

## Children Giving Clues

*Frustrated with the restrictive nature of the Common Core Standards, the author calls on her teaching peers and colleagues to resist a system that denies them and their students access to what teaching and learning should be about.*

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I still cannot take my measure without a classroom of children to give me clues. . . .  
Where Reeny goes we shall follow.

—*Vivian Gussin Paley, The Girl with the Brown Crayon:  
How Children Use Stories to Shape Their Lives*

When you grow up in this world you realize people don't give a shit about what you feel or what you think.

—*David Coleman, leading author and architect  
of the Common Core State [sic] Standards*

**W**hile studying for a master's degree in English literature, I dated a physics major, and the first present I ever gave him was Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. I'd loved that book so much after reading it—unsupervised—as a first-year student that I tried to avoid any class where it might be taught, for fear my joy might be parsed right out of it. A. A. Milne described this passion: "One does not argue about *The Wind in the Willows*. The young man gives it to the girl with whom he is in love, and if she does not like it, asks her to return his letters. The older man tries it on his nephew, and alters his will accordingly. The book is a test of character" (qtd. in Moore 45). I don't know that I deliberately set out to test that physics student, but how could I keep company with someone who didn't take inordinate pleasure in *Tom Jones*? And, dear reader, I married him.

Ann Tyler captures the mindset I was trying to avoid: "Rose had a kitchen that was so completely alphabetized, you'd find the allspice next to the ant poison" (12). *Tom Jones* was just too important to me to submit to alphabetizing. I feel the same way about teaching: I'm not an alphabetizing

kind of teacher. Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out that "we boil at different degrees" (55). We should celebrate differences—those of teachers as well as those of students. I just bought a T-shirt from a kindergarten teacher who responded to Common Core imperatives: "They're going to have to pry the crayons out of my cold, dead hands." This T-shirt, available in many colors, announces *Occupy Kindergarten* (Schwengel). Every AP English teacher should buy one, because we all must care about the survival of blocks and finger paints in kindergarten. High school teachers reap what kindergarten teachers sow.

Talk to seventh- and eighth-grade teachers who embrace what they do, and they'll tell you they relish the great exaggerations these students provide. When I read standards-based reading lists that seem sent in from some other planet, I wonder if they're referring to the seventh-grade Sherri who is obsessed with makeup and fashion magazines. Or the Sherri who sucks her thumb and wants to listen to a tape of *Rumpelstiltskin*. The Sherri I know can't be pinned down to read the same book from one day to the next, never mind the same book as all her classmates. As Stephen D. Krashen

observes, “Home run book experiences vary widely among children” (8). Speaking from long experience, I figure a teacher has to be a bit off-center herself to linger with seventh and eighth graders. Off-center—but not loony enough to think she can standardize these kids, or would ever want to.

Frank Smith warned us decades ago that “The journey to learning cannot be planned in advance and controlled like a journey to the moon” (66). To suggest otherwise is an insult to intelligence. For more information on the self-destructiveness of the hustling, techno-driven way of life, read Thoreau, read *Moby-Dick*, read Morris Berman’s *Why America Failed: The Roots of Imperial Decline*. Read anything by Matt Taibbi or Chris Hedges. I mention these writers because you can’t consider seventh graders without considering the world they live in. You’d have to be insane to hold these truths to be self-evident—that all children are created equal, that they should all be subjected to the same complex text at the same time. Insane.

My plan here was to make the defense of fiction that NCTE ignores. I collected many volumes—from *The Girl with the Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape Their Lives* (Paley) to *Crockett Johnson and Ruth Krauss: How an Unlikely Couple Found Love, Dogged the FBI, and Transformed Children’s Literature* (Nel); *Gates of Excellence: On Reading and Writing Books for Children* (Paterson); *How Fiction Works* (Wood); *Radical Children’s Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction* (Reynolds); *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction* (Oatley); *Should We Burn Babar?: Essays on Children’s Literature and the Power of Stories* (Kohl); *Tales for Little Rebels: A Collection of Radical Children’s Literature* (Mickenberg and Nel); *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Frank); *Free Voluntary Reading* (Krashen). All these and more. They are worth reading. And reading again.

