

In a Mirror: Mother and Daughter as Teachers

By Rae S. McCormick

The forging of a sense of identity is never finished. Instead, it feels like catching one's image reflected in a mirror next to a carousel—'Here I am again.'

—Catherine Bateson, *Composing a Life*, p. 219.

I actually remember when it started. Well, not the exact date, but certainly the exact event. She was sitting at the dining room table after dinner, her legs curled up under her in that peculiar way she has of making herself taller while seated, hunched over student papers. I was coming from the kitchen and was caught by the light on her hair and the intensity of her posture. I watched her from the corner of the room, clearly in her sight, but not seen. She was reading some assignment the fifth graders in her first student teaching classroom had completed. Absorbed in her work, she smiled at one paper as she marked something on it, bit her lip as she looked at another, frowned as she re-read another. She continued like this through the pile of papers in front of her, completely engrossed in this task that perhaps seemed like the mark of a "teacher." Finally, she sat back and looked up to find me watching her. "Look

at this," she said, as she held out a paper for me to see.

"This is one of the students I told you was having such a hard time with his math problems the other day. Look how well he did on this!"

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She had been working after college graduation for three years when she called one day and said, "I want to be a teacher, and I want to come back to Oxy for my

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credential.” I protested her attendance at the teacher education program where I taught, reminding her of how close we were and telling her I didn’t think it was a good idea for her to do this. I felt she needed to be away from me as she pursued this long-standing (she says ‘genetic’), but heretofore repressed, longing to teach. Besides, she had been living on her own for three years and the return to living with her parents might be challenging for all of us. Uncharacteristically, she rejected my advice and insisted on applying to our program. As things turned out, I wonder why I questioned her judgement.

What a gift this has been for me to watch my daughter become a teacher! Not only did I observe first-hand her progress through the professional preparation program, I also have been an invited participant and sometimes co-teacher in her classrooms. And as I watched, I began to write. At first, I just wrote occasionally in my own journal about my reaction to her experiences. That first night with the papers, for instance, or my private expressions of concern over her well-being as she struggled to learn how to “control” those same fifth graders. But gradually I noticed that my entries changed in two ways: I started to write stories, and I started to reflect on my own teaching as a result of thinking about my daughter’s teaching. I began to think seriously about the teacher education program in which I taught as I closely observed its impact on a very conscientious student. Then later, as she invited me to her own classrooms, I pondered the relationship of the personal and the professional in our teaching lives. When the “Lives of Teachers” Special Interest Group of the California Council on the Education of Teachers was formed, I became an interested participant. Heather also began writing, and we occasionally shared our separate stories with each other. Most of what we write is very personal, for it has become a significant self-reflective tool for us, not just of our teaching, but of our lives. This story is from the collection written during her third year of teaching first grade, with names and details changed to protect the identify of her students and to allow us to share it with an audience.

“Mrs. Rae, you look older!”

This year, it’s been Andrew. Cute, blond, little, smart, privileged, verbal, antsy. Early in the school year we connected during one of my classroom visits when I went to his desk, knelt down to his level, and had him “read” his book to me. Quickly, he asked me to read to him, which I did, wondering as I did what Ms. McCormick would think about this variation on super silent reading. Rationalizing, I told myself he was better engaged this way and others around us were attentive to my whispered story-telling. And Andrew knew I liked him. And he liked me.

Throughout the year his had been the most prominent among the names recited by my daughter as she sighed in exasperation during the telling of a tale of lessons gone awry, of table points’ failure to motivate expected classroom behavior, of children continuing to need reminders from her.

“But he is so bright and skilled,” I’d answer. “He needs to be challenged academically. He’s bored.”

“He’s Andrew,” she’d answer me.

During a later visit I made to the classroom, he could hardly wait for his group to circulate to my center where I was working with the children on word families in reading and spelling by having them read and write words on their white boards. Sitting beside me at the round table, after scurrying just short of running to the table, he peered into my face with a serious expression on his. “Mrs. Rae, you look older.”

“Older!” I replied, laughing, but thinking to myself, *Older than what? Older than Heather? Older than before? Has my hair turned grayer?* “Well, Andrew, I am older than I was the last time I saw you.” Still frowning, he continued to peer at me. “I don’t feel any older, though.” I catch Heather’s eye across the room and laugh with her at this honest burst of observation from one of her challenges.

On the day in question, we’re going to the local Performing Arts Center for a special performance by the symphony. Heather’s school participates in a program that sends a member of the symphony orchestra to each school, educates teachers about music so they in turn can educate their students, and provides a culminating field trip to the concert hall for a performance. This will be the second year I have attended with her class, acting as a room mother, riding the bus, shepherding my group of four or five students. This year the theme has been Tchaikovsky, and the performance will turn out to be wonderful.

