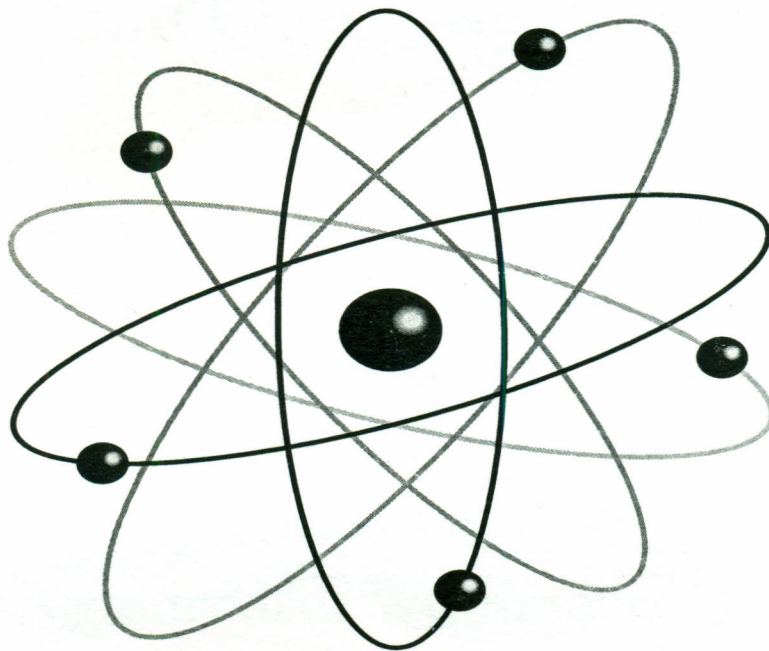


C o m p o s i t i o n
T h e o r y



and Other Mysteries

Connecticut Writing Project
Summer Fellows
2000

Composition Theory and Other Mysteries

by

Members of the
Connecticut Writing Project
2000 Summer Institute

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Connecticut Writing Project
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The Connecticut Writing Project offers opportunities for growth and professional development to teachers of writing in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. A program of the University of Connecticut Department of English, the Connecticut Writing Project is affiliated with the widely acclaimed National Writing Project, which now has 166 sites in this country and abroad.

In the project, experienced classroom teachers are trained as Teacher/Consultants in an intensive Summer Institute where they share their expertise and practice writing themselves. During subsequent school years, they present workshops on composition theory and practical strategies for teaching writing to teachers in participating districts.

The approach has proven effective by generating widespread interest in good writing and by upgrading students' abilities as writers and learners. For further programs, please write or call the director:

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The Preserved Picture

Michelle Amann-Wojenski

I preserve the picture
Behind the Plexiglas
Of an off-white Victorian frame.
The faded photo shows
A flower in your hair
Accenting the innocence of you, a woman, a girl
Wearing a white ruffled collar and tight black curls.

You're smiling, and I can almost hear your thoughts:
*Those girls wearing expensive pearls,
Low-cut blouses with embroidered swirls
And cotton candy lips haven't got anything on me.
I have all I need in my Lucky Strikes and this good-looking LT.*

As I study your wrinkleless face,
I notice something I had not seen before.

I can't help but recognize . . .
Something I should probably ignore
The blue in those big, brown, brazen eyes....
Remembering your cursed clairvoyant ties

I can't help but wonder . . .
Do you know how that soldier boy
In his pressed pants and brass buttons
Will someday call you wife
And leave you not once but twice?
First he will respond to the call of war
Next he will answer to the call of the Lord
He will make you a widow even before
You know all the gifts and secrets he has to confide
And all the harmful habits he has to hide.

I can't help but question. . .
Do you know that his habit
Of drinking whiskey like water
Will claim yet another victim in your unborn son?
Your only son, whose duty it is
To bear his father's name,
Will share his father's fate and fame—

I can't help but inquire . . .
Do you know of the choices of another
That will cause your only daughter to be a single mother?

Forced to struggle to survive
Left with only the wisdom of your words
Because all that you needed,
Those Lucky Strikes and that soldier boy,
Took away your life and joy.