I call on Norman Mailer for my favorite insight of this moment: “Good and great literature is most effective at changing your life when you are young” (qtd. in Shwartz 159). Ignoring this truth is the tragedy of our time: we are robbing children of the literary heritage that matters for a lifetime. A child only gets to be 5 or 8 or 13 once. And when you deprive him of his literary right to find the book that will knock his socks off, that chance is gone—forever. I told Pete, the second most obnoxious

kid I ever encountered (Ohanian, “To Pete”), that Katherine Paterson, whose *Great Gilly Hopkins* I’d read aloud to the class, believed every teacher should read *Ramona the Brave*. Since Pete could not read, I taped the book for him, with the instruction, “Tell me why Katherine Paterson wants every teacher to read about this first grader.” I’m not sharing Pete’s on-target answer because every teacher *should* read the book.

It is offensive to imagine that fiction—from *The Tale of Squirrel Nutkin* to *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* to *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*—needs a defense. Making a defense is exactly what the Standardistos want us to do: spin our wheels and tear up our souls on a detour. The issue is *not* how to parse out fiction and nonfiction. The issue in a democracy is *Who decides?* Who decides what children need to learn? Who decides what teachers need to teach? Who? Our silence as a profession has ceded victory to the power brokers, and the only thing left is to wonder: Which technology will come first—driverless cars or teacherless classrooms? As I write this, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has funded inBloom, Inc. to fully sequence learning and ensure a technology takeover of the classroom. Here’s Bill Gates, whose education policy “moves in apparent lockstep” with that of Education Secretary Duncan (Golden): “The standards will tell the teachers what their students are supposed to learn, and the data will tell them whether they’re learning it (Gates).” Matt Taibbi’s description of Occupy Wall Street perfectly fits the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation/US Department of Education enterprises: “Occupy Wall Street was always about something much bigger than a movement against big banks and modern finance. It’s about providing a forum for people to show how tired they are not just of Wall Street, but everything. This is a visceral, impassioned, deep-seated rejection of the entire direction of our society, a refusal to take even one more step forward into the shallow commercial abyss of phoniness, short-term calculation, withered idealism and intellectual bankruptcy that American mass society has become.” Occupy kindergarten! Occupy the schools! (Ohanian, “Whoo-Hoo!”). The resistance to Common Core State [*sic*] Standards is about something much bigger than testing companies and publishers and what grade gets tested on *Macbeth*. I use [*sic*]

when the word *State* occurs as part of the Common Core nomenclature because the standards were paid for by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the US Department of Education coerced state consent with threats and money. I find it unsettling that an organization that went so far out on a limb about grammar reform in 1940 has descended into such a degree of passivity about the Common Core and the national tests driving that core (Skinner 179–87). I've written about how NCTE censored me on the Connected Community (Ohanian, "My Censorship"), informing me that "All defamatory, abusive, profane, threatening, offensive, or illegal materials are strictly prohibited." As if I'd done anything of the kind. I asked for information on just which one of those outrages I was being accused of. I'm still waiting for an answer.

NCTE has broken my heart by promoting *Gleichschaltung* over the professional values we hold dear. I choose not to dwell on professional chicanery and heartbreak because two students from my distant past have reached out, reminding me of Mary Oliver's words:

Always there is something worth saying about  
glory, about gratitude. (*What* 5)

## Glory

In his introduction to *The Big New Yorker Book of Dogs*, Malcolm Gladwell writes, "Dogs are not about something else. Dogs are about dogs" (xv). Bingo. We must accord kids the same dignity: Kids are about kids. Kids are not about anything else, not about the nation's gross national product, not about future workers in the global economy. Kids are about kids. Today. Here and now. Leslie, a deaf child in public school for the first time in my first-year-as-a-third-grade-teacher classroom, found me on Facebook. She said she searched because she wanted to thank me for introducing her to *Amelia Bedelia*, which she now reads with her own children. For Leslie, the homonyms were complex text. Once she caught on to the play on light bulbs and flower bulbs, she was able to "get" the knock-knock riddles that had eluded and frustrated her all year. The day she yelled, "I get it! I get it! Let me read it out loud!" the class cheered. Then she yelled, "Let me read another one!" Classroom glory. Not in the lesson plan.

