Abu’s Lesson

Author Barbara Bass’s first grandchild, Devorah Emily, was born in February 2001. As a gift, one of Bass’s friends in the Maryland Writing Project gave her a handmade journal, a 2001 penny, and the book *The Hundred Penny Box* by Sharon Bell Mathis. Bass then set about collecting one penny for each year of her own life. That penny collection and her friend’s gift inspired her to write a series of essays for her granddaughter, each one focusing on a story from one year of Bass’s life. The following is her reminiscence from the year 1954.

**BY BARBARA BASS**

Several summers ago, we invited a man known as “Abu, the flute maker” to visit the Maryland Writing Project Summer Institute to illustrate to the teachers someone who had found his gift, his talent, in spite of school rather than because of it. As a child, he discovered his ability to create music out of almost anything—a chair, a bedpost, a clothes hanger, for example. He could also make flutes. 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. His talent, of course, “didn’t count” in school, and he eventually dropped out. He saw himself as a failure until he began putting his talent to work. Now he has his own group that makes music from a variety of homemade wind and percussion instruments. He travels from school to school demonstrating to children that each one of us has value and attempting to nurture the creative ability in each child he meets.

We all learned about the strength of the human spirit that morning, which is what we had planned, but we learned something unexpected as well. As Abu was setting up his instruments, I walked across the hall to the student day-care center that is housed in the same building and invited the teachers to bring the children to Abu’s concert. They were thrilled but asked if they could bring the students 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 some huge conga drums as well as some smaller percussion and homemade 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 were horrified. Their 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 trooped 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 have we done? What has been done to us?”

Like these children, we did not enter school anxious. Like other three- and four-year-olds, we assumed we were creative. Young children assume they can, not that they can’t. There’s evidence that anxiety over creativity and learning has its roots in the classroom environment. Studies have shown that students who take more writing classes, for example, tend to be more apprehensive about writing than those who take fewer courses. The effect of repeated failure seems to be cumulative. Other studies have proven that young students do not become anxious right away. It isn’t until the end of elementary school that a consistent tendency emerges in students to be anxious. The saddest part of this school-induced anxiety is that often students affected (or should I say “inflicted”?) with it are usually quite capable intellectually, but the anxiety, with its resultant poor self-esteem, can interfere with students’ ability to produce work comparable with their abilities. I don’t know where I found this quote by Joseph Chilton Pearce, but it is appropriate here: “Anxiety is always the enemy of intelligence. The minute anxiety arises, intelligence closes to a search for anything that will relieve the anxiety.” And in *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Abraham Maslow writes, “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.”

On the day that Abu visited our institute, I was just one more adult who did not respond to his call. And I am sure that my own educational experiences had something to do with my reticence. I remember rules, restrictions, and anxiety. I remember standing in the corner if my spirit began to emerge. I remember being taught what I now realize was “sight”
reading, and guessing the answer wrong. “What is this word?” the teacher would ask? No response. She offered a hint: “It’s a girl.” I confidently threw my arm up in the air. The teacher looked hopeful. “Jane?” I said tentatively. Her face dropped the way it did when we disappointed her. I never did forget that word again, though. It was “sister.”

When I reflect on my education now, it seems based on the philosophy of “heads only—sit still—don’t feel anything.” There were no opportunities for exploration, and risk-taking was discouraged. I never felt safe taking a chance or even asking questions. I gave up trying to figure out why we had to do anything we were asked to do. I remember memorizing the 21 counties of New Jersey in alphabetical order (Atlantic, Bergen, Burlington, Camden, Cape May…), the poem “In Flander’s Field” with all of the punctuation marks in place (“In Flander’s Field the poppies grow comma between the crosses row on row semicolon”) and Antony’s speech at Caesar’s funeral—without a clue as to what “lend me your ears” meant. It was only after I saw Julius Caesar as an adult that the words in that speech touched me: “The evil that men do lives after them. The good is oft interred with their bones.”

These school incidents illustrate to me where my creative child went; little in my school experience prepared me to volunteer to try out Abu’s conga drum. But maybe that was because this event was, in fact, taking place in something that looked like a school setting. Certainly I and, I would assume, most of the teachers in the institute that day, had had out-of-school experiences that fueled our creativity.

I remember a day in my early life when, as Maslow says, my “need to know” was “fired.” It was a time when I actively participated in the process and created meaning for myself. At age eight, I was left alone after school to care for my five-year-old brother while my parents were at work. I would pick him up from his kindergarten class at Aldene School and walk him home. We would often wander around Roselle Park, waiting until the last possible minute before I would have to unlock the door and step into that silent, empty apartment. One afternoon, I began reading all the words printed on every door we passed. It kept my brother amused. When we came to the one that said “Free Public Library” and under that “Welcome,” I cupped my hands around my eyes and looked in through the glass door. There were people in there, adults and children, sitting at tables reading, and row upon row of books. The seemingly friendly grown-up behind the desk saw me peering in and smiled at me, beckoning me to enter. I took my brother in one hand and tugged on the door with the other. The librarian showed us to the children’s section. I was drawn to a separate bookcase labeled biography, picked up a book entitled Amelia Earhart, Aviatrix, and I was a goner. My life had taken 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 library.

I don’t remember owning books as a child—or even being read to. If someone had told me that such a place existed—a place where I could take books home for free!—I doubt that I would have believed it. I decided that afternoon to read every book in that place—in alphabetical order. I’m still working on it. My library card is still one of my most prized possessions. Whenever we moved to a new town, the first place I looked was the public library. That love has expanded to include Brentano’s, B. Dalton’s, Borders, and Barnes and Noble when I was able to buy the books I loved. I am drawn to books and am happiest when I am curled up, lost in one.

Left alone to learn on my own, I began to understand the distinct separation between going to school and learning. It was in that storefront library rather than in the classroom that I developed a growing understanding of my potential, an appreciation of my intrinsic self-worth, and the realization that I had to create my own happiness. I discovered a world beyond Dick and Jane, a discovery that deepened and sustained my love of reading. How I felt in that place influenced my ability to learn in ways I am still just beginning to understand. That is the part of me I wish I would have called on when Abu brought his flute to class.

References

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