I can't help but want to understand . . .
If you did know all of that
Why did you continue on your path—
A plan of promised pain and tear stains?
Would you again be seduced by what you wanted to be right
If you had a chance to relive this captured sight?

Cigarettes

T. G. Gant

"Kay, what you up to girl?" Maria chomped into the phone with her loud gum. "Nothing, just doing the homework for Mr. Wheeler's class. You do yours already?"

"Pfth, yeah right girl, as if I would. Listen, the checks came in today, my ma wants me to walk down to the store and pick her up some cigarettes, wanna come?"

As if it's a choice for me, thought Kaycina, *I either go, or she won't be my friend for a month!* "Is today the day the cheese comes too?" asked Kaycina.

"Girl, I can't believe you like that shit. You probably wouldn't like it so much if they brought it to your house too."

"It's not bad, at least it's free," offered Kaycina.

"Yeah, whatever free means, if my ma could get a job like yours, we wouldn't get it either. You gonna come?" demanded Maria.

"Yeah, I'll meet you at the tree."

Kaycina and Maria walked up Harrisville Manor. None of their friends seemed to be around, but a lot of younger kids were hanging from trees and daringly jumping from suicide mountain. Kaycina remembered the time, not long ago, when she used to jump bravely from the rock too. It truly is a rock, even though it feels like a mountain. Kaycina thought that if she really wanted she could go over and reach the top of the rock, well maybe on her tippy toes. The spicy tingle of Spanish rice passed their noses. Kaycina was reminded of her second baby-sitter who she couldn't wait to get away from. The woman had some fruity name like "Nectarine," and her four boys tormented Kaycina by talking about her in Spanish. Kaycina begged and pleaded to just be able to stay by herself after school. Her mother never agreed, so after Kaycina turned 10 (She figured she was in "double digits" and was old enough to make her own choices) she stopped going to Nectie's apartment. For awhile, her mother kept paying Nectie without even knowing that Kaycina wasn't there. Eventually, her mother caught on and told Nectie that Kaycina was going to stay by herself. Ten years old being alone in Harrisville was not uncommon. Most families only had one parent and if that parent worked, there wasn't money to go around hiring baby-sitters, especially for 10 year olds. In fact, most kids were making money babysitting by that age. Kaycina smiled thinking about the independence she forced out of her mother. Thinking about the rumors she heard about Nectie's older son, she was relieved to not be one of "his girls" as he would have made her.

As the girls passed the last L-shaped building of Harrisville, they were on the dirt path between Harrisville and Pilgrim Manor. Pilgrim Manor had old time street names like Plymouth Lane, Mayflower Court and even Thanksgiving Ave. As the girls cut through all the yards of Pilgrim Manor, they had to dodge a lot of dogs. Fortunately, the dogs had leashes that allowed them to only run up to the edges of their yard. The girls had a few close calls, but they made it.

"Man, I'm glad we don't got dogs in Harrisville!" said Maria.

"Me too" agreed Kaycina. Secretly, however, Kaycina wished she did live in Pilgrim Manor, just so she could have a dog.

"I hate Pilgrim Manor," said Kaycina, "All their apartments are so hot and stuffy, you can barely breathe."

"Yeah," agreed Maria, "They've even got worse roaches than we do."

"Whoever thought up Pilgrim Manor was *stupid*, who would build four apartments in one building and then stack them on top of each other. It's just *stupid*. At least at Harrisville, we've got up stairs and down and no one lives below or above us!" continued Kaycina.

"You're saying it girl!" agreed Maria.

Deep down, the girls both knew that Pilgrim was a more expensive place to live. People could have dogs, they had storage space in their basements, and they had laundry in each building, unlike Harrisville where apartments shared laundry rooms with four other seven family buildings. Harrisville was definitely the ghetto of the town, even if Kaycina didn't acknowledge it.

"Pilgrim sucks," said Kaycina.

"Yep," said Maria.

As the girls passed the busy road onto the street their school was on, Kaycina's mother drove by. She pulled over next to the girls and stopped the small blue sedan. The car sounded tired and looked even worse. With a deep key scratch down the passenger side and a kicked out headlight, it was definitely a Harrisville car. Harrisville's hoodlum gang made it a point to "mark" each and every car. When the sun went down, anything was fair game at Harrisville; delivery people and even the police would not be seen after dark. Kaycina's mother had all her windows rolled down and they could see her matching coral pink suit. Her hair was pulled back into a French braid and she had just flung her cigarette out of her window. Kaycina had tried that suit on many times without her mother knowing; she was hoping to wear it to her Confirmation.

