock School would require many adjustments. I didn't know it at the time, but community and kindness were to become focal points and would contribute to my personal growth in significant ways. Indeed, my idea of good teaching and stewardship as well as the basis upon which I shape my own sense of human compassion began at Bullock School. To a large extent, the many lessons I learned that year, in and out of school, have even guided my professional research activities. I only spent one year at Bullock School, but it was a year packed full of growth and realizations—enough to last a lifetime. Mrs. Paul was my teacher; all the students were my peers. We, along with our parents and neighbors who supported Bullock School, were part of an agri-community that was quickly coming to the end of its time.

At Bullock school, I was one of seven in the second grade. We formed the largest class. My younger sister, Stacy, one of the three first graders, also attended Bullock, but Barbara, my older sister, was bussed into town for high school. Each school day we left walking the half mile to the “burg,” a little cluster of houses half way to Bullock school. Barb stopped off there to catch the bus, but Stacy and I joined about 15 other children and walked on to Bullock. Boys would walk with boys, girls with girls. We teased one another, ran ahead, taunted someone for some silly reason and generally did what kids do. It was an easy part of the day in the safety of that group, and I learned how to enjoy a long walk. These walks not only provided healthy

exercise that primed us for our lessons, but they were sort of a daily adventure into the community.

The Minick boys were the first to join the walk, for they lived between our house and the burg. Patches was closer to Barb's age, Tommy was a year older than I. The third brother, well, he's vague and shadowy now, some forty years later. These boys liked to play tricks on their mother. They often put live frogs and snakes into their lunch boxes as we walked home. I would imagine the scare these gave to Mrs. Minick. One time, Tommy made me open his lunch box just so I could see the snake. It wiggled and squirmed a lot as if it wanted out. I slammed the lid shut fast and hard. I felt grateful not to have brothers, because I did not want to encounter such daily goings-on. My pity for Mrs. Minick extended even deeper when I realized she had three boys, not just one. That meant three times the misery, three times the surprises, three times facing wiggly bait whenever she cleaned lunch boxes. Poor woman. Her boys were so unlike us girls. Yet, I admired them to no end, because their courage and mystery were so great.

Courage comes in different packages. I learned this at Bullock School. As in most one-room schools, each class will periodically sit at the recitation desk in front to receive lessons. Afterward we would return to our desks with homework to complete, however it often did not occupy us the whole day. On rainy days, we were doomed to listen to others' lessons. When lessons

Author's Note

Gregory Michigan, located fifteen miles from Chelsea, boasted a population of approximately 300 people in 1960. Most people farmed. Consolidation of the school system was not completed until 1963. Bullock school, my one-room school, was a standard construct with large windows, a single room, rows of single desks and a conference table at the front by the teacher's desk for daily lessons.

The grounds, like the front yards of our farms, included maples, oaks, and elm trees that shaded the single teeter-totter and swing set. Crab grass, wild flowers and weeds covered the earth. There were no fences or basketball hoops or ball diamonds. After consolidation, this place became someone's home when the building and land were sold.

from other grades were known or too hard we daydreamed or read. Often, though, Mrs. Paul dismissed the lower grades for early recess. This meant first, second and third graders could spend a larger portion of the day in playtime, outdoors if someone had the courage to inform her about our completed homework. Not an easy thing to do since it meant interrupting her lessons with the others. Somehow the challenge usually fell to me. My quickened heart beat, the shortness of breath, the doubt that would speed through my blood, all this became too familiar when I approached Mrs. Paul for early recess breaks. On the surface I looked brave to everyone else. My friends depended on me, so I pretended to do it with ease, always quietly and with respect, barely breathing. It was such a relief when she said, "Yes, you can go, but play quietly. I'll bring you back inside if I have to come out to quiet your voices." Her voice was always kind and gentle so that I often felt a little foolish for being fearful about asking.

Among my peers I soon gained a reputation for being dependable and brave. Even grown-ups began to say, "Oh, Susan, she's so sensible and you can really depend on her." I do not know if this was a curse or a blessing, but it certainly pressured me to live up to high expectations even when I was not sure I could. Since confidence in my abilities had not yet formed, fear merged with my shadow. I kept it hidden.

I do not think I could have articulated it then, but looking back I see 1960 as the year I pretended a lot. I pretended to be like the people in books. By then, I was reading more than anyone else I knew. It kept me in a separate world where my mind was constantly fed with new ideas and images. When I had to be in the real world, the one with everyone else, I just called up this pseudo-courage and went about the challenge at hand. As a result, my role as spokesperson for the second grade became well established. It confused me to be in such a leadership role. Today, I know the great irony of the situation caused my confusion. Each time I went forward, I had to find the right language, the right attitude, the right stance. I had to get the job done. It

was such hard work to pretend to be brave, even harder to be the second-grade leader, but it was worse to see my friends disappointed.