But, first we have to get there. Heather is in charge of the buses for her school, so shortly after the children arrive for the day and are settled at their seats during super silent reading, she leaves me in charge so she can oversee the arrival of the buses and the distribution of classes to their assigned places. I am aware of how immediately my self-perception changes as I move to the front of the room from my customary position on the sidelines. *What is this?* I wonder, aware of my heightened attention to children’s behavior. *Is Amanda talking to her table mate or just reading to herself? Why is Edgar fidgeting? Oh-oh, there goes Joan out of her chair.* It’s as if the hairs on the back of my neck are erect; I know my posture has changed. *What does my face look like? Where is my smile?*

I tell them I will read a story to them while we are waiting. I take one from the chalk tray to read and immediately am greeted by choruses of “We’ve already read that one.” Knowing that as soon as I’d put it down and picked up another, they’d say the same thing, I say, “That’s ok. It’s a good book, so we’ll read it again. If you prefer to continue reading your own, you may do so. But I’ll read this one.” I begin reading and immediately realize that there is a good reason why I tell my students in the credential program to always preview what you are going to read or show to students so you are well-prepared for how to use the material. The book is not good; it’s laborious, wordy, uninteresting. Since I don’t know where it is headed, I don’t know how to skip some parts and liven it up. I feel the class slipping away. And I feel the frown on my face and the tension in my body. Ariana and Michelle go to

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the library corner in the back of the room to read. I watch them and confirm my approval of this through a nod and smile. But then, they begin to talk and fidget and push and pull at each other. "Ariana and Michelle," I interrupt my uninspired oral reading to say, "you may sit there if you are reading quietly." I gamely continue reading, picturing at the same time my exhortations to the students in my reading methods class to "make the literature come alive with your enthusiasm..." Fortunately, Heather returns to announce that it is time to get on the bus.

We are the third class to board this bus. As luck would have it, I'm seated next to Andrew and Sam. We settle in. Heather leaves to check on the other buses, returns to announce that some of us have to go to another bus, and calls the names of about half of her class, indicating they are to go with her. She says to me, "Sorry to leave you like this. Are you ok?" "Sure," I say, squirming with anticipation of the return to a real teacher role. I'm to be in charge of this half of her class.

We finally embark for the 15 minute bus ride. Andrew wants to open the window and stands to do so. I shake my head. He sits and frowns. Then he and Sam begin to bat at each other. I shake my head. Andrew inches forward on his seat and turns around to see who is sitting behind us. Hands reach over the back of the seat toward him; his reach back to theirs. I shake my head. Andrew and Sam resume the hand-batting. I shake my head. *This is getting tiresome*, I say to myself. I talk with Andrew and Sam, trying to keep them from acting out their boredom as well as trying to find out more about them. Yes, they've both done this before in kindergarten. Andrew has also gone with his grandma to the Performing Arts Center. Yes they like to play baseball. Yes they play Nintendo. Andrew still wants to open the window. "No, it's fine like it is," I say. I turn to talk to the girls across the aisle. Andrew and Sam begin batting each other. I look at Andrew, put my hand on his knee and say, "Only you are in charge of your hands. You have absolute control over them. No one else can control them. I need you to control those hands and keep them to yourself."

"Can I open the window?" he responds. *Where's Heather?* I say to myself as I shake my head for what, the fourth time.

We finally are seated in the concert hall, a place so beautiful it makes my skin prickle and tears come to my eyes. The children, all 3000 of them, are buzzing in a relatively well-behaved way. I am seated next to Andrew on one side and a boy from one of the kindergarten classes on the other. Heather is seated about six children to my right. We wait for the performance to begin. Andrew stands up, lets his seat rise to its upright position, and sits then on the top edge of the raised seat. Poised, hands outstretched in front of him as if he is ready to go down a slide without holding on, he bounces and the chair falls to its down position, Andrew beaming in delight. Up he goes, on the edge, poised to repeat this ride, when I resume my head-shaking. With a serious tone, I say, "We have to sit right in these lovely chairs. We can't bounce them. We have to respect this property for it belongs to all of us. We have to act like adults when we're here." I look at Andrew as he is engulfed by the velvety

chair, his head barely rising to the top of the back, his legs about a foot from reaching the floor. *Oh-oh*, I think.

I turn to talk to the kindergarten children to my left. Andrew's chair on my right rises to its upright position; Andrew's feet touch the floor; Andrew's body gives a bounce; Andrew's chair crashes to its down position. Andrew's "teacher" frowns and sighs in exasperation. I look at him with eyebrows raised. He smiles. I frown. He turns to talk to Sam on his right. Heather catches my eye and asks if all is ok, gesturing her question, "Do you want me to take him?" I smile, shake my head, and mouth the words, "He's fine."

We talk about this and that; he fidgets. His body is still too small for this adult chair. He fidgets some more, stretching his legs out in front of him until his toes touch the back of the seat in front of him. "Gosh, Andrew. You know we have to keep our feet off the furniture. That is annoying to the person in that seat to have your feet on the chair, and besides, it can get the seats dirty. Just keep your feet down." He puts his feet down and turns around to talk to the kids behind him. I turn to survey the crowd, talking a bit to children and adults near me, wondering when the show will begin. Out of the corner of my eye I see feet reaching out to the back of the chair to my right. In disbelief I turn to look at Andrew. We stare at each other, his legs extended, his body scrunched down in the seat so he can in fact reach the seat ahead of him, my body taut with anger. Up goes my eyebrow. Down go his feet. "*Man!*" I say to myself. Now I see what Heather's been complaining about all year. Does he always need this constant reminding? Have I ever been spoiled. With Heather as a child, all I had to do was tell her once, and that was that.

