

Running Head: INSCRIBE ME IN THE BOOK

Inscribe Me in the Book of Life

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In 1956 I attended school on Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New Year. This was against the custom of my nominally Jewish family, but I had a reason. On this holy day when the *shofar* or ram's horn sounded throughout our mostly Jewish neighborhood, few of my third grade classmates would be coming to school. It was a good time to see my teacher in private and convince her I was not stupid. So, on the morning of September 6, 1956, a date which the Jewish calendar listed as First of Tishrei 5717, I rose and begged my mother to let me attend classes at P.S 206. My mother consented, for we never went to Temple, but she had assumed that on a holiday, I would prefer to watch TV.

Observant or not, my classmates stayed home, except for a kid named Charlie who had been expelled from Good Shepherd Elementary the year before. My teacher would have stayed home herself, but in those days Jewish teachers could not easily be absent on Rosh Hashanah, and only the exceptionally religious bucked the system. I knew I would find Mrs. Heitner in Room 305, when I appeared at 8:45, dressed in my jumper and saddle shoes.

In first grade, I had been consigned to the slowest reading group in my grade. Such things happened to kids from less affluent families. Prior to then, I had not had much practice working in pencil, for when I was small, my mother saw I was inclined to scribble rather than copying letters properly like my older cousin Carol, and we could not afford to waste paper. When I handled scissors clumsily, my mother worried I might injure myself, and she confiscated these as well. But my parents took to me to the *Brooklyn Public Library* and the *Children's Museum* in Manhattan many times, which were free. They showed me how to work the Victrola,

and I listened endlessly to their Beethoven and Mozart records. My father read to me every evening, from Untermeyer's anthologies and never suspected I was slow until I started school.

Early in first grade, my class was divided into instructional three groups, which I capitalize because of their formal significance: Bright Children, Average Children, and Slow Children. Seldom did teachers call us this; we were Bluebirds, Redbirds and Yellowbirds; but the ornithological monikers fooled no one. At first, the Intelligent Children were only a few lessons ahead in the *Dick and Jane* readers. But the brighter children were taught differently, and over time the gap between us widened. Intelligent Children were allowed to look at library books upon completion of seatwork, while Dull Children were ordered to color workbook pages. It was believed that library books only confused a Dull Child. We memorized sight words. We "sounded out" new words using a peculiar system I could not comprehend. It was forbidden to look at a story's pictures prior to reading, and I was scolded for doing this. We were not allowed to take readers home because parents were not professionally trained and might show us the wrong way to read. I once heard my first grade teacher say I lacked "reading readiness." I figured this was the same thing as being Slow. My parents, who revered teachers, were disappointed to learn I was Slow, but did not dispute the assessment.

In second grade, I made friends with a girl named Susan, who was a Bright Child, and she showed me her worksheets and papers the many times we played school. A forthright young person, whose father was an electrical contractor, Susan told our second grade teacher she did not think I actually was Slow. The teacher smiled. "Rosalind is doing better because you are helping her, Susan, and that is very nice. But Rosalind is where she needs to be." I realized then

that while I could study my friend's materials, it would never change my standing in school. If at that moment, someone had explained what a caste system was, I would have understood. I knew I would always be Slow.

Fate smiled on me in third grade. Gertrude Heitner's classroom was unusual. The desks were moveable, not bolted to the floor as they were in every other classroom at P.S. 206, and we worked in groups. Even today, her room would be exemplary. Its science area was filled with interesting objects— unprocessed cotton, seashells, anthracite coal, dried plants of every description. In our groups, we held discussions, did research, performed plays. I suspect Mrs. Heitner was a Deweyan who believed in Progressive Education. Alas, this was the 1950's; I was part of the "Baby-Boom" generation, and schools were overcrowded. There were 37 children in Mrs. Heitner's Room, and there was no aide. I was still in the Slow Group for reading.

But on Rosh Hashanah of 5717, the day when according to Jewish tradition, the gates of heaven swing open and God inscribes us in the Book of Life for the coming year, my classmates were absent. I helped Mrs. Heitner clean her closets, and she asked me to read and write for her. She gave me a spelling test and, at the end of the day, sent me home with two brown bags of battered books. A few days later, I was separated from the Slow Group, so I could learn "at my own pace." Thereafter, I was encouraged to read an array of interesting materials. In Mrs. Heitner's room, all children kept a notebook of essays and stories. While I still worked from the graded reader, Mrs. Heitner was more interested in my independent reading and writing. Her unorthodox methods were strikingly similar to what we now call Whole Language. At the end of the year, when standardized tests were administered, I scored at a fifth reading grade level.

Then as now, standardized tests trumped all. While they limit many children's chances, standardized tests by their objectivity, sometimes liberate. My assignment to the Stupid Caste was over. Or was it?

According to the pacing guides, I was one basal reader behind the Bright Children, though many of them had lower scores on the standardized test. The system was clear that in order to join the Bright Children in fourth grade, I would have to complete that last book. Mrs. Heitner gave me the necessary reader and workbook to finish over the summer, and, as my mother later told me, fudged the paperwork necessary to transform me into a Bright Child. But the basal reader bored me, so I read *Little Women* that summer instead. When I told this to Mrs. Heitner in September, she patted my shoulder.

Since then, I have belonged to Smart Caste of every school I have attended "with all the rights and privileges and pertaining thereto," to quote my doctoral diploma. My parents were filled with joy over my metamorphosis. School was not the dismal place it had been the first two years. Teachers were better; the assignments more interesting; my options more enticing; the discipline less arbitrary and more fair.

This tale of educational resilience is from a time long past. But in its essentials, education is not, I fear, very different from the way it was in September, 1956. As a teacher educator, I observe many schools. When one looks below the surface, most P-12 institutions use educational castes to structure student identity and mediate access to opportunity. We call these castes "programs." Most have specific ordeals and rites of initiation such as testing for Gifted and Talented and the IEP conference.

Mass education, by its need for uniformity and control often disrespects diversity of all sorts and violates individual needs. Education is deeply personal and difficult to carry out on a large scale. Where there is mass education, there is often injustice, particularly toward lower socioeconomic groups and minorities. I believe it would have been to re-present myself to P.S. 206 had I been a child of color. I taught for years in under-resourced urban middle schools, and it pained me deeply that public education is difficult to implement justly and well. This awareness did not come with a magic formula for making the system fair, and I cannot claim to have reached every struggling child though, like every good teacher, I tried. I offer this story, as an illustration of what can go wrong, and what one committed teacher can do set things right.