I didn't think much of my second grade voice, for it was attached to my body and that year my body suddenly betrayed me. After a tonsillectomy at the end of first grade, my body grew fatter. Then it lost two front teeth. My mother chopped my hair in some jagged style causing my hair to stick to my head, especially when it was dirty. All my clothes were too tight and I just wished I could go through the day being invisible. If I opened up my mouth to speak, people would look at me. I was different, too different for comfort, so I silenced my voice and kept it inside my head most of the time. It felt like insulation, rather than isolation, because the older girls often mothered me and welcomed my voice, thereby solidifying my role in our community.

I admired my classmates of the upper grades from afar, particularly Angela and Gladys who were wise and beautiful eighth-graders. They protected us from the bigger boys, and they welcomed us into their circle. When the older children decided to make a real teepee, Angela and Gladys were the first to allow the younger ones into it. That teepee was one place where my I could see that my voice was emerging. I would stand inside, sometimes alone if I was lucky enough, and whisper, then talk, then sing. I'd shut my eyes and pretend to be in history, on the plains, doing something like gathering firewood or herbs from the earth. I knew about this stuff; I was a reader and had read about Native American life on the plains. This knowledge gave me courage to assert myself which again brought me into the limelight. Even the bigger kids accepted my words, my voice. More than the power of my voice, though, that teepee brought us together as a family because I always stressed the "community good" as a Native American ideal. If we were going to pretend to be like the Indian, we had to put community first. Some of the boys did not like this, but Angela and Gladys respected it. They enforced it first, setting an example which we all followed. They were kind and so we all became kind, at least whenever we were

inside the teepee. Once outside, girls were targets for boys who assumed, that as females we were open prey. We would run, they would chase, but rarely were we caught. We'd reach the teepee, safe ground that converted even the roughest boy. It was a magical place inside that circle because there everyone placed the safety of the community first. I saw the idea of community transform roughness into kindness. I saw the power of an idea change people. At the time, I felt it, learning it through the heart and body first.

In the world of second grade, though, life changes quickly. Recess only lasted thirty minutes, hardly enough time to even stir up a good amount of pretend. Just when the intensity would be the strongest, Mrs. Paul would call us back in for more lessons. It was good for me, because I was curious. I liked to learn. Most of the time I would finish my homework in no time and then listen to the others' lessons.

Geography was the best. I began to see the globe as a place for special daydreams that connected to the information I learned from all the reading I was doing. I began to read the encyclopedia to discover things about the places and people that the fourth and fifth graders were learning. The spatial configuration of the land drew me forth as magnets attract metal. I could not be stopped. When it finally dawned on me that real people, like me and Stacy and Angela and Barbara, were standing and breathing on those spots, I couldn't stand it. I had to learn more. The globe burned on my brain. The rivers that ran here and there entered my eye. The oceans with sailors and whales and tides whispered in my ears. I could taste the winds as they came across the Himalayas and I would sweat as I read news of the equator. Geography! What great stuff! It was easy to memorize, too. The states and their capitals. The rivers and mountain ranges. The eastern and western oceans. The seas of the Middle East and Mediterranean regions. Russia. China. Indonesia. India. Africa. Australia. I fell in love. Europe. Japan. Greenland. Canada. South America. OOOhhh, how I loved geography. I lived for the

lessons given to the fourth and fifth graders, until Mrs. Paul stopped at a certain point. Then I had to wait and listen to the geography lessons intended for sixth, seventh and eighth grade. When I learned all their lessons, I had to branch out on my own. Since the encyclopedia at home only went so far, I had to get creative. I listened for tidbits of news from T.V. broadcasts and radio news reports. I looked up new books in our local library. I was a glutton for the National Geographics. I do not know what my parents made of all this. I can't remember being open about my new interest. As usual, I kept things secret, going about satisfying my needs in quiet ways. I did not ask a lot of questions, exactly. I just kept my eyes and ears open, waiting for more information. It lived whenever news about the people came my way. I loved knowing about their food, their dress, their religion. I liked seeing pictures of their houses and various forms of transportation. The idea that some people went about in boats instead of cars intrigued me. I wondered what breadfruit and green bananas were like. I longed to feel the heat and humidity of the jungle and hear the songs mothers sang to their babies as they lulled them into sleep. The instruments of the exotic music I read about were so strange. I found it hard to believe a pleasant sound could arise from a lap-held two stringed gourd-like thing. I knew it must be pleasant. National Geographic would not photograph ugly-sounding instruments. I knew the power of music for we had it at home. My father played the organ and sang. I played accordion as did my sisters. I yearned for what was not mine, because I valued what was mine. In a comparison contrast style, I checked what I did not know against what I did know. I deduced a lot but always had more questions than answers. Curiosity became a crown that I have never wanted to remove.

