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A few weeks ago, as I was cleaning out a closet, I came across a stack of old report cards from grade school. Many of the comments had a common theme: "Debbie would do a lot better if she didn't talk so much."

Visiting with my neighbors kept me in trouble through most of my school years. Give me anybody, and my mouth would be off and running. Teachers stuck me next to the dreariest, most uninspiring kids in the class, hoping their lack of engagement would be a deterrent. It only spurred me on.

One boy, Jimmy Hayes, was so unresponsive that I babbled twice as much until Mrs. Penelopy finally moved me. You couldn't say I didn't give it my all. (I still believe to this day that given more time, I could have gotten Jimmy going on some topic.)

Some people just like to talk; for one reason or another, they love words. Take Madeline, my four-year-old neighbor. Last year, when she was new to the neighborhood, I caught her picking some of my purple columbine. I had gone to the front yard and spotted her balancing on the tips of her chartreuse tennies, stretching to reach a high blossom.

I walked up to her and not meaning to, I startled her. The bouquet shot behind her back and two blotches of red appeared on her cheeks. "Hi, Madeline. Don't worry about the flowers. I don't mind if you pick them—I have lots. The pink is nice, but the purple is really special, isn't it?"

She nodded, slowly bringing the bouquet out from behind her back.

She smiled with her mouth closed, still unsure. "The tall, spotted ones are foxglove, and the yellow and orange ones are marigolds," I said.

Madeline soon relaxed, a less tentative smile showing the gaps in her four-year-old teeth. "Your flowers are pretty," she began, and then went on to tell me about the garden at her old house.

A few days later I was out weeding and heard a small voice behind me. "Hi." I looked up to see Madeline. "Can I help?"

"Sure," I said, showing her how to pick a weed by yanking it from the roots. Right away she got the hang of it. A few minutes later I saw a petunia stem in the pile, but figured it was part of

the cost of training.

Along the way, I bought her child-sized gardening gloves. Her tiny hands now go home clean. She doesn't last long at the work, but has become very proud of "our garden." Although she does more talking than weeding, she loves to slide on the gloves each time she visits. They move along briskly with her words and stories.

She reminds me of my childhood self. Not only did I love talking, I also loved gardens, and they both got me in trouble. I can recall hearing many sharp raps on windows when I'd pick flowers in someone's front yard. I'd leap back on my bike—wheels still spinning—and pedal away fast, stolen goods in hand. The promise of a lovely bouquet was always too much for me.

Temptations seemed to lure me in every corner of my life. I had a tough time resisting them. When Dr. Krug called me out of my seventh grade English classroom, I was scared. Looking up at his tall figure, glasses resting on his nose, sparse tufts of hair and pressed white shirt, I wondered what I had done.

"You talk a lot in the classroom," he began. My stomach did a flop. Here it was again. "You could be quite good at English if you tried. I'm going to help you put all those creative words into compositions. I'll work with you and we'll see what happens."

I didn't want to work with him. I liked English okay, but not enough to want to master it. And I knew if I worked with him, he'd expect mastery—that's the kind of man he was. He used to sing songs about roving eyeballs during tests and give us daily lectures on living right; I figured he had a spiral notebook he taught from each year containing lessons for good living he made up as the years went by.

"Don't ever let anyone talk you into doing something you know is wrong. Be especially wary if you don't admire that person in the first place. You'll only end up hurting yourself," was one lesson I remember. I imagined him sitting on a brown corduroy armchair, waiting, as the setting sun darkened the room, for inspiration. I pictured the spiral notebook dangling in his hand, ready to be written in should a wise thought emerge. A thought that could save us from wasting our lives. He seemed determined to steer us away from the direction in which the world was going.

Knowing all this, I couldn't imagine what lay ahead for me if I accepted his proposition. He probably had a year's worth of grammar admonitions scribbled in another book. The strain of even thinking about it was too much. I visualized more work than I could ever finish waiting for me in that little book, in the years ahead. (We all would have him as a teacher for two years.) I wondered what on earth to do.

I also wondered how he knew me so well. Had he sensed my interest in English? My interest in the way he taught? If so, he was on the right track. I mean, truth be told, chatty ways aside, I liked him. Not only liked him, but admired him. He stuck up for what he believed, dared to tackle the subject of integrity with a rowdy, often unresponsive group of adolescents. He gave the students his all.

I studied him. I didn't want to kill myself under his tutelage, crush my carefree ways, change at all. But neither did I want to let him down—he believed in me. I stalled. Then we heard shouts and hoots from the unattended class.

"Well?" His question interrupted my thoughts and I looked up at him, startled by his booming voice and feeling shrunk by his frame.

I knew my answer was important, not just to him, but to me. My words didn't roll out with their

usual rapid clatter; they were stuck like a clogged drain that wouldn't empty. I stood there for a while and then an answer came—I decided to give it a go.

I responded with reluctance on purpose, just in case I couldn't pull it off. "Okay. I guess I could try." As nervous as I was, part of me was grateful. Grateful for people like him in my life, people like him in the world.

That week, I started taking extra work home, and even rode my bike to school early some mornings for help. Thrilled to have someone notice my love of words and help me find an appropriate place for them, I worked hard.