"Kaycina! Where are you going!" shouted her mother.

"To the store, I left you a note on the table. Maria's ma wants some cigarettes." said Kaycina.

"What the hell are you doing dressed like that to go to the store for!" yelled her mom.

"Dressed like what!" shouted Kaycina from the sidewalk. *If that bitch makes me get in the car and go home, I'm never talking to her again.*

"Kaycina, your cheeks are just 'bout hanging out of those shorts and does that shirt need to be so tight?"

"You bought the shirt Ma!"

"Kaycina, don't make me put you in this car and take you home!"

"Ma, we're just going to the store, I was hot and this is what I put on. It's not like I went to school like this!" replied Kaycina trying to get on her mother's good side.

"You better not have gone to school like that;

you better come home right after the store and change those clothes. Don't even think of gallivanting around and then calling me from some friend's house telling me where you are. You come home first, change those clothes, and then we'll discuss you going out."

"OK Ma." Kaycina's mother left and the girls continued walking.

"Girl, that has got to be embarrassing," said Maria.

"Shut up, as if your mother checked you before you left."

"Man, I thought your mother was cooler than that."

"Please, I told you, she's only nice when other people are around. I'm surprised she even yelled with you right here."

"Parents suck" said Maria.

"You said it girl" agreed Kaycina.

The girls got to their school and decided to do some flips and hang upside down on the uneven bars.

"I'm so glad we're finally at the top of school," said Maria.

"Yeah, sixth grade is cool, we rule this school—DONTCHAKNOWIT!!" shouted Kaycina. Kaycina was looking at Maria hanging upside down and wishing she could be thin like her. Her mother really was right in complaining about her cheeks hanging out of her shorts. Maria could wear anything she wanted but Kaycina ended up looking foolish if she tried to dress like Maria. "Maria, how do you stay so skinny?"

"Oh please girl, I am so skinny, I hate it. I wish I looked more like you. At least you have a reason for wearing a bra."

"Whatever. I'm too fat, I think I'm going to go on a diet."

"You shouldn't, diets aren't good for you. Mi madre's on them all the time and she just wastes her money. Can you believe she used to look like me before her four kids?"

"Mine was skinny too, before me. I'm not having no kids if that's what happens."

"Yeah well, I need to gain weight and you don't need to lose any." Maria flipped down from the bar and was ready to keep walking.

"Did you see that stupid fifth grader trying to ask me out at recess today?" asked Maria.

"Yeah, I think your ex, Derek, sent him over."

"Derek is not my ex; he's not my anything!"

"Whatever! Let's get to the store before my Ma calls the police on me."

As the girls walked down the street, Maria brought up her father. "Like clockwork mi padre showed up today." Maria's father is Puerto Rican and her mother is African American. Ever since he had begun teaching Maria some Spanish words and phrases, the girls had been adding them whenever they could. Their favorite words were: *Mi Madre*, *Mi Padre*, *Gringo* and *Ah Dios Mio!* They used "Gringo" anytime they talked of White people. "He always seems to come on check-day because he knows she'll be in a good mood. "

"Well at least you see yours once a month. I see my mine in the summer and get guilt-gifts all year long; it's really pathetic."

"At least you get stuff; mine just takes. Fathers can be so dense don't you think?"

The girls crossed the street to their convenience store and ordered Maria's mother's Newport Lights.

Pulling down the green and white box, the grizzly cashier asked, "These for you young lady?"

"No, my Ma sent me," said Maria.

"Checks must be in today, huh?" said Grizzly as she slapped a paid sticker on the box.

With Maria's change and Kaycina's baby-sitting money the girls had enough money for two Slim Jims, two ice cream sandwiches and a cherry coke.

"What a rude bitch" said Maria as they left the store, "the checks much be in, huh" mimicked Maria, "fat-ass, ugly-mustache Gringo bitch."

Kaycina didn't truly understand the embarrassment of check-day, but she knew that it was not the time to talk about it. Check-day was not something Maria took lightly.