Life changes quickly in second grade, yes, but I learned through geography that life changes quickly everywhere. Change became natural. Curiosity prepared me and led me to develop survival techniques I still use today. Perhaps this could have happened in some other school. On the

other hand, I learned a great deal of geography specifically *because I had access to six grades beyond my own*. No one said to me, “No, this year you can only go as far as the second grade level.” Maybe we need to remove levels altogether and just teach children to go as far as they desire and to follow their interests. It worked in 1960 and still works today in our more progressive schools. For example, Montessori, Waldorf, and Sudbury schools allow a pedagogy that depends on a child’s affinity for learning to shape the curriculum and the boundaries within which the children find themselves.

There have been positive changes in education since 1960. Today we are more open to multiculturalism, and we make provisions for children with special challenges. In 1960, we did not do it. At that time, the “polio threat” was real and it hovered all around us. Mothers and fathers everywhere wanted to protect their children. My mother held the belief that cold water brought on polio. On hot days we were not allowed to swim in cold streams or lakes. We could not squirt ourselves with our garden hose or run through a sprinkler on the yard. Our legs were inspected and we had to walk up and down in front of Mother so she could watch our gait. I did not know what polio even was, but it made Mother scared so it also scared me. Then I learned in a very real way what polio could do to a community, to a family, to me.

Mother honored me one day by taking me with her to Mrs. Minick’s house. She said it was a time for “the girls,” so I knew I would not be playing with the boys. We arrived and Mrs. Minick had prepared cookies and coffee for us. I was told to go in the living room and talk with Mrs. Minick’s daughter. Daughter! What Daughter, I thought. Since when was there a girl in the Minick household. She was on the couch covered in a blanket, another quilt made by her mother. Pale, languid, she lay there and I did not know what to talk about. She had braces on her legs, but could not walk or even stand well. No one had ever talked about her. She never came to Bullock School, where I believed she belonged, like her brothers. In fact, her brothers had

never ever mentioned her. It was as if she did not exist. Her name is still unknown to me. “The no-name polio girl” is how I named her.

After leaving, I asked my mother numerous polio questions that she could not answer. After leaving, I looked at Mrs. Minick in a new way, with new respect. I could see new pain in her eyes. After leaving, I never argued with Mother when she asked us to get out of the lake. As an adult, I understood more. But as a child, I was thrust into a new worldview that included harshness and pain, the type that threatens life. My relationships at school shifted again. I could suddenly feel someone else’s troubles. I grew quieter, still. I became a quiet empathetic child who did not know what to do with so much emotion. As usual, my refuge was found in books. I read even more than before. I read about polio. It did not matter so much any more that I was missing teeth or my hair was chopped. At least I did not have a disease. I did not have braces on my legs, and I would not end up inside an iron lung. I could go to Bullock School and she could not. I often thought of “the no-name polio girl,” the “Minick Daughter” who spent days on the couch. I was told she was a reader, too, like me. It was impossible for me to realize that she was like me. I could not fathom how I was like her. The next time I went to see her, we talked about *Little Women*. I thought for a moment that we were alike, but then she tired so quickly and I was asked to leave. I can not remember going back there. I think mother was afraid to let me go, afraid I would catch polio. I do not know what happened to this girl. No one ever talked about her.

Everyone still talked about polio, though. We even talked about it in school as we studied science. It seems to me now, that we missed an opportunity to practice kindness and love. The mysterious causes of polio turned us into insensitive people. We let ignorance and fear rule. In school, in science class, we were learning to trust science. It was held up as a panacea. Science was always right. Yet, here was an example that proved science could fail and could cause negative behaviors in the kindest people, people like us. I never before had thought that anyone in our community would isolate one of

its own so intensely, and I learned that self preservation combined with a lack of knowledge can cause the ugliest behavior.

Unfortunately, those ugly behaviors are still active today whenever AIDS victims are revealed. Today, we can choose to model kindness and remember disease victimizes people. Sick people need kind treatment, not accusations. In my own teaching, I stress this when opportunities deem it appropriate. I name things. I put them in the open for discussion. I reconnect with history, showing my students that, from the a current view, behaviors created by the polio scare seem so ignorant. I raise questions that let them reconsider their own attitudes and expectations for answers in the future. In this way, I guide students to compassion. They begin to see that there is always more to learn, more to know and that trusting this idea creates hope and faith. I learned this implicitly at Bullock School, because I was constantly, each day, privy to what lie beyond the second grade.