We started with poetry. He handed me several books of it to take home and study. "Look through them and find your favorites and then come back and tell me what you like about them." My favorite poet right off was Ogden Nash. The poem I liked best of his was "The Kitten."

The Kitten

The trouble with a kitten is
that
Eventually it becomes a
cat.

I also liked "The Perfect Husband."

The Perfect Husband

He tells you when you've got on too much lipstick,
And helps you with your girdle when your hips stick.

Ogden Nash's knack for rhyming tickled me, as did his humor and simplicity. I had fun trying to copy him and found it was a good way to get started writing poetry.

One of the first poems I wrote was "Autumn."

Autumn

I like leaves
on top of trees,
And in autumn
at the bottom.

Dr. Krug liked it and that encouraged me.

He helped me discover William Carlos Williams:

This is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving

for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

I'd felt the same way after not being able to resist eating something that was meant for somebody else. How had he captured it so well? When our poetry study ended, I was disappointed, but also eager to move onto prose.

As our class moved into writing compositions, the lessons were more difficult. Dr. Krug encouraged me to find books I liked and to talk with him about the books we were reading in our literature class. Our literature teacher, who read to us every day with her lyrical, theatrical voice, held the class spellbound, and I looked forward to leaning back in my seat looking at the sky and the clouds as the words fill my head. We also read assigned books at home, and I remember especially enjoying "Silas Marner" by George Eliot and "The Bell Jar" by Sylvia Plath. Dr. Krug encouraged me to read non-fiction as well, and two of my favorites were "Dibs, in Search of Self" by Virginia Axline and "Ordeal by Hunger" by George R. Stewart.

Dr. Krug's instruction also helped my writing. "A good writer uses strong verbs and nouns. Too many adjectives and adverbs can deaden the best words around them," he told me one morning. I didn't get it at all.

"Okay, let me show you," he said, hurrying from one side of the classroom to the other. He then stopped and looked at me. "Describe my action."

"Try again. Take the adverb away and use your verb to give the sentence pizzazz. He was getting all worked up, so I figured I'd better get it right.

"You raced across the room."

"That's better. You'll get it. You just have to give it everything you have."

I was giving it everything I had, and so was he. When he taught, his body became the lesson; he became a human prop for teaching. One day we were learning adverbs. I'd just taken a quiz and had chosen, "he feels badly" instead of "he feels bad" as the correct answer.

He called me over to his desk. He motioned for me to sit down and he closed his eyes. He felt around for objects, explored them with his hands, and then dropped them clumsily.

He opened his eyes and said, "That's what happens when a person doesn't know how to touch things well. He doesn't touch them in a skillful manner. By saying, 'he feels badly,' you're describing a person who isn't good at feeling things, which is utterly ridiculous. You use an adverb to describe an action, not to describe a person. So you want to say, 'he feels bad,' because bad is an adjective, adjectives describe people, and you are describing the man himself, not the way he performs an action." I never forgot that rule.

As an adult, my love for words is still a passion. The gratitude I feel because no one succeeded in scolding this love out of me is huge, as is my gratitude to those who helped me cultivate them. I grew up and taught college grammar and tutored kids in English, using the same actions I'd learned from Dr. Krug. And I've held onto my love for flowers. My mom taught me the names of flowers all over town and she grew a garden of her own from which I could make bouquets. Flowers continue to give me a great deal of pleasure as I tend them in my yard and paint them.

I've wanted to continue helping young people build a life and purpose from these passions.

Unfortunately, I am not around as many young people these days as I used to be.

However, there's Madeline. The other day I was on the side yard painting a watercolor of snapdragons, when I heard footsteps. Turning to the side, I saw her. "I like your painting," she said.

"Thank you." She looked in my eyes and then back at the painting. "Would you like to learn watercolor?" I asked. She nodded her head quickly. I reached in my case and took out an extra watercolor pad and pencil. She sat down in the grass, resting the pad on her crossed legs, her cheeks rosy from summer and her pigtails brushing her freckled arms.

"First, you draw something you like, and then you paint it." It was the first of many lessons and I've found her to be an eager learner with a great eye for color. When she paints, she doesn't talk as much as when she plants or weeds.

I didn't talk as much in class, either, once I got writing. I was too involved! Being pulled outside the classroom changed me forever. Who knows—I may have ended up memorizing grammar and techniques of good writing from a book or a writing class. Or I might have just kept chatting, never knowing what I'd missed.

In that case, I wouldn't have had as much fun as I do now, when every once in a while at my keyboard after I've found the perfect verb, I see Dr. Krug gliding--no dancing--across the top of the page.

"Make sure your paragraphs connect to each other," he says, clasping his hands together. "Otherwise the reader will feel disjointed." Then he unclasps his fingers and keeps the tips of his two little fingers touching. "Disjointed thoughts don't produce smooth reading and you lose connection with your audience." As he says this, he pulls the two little fingers away from each other. "Your ideas will fall apart in such a structure, no matter how great they are."

He smiles and gives me a thumbs up. I wonder how he manages to keep his shirt starched and unwrinkled, but I don't start chatting; instead I bend to the page and give it my all.

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