"Girl, when I get out of school, I'm goin get me a good job, get out of Harrisville and away from this hell-hole!" said Maria angrily.

"Maria, you gonna leave your family behind?"

"No, I'm going to be so rich, I'll be able to buy a house for everyone to fit! Course with your grades you'll be going off to college and leaving me anyway."

"Girl, it takes more than grades to get into college. I'm hoping I can type fast like my ma and get a secretary job."

"That's cool, typing, course you know you're gonna have to sleep with the man to keep your job," said Maria.

"Girl, I ain't sleeping with no gringo but my husband; you know that."

"Yeah, knowing you, you will be marrying some gringo, but secretaries, you know."

"Well, I'm not even going there with no one so like, whatever! "

As they crossed the street to go back by their school, Kaycina asked, "Hey, you wanna walk by Derek's on the way back?"

"Shut up girl, I don't like him, never did, never will."

"So, you wanna walk by and see if he's home?"

"No, I don't"

"Come on, it's not like it's out of the way!"

"Fine, but I'm not talking to him if he's home!"

"Fine" said Kaycina slyly.

On the Occasion of our First Anniversary

Dale Griffith

For over six years, I have been a teacher at York Correctional Institution, Connecticut's maximum security prison for women. For most of my teaching career at York, I have taught language arts, focusing on various forms of writing, a craft that, I believe, can empower and heal. In July of 1999, writer Wally Lamb, a lifelong friend of York librarian Marge Cohen, agreed to come to the prison to present a two hour writing workshop. That was all anyone expected. Marge, knowing that I'm an avid reader and a great fan of Wally's, appointed me as the staff liaison for that one day event. Yet, a year later, Wally continued to come, week after week, helping the women in the writing group to create an autobiographical anthology of their stories which will soon be published.

What follows is my letter to the writers which was presented to them at a school assembly on the occasion of our first anniversary. At the celebration, Wally also read from his novel, I Know This Much Is True, and from a short article, "Unlock a spiritual prison," which appeared August 11-13, 2000 in USA Weekend. While Wally was busy writing his article for USA Weekend and assisting "my" students, I was tucked away in Storrs, studying composition theory and writing this letter.

My Dear Fellow Writers,

As we celebrate our first anniversary, I must thank you all. My life today is wonderful, partly due to your influence, but not so long ago, I was a hollow shell, too empty to even know what was missing. In desperation, I prayed to a remote God, promising to serve Him if He would deliver me from my enemy—my then-husband. A year later, I'd ended my marriage, but I had what was left of myself.

In that empty place, I slowly came to understand that I was hungry for love. While people had *said* they loved me, their actions belied their words. They'd fed me crumbs instead of bread. And, I was no better. Who had I truly loved? My husbands? My father? My mother? Myself?

I'd heard about "unconditional" love, but it was merely talk, just another excuse for people to hurt one another. My father's "Baby, I love you" as he unbuckled his leather belt. My mother's "I love you best," as she left me for years in my grandmother's care. My husband's, "No one loves you like I do," as his fist whizzed past my ear.

And though I'd spent years in church pews, the preacher's god said: Obey Me or else. I learned nothing about love there.

Loving others meant pleasing them, so I'd knock myself out trying to make my father or mother or husband or kids happy, and when it worked, I'd be happy, and when it didn't, I'd seethe with resentment, hidden beneath a sugary smile. The resentment mounted; the smile disappeared; then, I'd need a couple of glasses of wine to feign sweetness—and that sometimes failed.

Though it escaped me time and again, I wanted to learn about love more than anything else—for my own sake and for my children's. I wanted my kids to experience the love that I had missed, so, I searched—in books, in religions, in the university, in romance.

I pleaded, "God, if you're there, please, *please*, teach me how to love." I wore out my knees in prayer, whispering and wailing, and gradually, changes as fine as dust transformed me—from the inside out. Unseen help revealed itself one winter when I was virtually broke. After a lingering illness, I'd lost my waitressing job; no prospects were in sight. Mysteriously, dinners appeared on my doorstep, money arrived from an anonymous donor, and a job offer came from Riverview Hospital for Children where children who had been tortured at the hands of "loved" ones healed my heart with their vulnerability.

