

A Story From School

In the early 1950s, I was destroyed by a 1st grade teacher and repaired by the competent, caring teachers who came afterward. Perhaps my travail was foreshadowed when, at the end of our kindergarten year, we were paraded in front of next year's 1st grade teacher to tell her our names. My shy, barely audible 5-year-old voice squeezed out "Jeffrey Roth" and she responded with "Jeffrey Wolf." "No, Roth." "Wolf?" Just move along. Maybe my last name did sound like the howl of a baby wolf. Anyway, it went downhill from there.

From the beginning of the school year, when she perceived resistance, the 1st grade teacher threatened to "hang you from the chandelier." While she did not threaten me directly, I personalized her intention every time and pictured myself dangling from the light fixture on the ceiling. I became frightened to utter a word and wished I could learn how to disappear. What made things worse was that for those responding to her queries with the right answer, she sometimes offered a "sucker" (lollipop). I was almost in tears knowing that my self-imposed mutism was costing me a crack at a mouth-watering treat. There was no invisibility when my fine motor deficits did not allow me to string even one of the colorful wooden beads or when I was standing at the blackboard being yelled at for using my fingers trying to solve a simple arithmetic problem. But it got worse . . .

I was afraid to ask permission to go to the boy's room. The result was catastrophic. I became a serial puddle maker. The evidence of my transgression was obvious from the wet area on my pants and of course, the puddle on the floor. Perhaps it was because I denied being the

transgressor that she added to the embarrassment by feeling my pants to confirm the indiscretion, accompanied by a gleeful chorus of “pish-ma-shame” from little girls in the front row. My mother came in for a conference and the problem seemed solved. I would simply raise my hand and when recognized, leave the room to do my business. Well, how do you raise your hand and leave the room while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance? By the time we reached “liberty and justice for all” there was another puddle to ruin my reputation as a civilized 1st grader. There was something terribly wrong with me.

My teacher for the next year, and thankfully a second year after that, not only picked up the pieces, but her firm, supportive style and love of students gradually gave me permission to feel comfortable, worthwhile, and believe I could learn. Learning in Ms. Heffler’s classroom meant not only the “3 Rs” but also music and art, and a world of color and beauty. I was able to come out of my shell and even appreciate my classmates and their talents.

My next teacher was another who understood how to challenge and, at the same time, support her students. I was still a slow and grudging reader by 4th grade. I recall trying to read the Carl Sandburg poem, “The fog comes on little cat feet . . .” during reading circle. As I struggled mightily, others in the circle raised their hands wanting a chance to take over, show their skill, and put me out of my misery. But my teacher must have sensed that I was determined to get through that poem. She signaled for the would-be readers to cease their grunts and cries and put down their hands. “Let him do it,” Ms. Wilson said. She somehow knew that her patience might give me the confidence and time needed to succeed. I continued turtle-slowly, and finished reading the poem. I had become a person again. School had become a place where I wanted to be.

