THE RED SHOE

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Growing up the youngest of three children, I was adored by my grandmother, favored by my sister, and protected by my big brother. My parents' decision that my mother would put her teaching career on hold during my preschool days allowed me to enjoy a Beaver Cleaver lifestyle, complete with nurturing support and warm cookies.

Soon it was time for me to leave the security of my daily home life and embark on my school career. Before starting kindergarten, I carefully chose a flower-covered lunch box and asked whether I would get glasses in order to read (grown-ups always needed to find their glasses to read). The night before the Big Day, giggling in the darkness long past our bedtime, my sister shared her seven years of worldly advice on how to succeed in school.

Long after my sister drifted into dreamland, I tossed and turned with visions of the wonderland of school. Too excited to sleep, I sneaked into the kitchen for some cookies. Mother was there preparing her own return to the classroom, and she smiled when she saw me peek around the corner, pushed her papers aside, and took me into her lap. I asked her about kindergarten for about the 500th time that day. She assured me that I would enjoy myself and that the teacher would love having such a sweet little angel in her room.

The next day, the long-anticipated walk to school seemed endless, but when I arrived at the door of Ms. Hancock's room, I saw my name on the door. Ms. Hancock had been waiting for me, just as I had been waiting for her. As the day progressed, Ms. Hancock showed us the star chart. The students' job was to fill up the star chart, she said, with starts earned for demonstrating the ability to count to 100, to identify colors, and to tie a show, among others. I was excited because I could already do most of those activities. Every day we had a chance to show our classmates what we had mastered and were given a star—*in front of everyone*.

One afternoon, Ms. Hancock brought out a red wooden shoe and asked, "Who would like to earn a star for tying the shoe today?" My hand rocketed up, and my heart pounded with joy when she chose me. I pranced to the front of the room, took one lace, pinched it together to make a loop, and manipulated the other lace around the loop. I bent down and grabbed the shoelace with my teeth to pull it through the loop.

"Nasty Girl! What would your mother think of you putting that in your mouth?" bellowed Ms. Hancock. I had no answer. Emotionally shocked and ashamed, I silently retreated to the far end of the carpet and slumped to the floor.

As I tried to make myself as small as possible, Ms. Hancock's ramblings about the filthy hands that had touched the laces and about never putting objects in your mouth became

unintelligible to me. “Nasty girl” were the only words circulating in my mind, like a tornado gaining strength with nowhere to land. How could I tell my mother that her angel was a nasty girl? How could I explain something I didn’t understand? Unable to answer these questions, I chose to hide my nastiness from my family. I still had a problem with the star chart because I had to accumulate all my stars to reach 1st grade, I thought.

When I looked at the star chart, I never saw the accumulated gold stars. The one blank square, four places from the left, that screamed NASTY GIRL, claimed my focus. During the last week of school, I knew that I would fail kindergarten, and that everyone would discover my nastiness. At home, I grabbed Teddy, the only creature to whom I had confided my nastiness, and cried as though my heart would break. My big brother entered my room to ask what was wrong. I explained through sobs that I couldn’t tie my shoes. “Your shoes are tied, silly goose,” he said. Through gulps of air, I managed to utter “school” and “no star.” My brother gently asked, “Did you tie your shoes at school the way Mother ties shoes?” Or course! How else would I tie them? Then my brother quietly explained to me that there were certain things we did only in our home. These things were not bad, but other people might misunderstand them.

That afternoon, my brother taught me to tie my shoes with my hands. You see, my mother was born without hands, and I had learned to tie my shoes by watching her lovingly tie my sister’s shoes and mine. I went to school the next day, tied my shoes “Ms. Hancock’s way,” and got my star. The illumination of that star still shines throughout my life and guides my teaching philosophy. Confronted with something she didn’t understand, Ms. Hancock passed judgment on the basis of a limited understanding. She never asked or tried to understand why I tied my shoe differently. To her, *different* was *nasty*. Through our personal, ignorant judgments of children, we educators can unconsciously, but permanently, clip the innocent wings of angels.

Luckily, this angel had the constant, gentle breeze of a loving family to lift her high above Ms. Hancock’s unenlightened worldview. I graduated from kindergarten realizing that I should never judge others solely on the basis of my viewpoint of a situation. To discover the real meaning behind others’ actions, I must allow others to shine their perspectives on the situation. Doing so sometimes allows me to see a rainbow in what appear to be dark and stormy skies. How sad it would be to go through life thinking there is only one way to tie a shoe!

As an educator, I try not to prejudge children or their families. I’ve incorporated into my teaching philosophy the silent and wondering question, “Why is this student engaging in ‘unacceptable’ behavior?” This simple question often gives me great insight into that child.

One year, on the second day of school, a student arrived 15 minutes late. She threw her backpack on the floor and flopped into her chair. Other teachers had warned me about Audrey’s temper. Because I had gained an unsought reputation for handling “difficult students,” Audrey was assigned to my classroom because she was “hard to handle,” “had a bad attitude,” and “questioned authority”. I smiled at Audrey; she glared at me. As I continue the morning routine, Audrey gradually disarmed herself because I had not engaged her in the battle she had

anticipated. Later that morning when students were working in their desks, I quietly asked Audrey whether she would please come talk to me outside. She rolled her eyes, slammed her chair under the desk, and stomped out the door.

I told Audrey how glad I was that she was in my class, and that I was looking forward to getting to know her. She bluntly informed me that she was not thrilled to be at school and was especially upset about being put in my room. I then asked her why she was late that morning, and whether there was anything I could do to help her. She looked at my doubtfully, not quite sure what I meant. "I am always late for class—so just get used to it!" she replied. Would she mind telling me why, I asked, because perhaps I could help.

Audrey explained that she always took her sister to prekindergarten, and because of the time conflict, she would always be late. Tearfully, she explained her dilemma of needing to safely escort her sister and wanting to make the honor roll. I asked the two were connected. She explained that she had made all *A*s and *B*s last semester but missed making the honor roll because of excessive tardies. As we talked, I realized that Audrey's constant tardiness resulted from a conflict between her family responsibilities and school rules.

To meet Audrey's needs, I told Audrey that I understood her problem and would not count her tardy for fulfilling her responsibility to her family. Then we discussed her responsibility to enter the classroom without disturbing others who had already started their day. Audrey agreed with a smile. From then on, Audrey's outlook on school and her relationship with her fellow students and me changed. However, I knew that there was another dragon to slay.

Marking students tardy was a district guideline. Before long, the principal summoned me to the office to hear other teachers' complaints about my non-enforcement of rules. Audrey's situation was not the only one where I was in violation: in my classroom, I allowed students to drink, eat, wear hats, chew gum, and sit on desks or the floor. My lack of respect for school guidelines infuriated some of my peers. Many fellow teachers looked at the world through Ms. Hancock's eyes: there is one way to do things, and all students will do them that way, without exception. I explained that I had greater respect for my students' needs than for mandated rules. I was teaching student to govern themselves, and we, as a group, had created our own rules just for our classroom. We still followed the school guidelines when in other parts of the school building. My principal backed me, and I was allowed to continue my practices after I pointed out that I had not sent one of many students labeled troublemakers to the office.

Recently, I moved from teaching into administration. I realize that my moral dilemma concerning choosing between guidelines and the needs of students will grow more intense. Enforcing the rules is one of the key responsibilities of an administrator, but I will not abandon my beliefs about looking first at students' needs.

While visiting my mother recently, I shared with her my hope that I will never get mired in the bureaucracy of my new job and forget why I chose to be an administrator. Upon my

departure, my mother gave me a gift for my new office: an old red wooden shoe with a dirty shoelace.