Two weeks before this article was due, Emily got in touch. Emily was in my combined seventh/eighth-grade language arts class decades ago, the class where I started exchanging daily notes with kids. Looking for writing that *involved* them, that helped them find their voices, I drew on my experience with a daily note exchange my father had initiated, an exchange we kept up for more than 30 years. Our notes were basic: Dad told me the height of his sunflowers; I complained about shoveling the driveway. But the impact was profound—for both of us. And so I handed

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every student a 3" × 5" notebook, announcing that there was a note inside from me, and I wanted an answer. The small notebook size was deliberate. I didn't want kids to be intimidated by a huge 8½" × 11" blank sheet of paper. Michael spoke for most of his classmates when he complained, "Why would we write to you when you're right here?" But I stood firm, and he was soon hooked. As spring approached, I told students that for me the first signs of spring were the asparagus ads in the newspaper. Kids thought this was a hoot, such a teacher thing to get excited about asparagus. But they watched the paper and left ads on my desk, competing for who could find the best bargain. Michael won.

Dear Ms. O,

As you no I want to Boston firday. It was a lot fo fun. When I first got to Boston we drov aron looking for a parking plas. We fon one and then we got out of the car. We walk to a fance market and had a bite to aet. Than we went to the aquarium and that was eciting There was a shoe with dolphins and seals. Wan we got out we want by a fruit markt. I thogt of you and chekt the pric of asprgus. It is \$1.00 a lb in Boston and 3 heds of letis for \$1.00. Boston is a long way to go for asprgus tho.

Your frend,

Michael

Michael told me his family thought he was nuts when he said he had an urgent need to go into a vegetable market for his teacher.

Michael and I shared daily notes for two years, and the week before his graduation from eighth

grade, his mother sent me a letter. “I was going to phone you, but Michael told me to write a letter. He said when you care about someone and you have something important to tell them, you write it in a letter. He learned that from you. He learned a lot, and we are grateful forever.”

In the end, we can only teach who we are, and because Michael’s letter is a testament to who I am as a teacher, I often read it when I give talks. Teachers always look beyond the spelling, noting voice, structure, knowledge of audience, humor, and so on. And I add a PS: I found out that Michael became a big-time chef in a tony restaurant. I claim partial credit. After all, I introduced him to an interest in asparagus.

**This is a simple exchange:** no kits, no processes, no rubrics, no graphic organizers, no snazzy peer editing techniques—no hoopla at all. Just a teacher writing notes and her students writing back.

I’ve written about Emily’s notes (Ohanian, *Caught* 74–78). She never missed a day, frustrating me because she never progressed beyond dutiful, short, dull responses to my questions. Then one day my question was, “What is your favorite flower?” Emily replied, “Red rose, yellow rose, blue rose, and pink rose or zinnia.”

Delighted to have struck a chord, I answered,

Dear Emily,

Here’s a poem for you by a woman named Elizabeth Coatsworth. I like it a lot and hope you do, too.

Violets, daffodils  
Roses and thorn. . .  
Your friend,

Ms. O

From that point on, Emily’s notes to me consisted of lists of flowers. One day her note was:

Carnations, sweet William, baby’s breath.  
Emily

That’s it: the whole note. The next day it was

Daisies and marigolds.  
Emily

I wrote questions about some of the flowers in her lists, but she didn’t answer. She just kept writing those lists:

Bloodroot, pansy, tansy, tulip, dandelion, milkweed, iris, baptisa.