Our days at Bullock had regular schedules for everything. They were comforting and I trusted them. On rainy days, Mrs. Paul often read books aloud. I never tired of her voice, even if I had already read the book. Her voice would rise and fall and swing about the words as if she were dancing through the plots. She would change her voice, making it deeper for male voices, higher and squeaky for elderly characters and whispery and soft for children. I learned about the hidden music in words through her intonation and rhythm. It lulled me into peace, but it awoke a deep felt-sense of language and meaning. My favorite books became the mysteries she read to us. Later in the third grade, when acquiring a new library card at a larger library I read through every mystery in the children's section. Today I still read mysteries when I need fun. Then, as now, mysteries appealed to my curiosity. Unlike me, my sister liked *The Little House on the Prairie* series. She identified with one of the girls in the stories. She read every book in the series and still talks about them. The Bullock link is obvious. She also was enthralled with poetry, even though the poetry Mrs. Paul read to us was usually

harder to understand. A few years later, Stacy received a collection of children's poetry that she worked hard at memorizing. I found these poems "silly", but today Stacy can still recite much of what she memorized. It is amazing to hear her recite a poem like "Song of the Pop-Bottlers"; it's a tongue-twister, but at age 49, Stacy still remembers Morris Bishop's poem:

Pop Bottles pop-bottles
In pop shops;
The pop-bottles Pop bottles
Poor Pop drops.
When Pop drops pop-bottles,
Pop-bottles plop"
Pop-bottle-tops topple!
Pop mops slop!
Stop! Pop'll drop bottle!
Stop, Pop, stop!
When Pop bottles pop-bottles,
Pop-bottles pop!

From my perspective, I could only enjoy the surprise I felt when I heard words placed together that I had not thought would fit. Poetry continues to surprise me today. When teaching it in introductory literature courses, I try to emphasize "linguistic surprise" hoping it too will hold the attention of a student who struggles with understanding the cryptic nature of poetry.

Once a week Mrs. Paul would set aside time for art. Shapes, designs, lines, colors, textures, all these were mixed together until our young eyes discerned "art". Mrs. Paul always held up our "art" and praised it. She praised even the ugliest piece and made us see something in it we had not before. She made us stretch our eyes and imaginations. Sometimes art class would not be interactive. Instead, she would show us pictures of old buildings with frescoes or sculptures. We heard about the great artists: Monet, Manet, Picasso, Gauguin and of course Michelangelo. I was especially attracted to Gauguin because he left home for Tahiti. His work brought Tahiti, and all island people, into focus. My affinity with his work grew even stronger when I learned that his birthday was also the same as mine. Images of Tahiti kept me warm in my daydreams and

art began to mingle with geography. I did not see this as interdisciplinary learning then, but I do today. In my composition classes, I regularly assign students to write about art and geography. Sometimes they research islands; sometimes they visit a museum. Days of Bullock School lessons linger. I am amazed at the way second grade still directs what I do.

In warmer months, the students at Bullock made excursions into the fields around the school. We searched for fossils, picked wildflowers, and brought specimens of bugs back to the school for “scientific observation.” One time, we even learned how to “sterilize” water. Science lived when it extended beyond our books. I do not know when I learned to dislike science, the seventh grade perhaps when it became too technical, when we were not allowed into the field. It took me years to rediscover science and to learn that in this subject area I am an experiential learner. Science is too abstract unless I am “doing it.” I hold this lesson close to me, now. It shapes much of my scholarly and pedagogical interests. As science was for me, composition and literature may be too abstract for some students. Since I can not determine who those might be, I advocate and use experiential learning. I guess I am just following Mrs. Paul’s example.

When our district consolidated in 1961, I was bussed into a different county where there were two third grade classes, two rooms for every grade. I was one of three Susan’s in that consolidated system. I became “Sue” so someone else could be Susie and Susan. I did not want to be Sue. I was Susan but had to accept this new name because I drew a shorter straw. Little did I realize how much I had lost by changing schools. It was not just my name, it was my community. It was a new school and a new world. Harder, less amiable. I wanted Bullock back.

Today, I see that I was one of the lucky ones in our country. I lived this especially rich second grade, made rich by the communal environment inherent in one-room schools. Our teacher was bright enough to make our days interesting. She knew respect initiated respect, so she respected us and we respected her. Mrs. Paul’s consistent

conscientious professionalism inspired me; but, in the second grade I did not know it. Each time she took out lesson plans for grades three, four, five, and so on, I learned that making a difference requires different packages for different people. Whenever, she answered even the dumbest question, I learned to respect someone’s curiosity. From her answers, I saw satisfaction on someone’s face, and I learned that comfort is found in knowledge. Each time she answered a question by saying, “I’m not sure, I’ll look that up for you and answer you tomorrow,” I saw that knowledge was continuous and vast, that it is the ultimate mystery, that it is there for everyone, even teachers, to explore. This mystery, this comfort, went along with me and is with me still.