Abu’s Lesson

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Abu the Flute Maker never did well in school. Because his gift – his ability to create music out of almost anything – a chair, a bedpost, a clothes hanger – didn’t count in school, he eventually dropped out. In spite of his early failures – or perhaps because he was able to surmount them – he is now a cherished resource in Baltimore. With his perfect pitch and uncanny ability to know just where to place the openings for air, his flutes create music with an ethereal quality. Along with his musical group, he creates wonderful sounds from a variety of home-made instruments and travels from school to school, nurturing the creative ability in each child he meets.

Abu taught us all about the strength of the human spirit on the morning he and his band visited the Maryland Writing Project’s Invitational Summer Teacher Institute, but we learned another lesson that morning as well. It began as Abu was setting up his instruments, and I walked across the hall to the student daycare center housed in the same building as our Institute. I thought the children would enjoy Abu’s concert. The teachers were thrilled at the invitation but asked if they could bring the children in after they awoke from their naps. I didn’t think Abu would mind the interruption.

When I returned, Abu was ready to begin. At the front of the room he had set up huge conga drums as well as some smaller homemade woodwind and string instruments. “Who is a musician?” he asked us. “Who is a drummer?”
No one spoke. “Come up!” he entreated. “Come up and play the drums! Choose an instrument!” No one moved. The teachers’ expressions said, “Who me? Don’t look at me! Choose someone else. I’ll make a fool of myself up there.” Abu was beginning to become frustrated when the door to the room opened and the children from the day care center poured in. As soon as they saw the instruments, they ran toward them, surrounding Abu, whose eyes lit up. “Who’s a musician?” he asked again. Every child responded: “I am! I am!” Some of the children didn’t bother to answer. They just walked up to the drums and began playing. Others began dancing spontaneously to the music their classmates were creating. The adults in the room looked sheepishly from one to the other. I thought to myself, “What has happened to us?”

As we saw from these three and four year olds, children at this age assume they are creative. They assume they can, not that they can’t. Unfortunately, studies have shown that much anxiety has its roots in the classroom environment, and the effect of repeated failure seems to be cumulative. Research has also shown that it isn’t until the end of elementary school that a consistent tendency emerges in students to be anxious. Part of this trend can be attributed to a normal self-consciousness that develops as children mature, but schooling must take the blame as well.

Joseph Chilton Pearce (1992), an expert on child development, wrote in his book Magical Child, “Anxiety is always the enemy of intelligence. The minute anxiety arises, intelligence closes to a search for anything that will relieve the anxiety” (p. 99). In Toward a Psychology of Being, Abraham Maslow (1998) confirms Pearce’s point: “All those psychological and social factors that increase fear will cut out the impulse to know; all factors that permit courage, freedom, and boldness will thereby also free our need to know” (p. 64). Pearce, further observes, “To live a creative life, we must lose our fear of being wrong.”

When I think back to my own early educational experiences in the 1950’s, I remember rules, restrictions, and fear; I remember being put in the corner if my spirit began to emerge. I remember no opportunities for exploration, for risk-taking. I never felt safe in school. I saw that same fear in the faces of the teachers on that summer morning at the Summer Institute, and I see it in many of my own college students as each new semester begins. They sit in class terrified that they will be called on. It takes at least a month into the
semester before they trust me enough to make that leap. I do recall a time, though, when I discovered a way to, as Maslow says, “free our need to know.” It was this experience, perhaps, that allowed me to play the conga drums with Abu.

When I was in the third grade, I was left alone after school every day to care for my five-year-old brother while my parents were at work. I would meet him at his kindergarten class and walk him home, waiting until the last possible minute before unlocking the door and stepping into our silent, empty apartment. One afternoon, I took a long walk through our town to the main street, reading out loud to my brother the words printed on every door we passed. It kept him amused. When we came to one door that said “Free Public Library,” I cupped my hands around my eyes and looked in through the glass door. Was this like the library they had in school? There were people inside, adults and children sitting at tables reading, and row upon row of books. The friendly librarian smiled at me, beckoning me to enter. I took my brother in one hand and tugged on the door with the other. She led us to the children’s section where I was drawn to a separate bookcase labeled “biography.” I picked up one entitled Amelia Earhart, Aviatrix, and my life took a turn that has made all the difference for me. I don’t know if I’ll ever understand such forces in the universe, but I will be eternally grateful for the one that brought me to the door of that storefront library.

Before we left that afternoon, I realized that my brother and I now had a safe place to go every day after school. On one of our visits, I decided to read every book in the library – in alphabetical order. I’m still working on it. Whenever we moved to a new town, the first place I located was the public library. My library card is still one of my most prized possessions. To this day I am drawn to books and am happiest when I am curled up, lost in one.

As I read my way through that library, I began to understand the distinct difference between going to school and learning on my own. I could go through the motions in school and let my imagination soar in a book. After immersing myself in reading, I started keeping a journal, filling it with poetry and stories. I wanted to create that kind of magic on paper. In the library, I discovered a world beyond Dick and Jane, a discovery that deepened and sustained my love of reading and writing. How I felt in the library influenced my ability to learn in ways I am still just beginning to understand.
School, however, was not all bad. My fourth grade music teacher once discovered me writing in my journal rather than participating in class. Instead of punishing me or embarrassing me, however, she asked me to stay after to talk with her. She asked if she could see what I had been writing, and I hesitantly showed her my journal. She read it thoughtfully and then asked me if she could put one of my pieces, a poem about the wind, to music. At our spring concert, the school chorus performed our collaboration in front of parents, teachers, and students. My picture and poem were in the paper with a story about me, the budding poet. All it took was the encouragement of one teacher to help me understand my potential, appreciate my intrinsic self-worth, and realize that I could create my own happiness. She had my full attention from that moment on.

Many years later, when I discovered the Maryland Writing Project, I once again found myself in a place that encouraged reading and writing. The Invitational Summer Teacher Institute promotes honoring the writer within each teacher, encouraging all participants to get in touch with their creative child, trusting the process, sharing what they do best in the classroom, and bringing that energy back to school with them in the fall. The MWP, which is a site of the National Writing Project, validates what teachers do right and provides resources for us to continue to learn and grow. We envision a future where every student is an accomplished writer and an active, engaged learner. We want to create a place for students to grow, for their gifts to be cherished. We want all of us to be able to raise our hands when someone asks, “Who is a musician? Come up and play the drums.”

For more information on the National Writing Project, go to www.nwp.org. For the Maryland Writing Project, go to www.towson.edu/mwp.

References


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