Emily

Dogtooth violet, lady’s slipper, jack-in-the-pulpit

Emily

Wild rose, gold rose, honeysuckle, cactus, black-eyed Susan, sweet pea, four-o’clock, Queen Anne’s lace, butterfly bush, morning glory, lily of the valley, harebell, thistle, bardock.

Emily

Sometimes her lists were short; sometimes they were long. No matter what I said in my note, Emily just kept giving me more flower names. Emily lived with her grandparents and worked in their nursery, so her lists were knowledge-based as well as sourced from the big, fat *Encyclopedia of Gardening* she lugged to school every day in her book bag. Every day I wrote Emily funny stories about my cats, complaints about shoveling snow, what I cooked for dinner, what I did over the weekend. Every day she gave me lists of flowers. Then one day when I wrote about how much I was looking forward to spring, Emily surprised me.

It is supposed to get to 65° today.

Your friend, Emily

The “Your friend, Emily” was in tiny letters almost too small to decipher. I wanted to whoop with joy. I wrote her a spring poem in reply and asked her a question. “If you had a choice of any place in the world, Emily, where would you like to visit?” Over the months, I had asked Emily 50 or more questions, all of which she calmly ignored. But here came another answer.

Dear Ms. O,

Portland, Oregon.

Brown and furry caterpillar in a hurry,  
Take your walk to this shady leaf or stalk. . . .

Christina Georgina Rossetti and Emily

What a gift. I wrote back, telling Emily of my delight. I included a short poem about butterflies in

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my note and asked Emily another question: “What do you like about butterflies?”

Dear Ms. O,

They look pretty and all the different butterflies and special colors and it would be nice to fly.

In spring the chirping frogs  
Sing like birds . . . in summer  
They bark like old dogs.

Onitsura and Emily

That was the last question Emily answered for another two months. Every day her note consisted of a poem, and I gave her one back in mine. Plus I always asked her a question. One day Emily read my note and complained, “You just took *my* poem. I was going to give that one to you today.” We agreed that it’s lovely when two people want to share the same poem.

When Emily was a senior in high school she brought me a poinsettia at Christmas. “I hope you still like flowers,” she smiled. Then she asked the question that every former student always asked: “Do you still write those letters to kids?” My answer continued to be yes.

After Emily graduated from high school, she started sending me a card at Christmas and a Happy Spring card in April. Emily’s cards followed me through four address changes. For a few years she included a short note. Then there were cards but no note. Just her name in tiny, tiny letters. One year there was a card with a poem by Christina Georgina Rossetti. No name. Twice a year I send her a card, always telling her something about what I’m doing, offering news about my cats, and always asking her a question.


Christmas 2010, 2011, and 2012, no card from Emily, but I kept writing. Then in late February 2013, a manila envelope arrived. In it was a Christmas card in its envelope—misaddressed and returned to her—plus a Valentine’s card. And a letter! In it, she turned the tables, asking me lots of questions about the weather and the cats. She asked me if I’m still writing books. “It must be a lot of books by now.” She signed off in big letters: “love always, your friend, Emily.” That 2013 letter is why I’m writing this article for the glory of it . . . and the gratitude.

While in high school, Michael of asparagus fame dropped by to tell me he made his whole fam-



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ily watch *The Acorn People* on television, noting that the book we read in class was better. “I bet you never thought you’d hear me say that about a book,” he grinned. “Books always win,” I replied. The Common Core State [*sic*] Standards can decree impossible levels of complex text for all, and the national testers can offer tests on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Ohanian, “PARCC”) and NCTE can keep its silence about how this one-size-fits-all approach denies many students access to a literacy that can enrich and empower them. But as Castle Freeman Jr. cautions, “*The Norton Anthology of English Literature* is seventeen hundred pages long. It’s a fat and heavy book. It will stop a bullet, but it won’t cover your nakedness” (32).

I call on my teacher colleagues to heed Mary Oliver’s advice: “Refuse all cooperation with the heart’s death” (*Swan* 53). 

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