Then one ordinary day, I realized I'd built a little foundation—and that foundation was me. Suddenly I knew that an entire universe existed within me where I was loved. Day by day, my life widened until I was prepared for richer lessons—which the women at York, and especially you, my fellow writers, have taught me.

Teaching at York is not something I planned. When I graduated from college at forty, I intended to teach high school English. Yet an invisible force called me. Stepping behind the prison walls felt like a kept appointment—by teaching here, I was both keeping a promise and receiving an answer to prayer. All my life, I have longed, like Homer in *The Cider House Rules*, to be “of use.” At York, I am both served and serving, and, through that paradoxical blend, a once-strange god reveals herself to me.

My God instructs in concrete ways, most often through her people. In the past six years, many teachers at York have passed my way—some who are regarded as “staff” and others who are called “inmates.” However, my best teachers have been the members of our writing group.

When I first learned that Wally was coming to York, I dusted my copies of his novels, rehearsed authorly questions, brushed up my vocabulary and started writing furiously in my journal—so we could discuss our “writing.” Then, one day, the phone rang, and there he was. I practically screamed. Instead, I “shushed” my students and, moments later, was chatting to Wally like he was a *regular* person. Then, he confessed that he felt sort of “called” to the prison, and I thought: *What's God got in mind for us now.*

Everyone wanted to attend that first workshop. I played director, videotaping, passing out pens, answering phones while Wally guided the group. Two weeks later, at our next meeting, we'd lost half our “writers.” Students fled when they learned they had to *write*, not just talk about it. When Wally committed to more sessions, we grew even smaller, and I moved my chair from the edge of wall to the group's inner circle.

One year later, Wally's still here, and so are we: Diane, Michelle, Carolyn, and Robin, all veterans from the start. We welcomed Brenda in January and Tabatha in March, and said good-bye to Laura and Deborah in the spring. Others breezed in and out, but it wasn't right for them.

Together, we've formed a family of sorts, with bumps and triumphs, but, no matter what, we have honored one another as writers. And, I have learned more about the writing process from you than from any book or paid professor.

What have I learned? For starters, you are living proof that good writing gets even better with practice. Compare a piece from a year ago to a recent draft:. Your writing has become clearer, more descriptive, more authentic. You, who have been silenced for so long, have found your voices—and they're beautiful. You could all lead workshops on the art of process. As someone who is easily defeated by constructive criticism and discouraged by the slowness of revision, I can't help but admire your sheer perseverance.

You've shown me the value of being true to your own story as you've peeled away layer after painful layer to get closer to the truth. I'm not always so brave. Looking back hurts. To dive into my depths and explore the wreckage, I need your help. Some days when the ghosts' voices are screaming, I swear I'll never write again. Then, I listen to you—and I am inspired.

So you've taught me to become a better writer, a better teacher, a better person. By allowing me to share in your re-creation, you have answered my lifelong prayer. In your work, a loving God reveals herself again and again—in Diane's profound wisdom, in Robin's careful introspection, in Carolyn's poetic recollections. In Brenda's shy smile and Michelle's bright eyes, in Tabatha's floating voice and in Wally's gentle guidance, I see God. And, on a *really* fine day, I see God in me too.

Relationships

Linda Jordan-Parker

How often do we speak
anticipating our own point
agendas
clouding rationality

How often do we hurt
but not notice
personal feelings
blocking sensitivity

How often do we regret
but never speak
pride
preventing healing

How often do we love
but never show
fear
resisting union

How often do we leave
without looking back
blindness
denying reflection

How often do we listen
too late
the passing of time
finalizing decisions

Can I Ask You a Question?

Julie Karro

I think I might have a problem (don't we all have at least one?). I often develop strong urges to ask strangers very personal questions. Let me illustrate the problem.