When is this show going to start? Waiting is hard for these kids. But then I look at the kindergarten children sitting in the row beside me. All have their backs to the back of the chair, little legs stuck straight out. Some are talking quietly to their neighbors, most are just sitting. Andrew's chair rises to its upright position again. His voice calls out to his sister who is sitting one row back and ten seats to our right. Bounce goes the body, out goes my hand to interrupt the downward ride of the chair. I glare. "Do you want to spend the rest of the time outside with me or do you want to stay for the concert? One more time and you're out of here!" He frowns at me as he sits and sulks. I then say to him, "Look at this boy sitting beside me. He is in kindergarten. You are a year older than he is. Why is it that he can sit quietly and wait and you can't?" As Andrew is looking at the boy who is at least six inches taller than he is and saying incredulously, "He's in kindergarten?" I am thinking, *What are you saying? You never ridicule a child.* I feel the flush on my face, not from anger this time, but from embarrassment.

The performance begins, with a lively conductor, the introduction of the musicians who have visited each of the schools, the appearance of Story Teller, a woman in costume who evidently is known by the students, dancers, pantomime, questions, audience participation. A well-crafted forty-five minutes culminating with the canons of the *1812 Overture* accompanied by projected images of

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fireworks. The children are enchanted and engaged and enthralled. All, seemingly, except Andrew. About 20 minutes into the program, he turns to me and announces he is hungry. I whisper something about he would have to wait until we get back to school.

“But I’m hungry,” he repeats.

“We don’t have any food, Andrew. You’ll just have to wait.”

“Can I go see Ms. McCormick?” he asks.

“No.”

“But I’m hungry.”

“No.”

“I want to talk to Ms. McCormick.”

“Tough! Sit there, be quiet, and don’t move, or I’ll take you out of here.”

“Tough?” When did I ever say that to a first grader?

We survive not only the concert but the ride back to school. I remind Andrew that only he is in control of his hands, wondering as I say it if he really is. I disembark, exhausted and, yes, hungry.

I have thought a lot about Andrew at the concert and about my behavior. I’ve told several people the story, beginning with my husband, and extending to some classroom teachers. Initially, the focus of my re-telling was on my realization of the challenges Heather had felt that year as she constantly battled with this group of children. She often complained to me that teaching wasn’t fun any more because it seemed like she was always having to “sit on the kids.” I had listened and commiserated and suggested alternatives as she tried to solve the problems, but I guess I thought she was exaggerating the negative experiences. I suspected she was holding them to too high standards of behavior and not relaxing and having fun with them. Perhaps she should loosen up a little and enjoy them, not try to keep them in line all the time. But then I sat with Andrew. Two hours with him, counting the bus ride to and fro, and I was ready to quit. Was I expecting too much from him? Should I have let him bounce on the chair? Was his fidgeting really that bad or did it just conflict with my preconceived idea of what behavior should be like? Is it all that bad to put one’s feet on the chair in front of one? What would have happened if I had ignored that behavior? Was he testing me? Testing *me*?

Now the focus is on me. Why did I react so negatively? Why did I tense up when “put in charge?” Why did I ridicule Andrew by implying his behavior was less mature than a child in kindergarten? Why does it matter to me months later that I was not successful in engaging this bright little boy in a productive, purposeful experience? I know it made me wonder if I have the credibility to suggest to new teachers how they might manage their classes. What do I tell teachers who are faced with children’s behavior that is exasperating, to say the least? How do we prepare teachers to remain calm and consistent in the face of seemingly unending nettlesome behavior? Andrew’s behavior was not nearly as bad as some students who fight, defy authority, or cause harm to others, yet I expended considerable psychic energy as

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I (ineffectively) interacted with him. I think of Andrew as I observe student teachers in classrooms where students constantly disrupt the proceedings, erupt from their chairs three or four times an hour, or pinch and pull their seat-mates. Table points for productive behavior, colored cards pulled for inappropriate behavior, frowns, smiles, staying in at recess—all have equally inconsistent results. I think of Heather when I hear very experienced teachers say, “This class is making me wonder if I should stay in teaching.” And I think of Heather when a student teacher says, “This really isn’t fun. I don’t feel like I am teaching. All I ever do is discipline.”

Did I react to Andrew because I knew his behavior had befuddled Heather? Because he and others had given her such a hard time and caused her to question whether she should be a teacher? Because her disillusionment worried me? Because he made me wonder if I could still teach? Because he made me ponder the enormous energy and skill it requires to be a teacher, and how often we who are not in the classroom every day misjudge and misunderstand that role? Was it my professional role or my personal role that caused such anguish?

Or, maybe I’m making too big a deal out of all of this; maybe it’s just because, as Andrew observed, I’m older now.

Reference

Bateson, C. (1989). *Composing a life*. New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press.