As I stood waiting for my falafel at the lunch truck last week, a man came up and stood behind and a bit to the side of me in line. He was a large man, tall and wide with muscle. He was also quite sweaty from some physical exertion. And, I must reveal, he smelled. Each time I got a whiff of him it reminded me of those smells that catch you off guard. Have you ever held your breath as you lifted the lid on the garbage can, and just as you replace the lid, you release your breath, forgetting that the act of closing it forces the stench up and into your inhaling nostrils? Or how about when an olfactory-deficient person asks you to smell the milk? "Smell this," they demand. You immediately stick your nose in the carton. Usually, the milk has gone terribly bad, as can be easily inferred from your face. You regret for hours having so willingly stuck your nose in that carton, and you are also convinced that this person made you smell the milk out of some underlying hostility towards you. The smell stays with you. I won't even go into rotten meat.

This particular man had one of those "catch-you-off-guard" smells. He had that moist, sour smell that many adolescent boys have after exercising or even just from sitting in a hot church for too long. You might also experience this smell as you pass a boys' locker room or walking down the male hallway in a college dorm. Anyway, the man in line behind me smelled that way.

Towering over me in line, he stretched a bit and every now and again his T-shirt brushed against me. I had a strong desire to step to the side, but I didn't want to insult him or give him the satisfaction of thinking he had intimidated me into moving. And it was his overbearing physical presence which caused the endless list of questions to pop into my head. "Are you a football player?" "Do you just not realize that you are brushing up against me with your sweaty T-shirt or are you just comfortable with less personal space?" "Aren't you hot in those jean shorts after exercising and perspiring?" "I noticed that when you made your order you said, 'Please.' Is that because your mother stressed manners?" "Do you ever have difficulty fitting into small cars?" The questions just kept coming until I concentrated on my pleading stomach and the expected falafel.

What am I to do? Is this weird? I had a conversation with a counselor the other day who talked about how, when counseling, you must be very direct with your questions—no matter what the issue. That's right up my alley! In most human interaction, we tend to dance around issues, allude to things we want to know, start somewhere safe and hope that we end up getting to the good stuff. I want to be free to ask any question which tries to force itself out of my mouth like a belly laugh at a wake—it would feel so natural and good to let it out, despite the complete mortification that it would most certainly cause. "I notice you hyphenate your name. Do you ever find it awkward when filling out forms, and what will you do if you have children?" "After five years of marriage and a two-year-old in your life, do you and your husband have an active sex life?"

The questions I have, in my view, are not judgmental. I am simply incessantly curious about people. Often, the information that friends have about others satisfies my curiosity. I don't even need to know names, or if I might know these people they are talking about. I just like interesting information about people. I have one particular male friend who has a limit of questions that I can ask him each time we meet; he is obviously not comfortable with detail or nuance. I see the questions as necessary to my understanding of the particular story he might be telling me; he views it as demands for unnecessary information which cause an overload on his computer of a mind—simple as it may be.

Sometimes, I wonder whether or not I really want the answers to the questions which present

themselves. The other day I received a tentative answer to this question. While at a friend's family picnic, I was introduced to a seemingly typical twenty-year-old man named Caleb. He had the rope necklace with bead, earrings and goatee seen on many men his age. After talking with him for a bit, I was surprised to discover that he went to college at a seminary and was on the first step to becoming a priest. I, as is typical, was suddenly overcome with questions. I asked a few regarding the process of becoming a priest but could not seem to get around to the pertinent questions. "How is it that you decided to go down this road and do you ever think of turning around and running back?" I didn't want him to think I was interrogating him; I had to ask casually. Also, the people sitting with us at the picnic table appeared to have no interest in the discussion. Not only was I bursting with questions, but I was also flabbergasted at the apparent disinterest of my tablemates. How could they not be interested? How often do you meet someone who wants to go into the priesthood—never mind a twenty-year-old?! After getting some basic information about the primary seminary (you end up with a bachelor's in philosophy), I was forced to stop my questioning by the deadly glare from my friend sitting across the table. Later as we drove away from the party, I chattered about the unbelievability of meeting Caleb and all the other questions that I had for him. My friend then revealed that Caleb's father had left the priesthood to marry his mother, but they eventually divorced. And, sadly, his mother had died just a few months ago. I sat in the car, overwhelmed by this new information and thankful that I had stopped asking when I did. I must have been approaching some dangerously difficult subject matter for Caleb.

I now realize that this question-asking problem needs to be brought under control. If this urge to ask questions gets stronger, there are two possible directions for my life. I might simply become a person who is the victim of perpetual eye rolling from others. Of course, in that case, I probably won't even know that people are rolling their eyes at me—those types of people never know. They just go around thinking that they are quite normal and justified in their actions. Meanwhile, the rest of us think they're crazy or annoying or just a boob. Or, I might pursue a more appropriate profession, for example a psychiatrist or a nurse for the Red Cross bloodmobile - they get to ask the really juicy questions like "Have you ever had sex with a man who's had sex with a man?"

I also imagine that there must be a chat room or support group on the internet for people with my problem. I could log on and ask away! "Have you ever had sex with a man who was an IV drug user?" "Are you ever afraid that your long nails harbor deadly bacteria?" Maybe I should just keep this problem to myself or people might start asking me some personal questions. Now *that* would be awkward!

Inside These Hands

Jason S. Lambert

Inside these hands . . .

— is the Divine water of Baptism, the thin host of First Communion, the chatoyant cross of Confirmation, and the lustrous ring of marriage.

Inside these hands . . .

— is the impression of my grandfather's carpenter-worn fingers atop my hand backs, while he ran alongside my red Schwinn.

Inside these hands . . .

— are sandy fistfuls of seashells collected on Cape Cod Bay, the poker chips that Nana kept in the hutch top drawer and the random bauble she kept in her windowsills.

Inside these hands . . .

— are locks of my father's tight curled hair, a starry-eyed child's handgrips when he took me on his shoulders, dizzy and giddy, cloud capped and assured.

Inside these hands . . .

— are jiggly green Jell-O squares, glittery walnut Christmas ornaments and the cold imprint of snow angel wings . . . Mom was a magician, pulling fun out of thin air.

Inside these hands . . .

— are plasticky-leather couch cushions made into formidable forts and the wiffle ball used during relentless games with my brother Keith. I slapped rackety applause for his band with these hands, proud and even a bit jealous.

Inside these hands . . .

— is the mug of steaming cappuccino I brought my wife on our first date, extra frothy with wisps of cinnamon. And the clump of moist grass I clenched as I proposed on that sunny afternoon in Norfolk.

Inside these hands . . .

— is the imprint of my wife's nervous palm at Hartford Hospital as she gave a final _____! then the smooth nape of my daughter's neck in the first three minutes of life, while she squeezed my index finger, silently saying
"Daddy."

Inside these hands . . .

— is my family, the center of my world, they have enriched my life with grounded love, even when I was less than perfect, understanding of a hard day's work, even when I complained, and encouragement in the arts, even when I missed a line.

Untitled

Aly LaRock

In this photograph, you are a tow head blond, your stylish 70's bowl haircut skimming your pink cheeks. You are sitting on top of a toilet which has been fitted with a portable plastic potty for your exclusive use. Your short, pale legs are dangling above the little rubber pants and blue shorts that have been hastily pulled down and cast aside. You are grinning with a toddler's pride and egotism as your adoring mother snaps the picture.

If only time could be stopped and the toddler's innocence could be preserved; if only that smile could last through the years.

But it wasn't meant to last. At five years old, your mother, your world, died, leaving you hurt, damaged, uncertain. What was that day like when she left you? Did you already know before your father said the words? Did you even understand those words?

And that next week, trying to cope with it all, striving to get back to some form of normalcy when all things normal ceased to exist for you. When you heard those words, harsh, taunting, "Your mom's dead," did they stay in the air, lingering, implanting themselves in your frightened mind? What did it feel like to hit that little boy in your class? Who held you and comforted you when it was all over?

The following year was rough. You and your dad, learning to face the world without her, your constant driving force and love. He told you what she had meant to him and how much she had loved you. He told you that they had tried for years and years to have a child, and that you were nothing short of several thousand prayers answered.

In a few years, your dad remarried, and things slowly leveled off. You became involved in sports, something that consumed your life, and you began to heal some. You moved to a different town, and the distance was welcome.

As a teenager, you went through the usual phases. You listened to Led Zeppelin, drank a little and began to grow. At fifteen, you were tall, lanky, still a tow head because of hours spent on the field. You were thinking about your driver's license, girls, upcoming games. You were no longer thinking about death, sadness and loss, but they found you again anyway.

You said that you left your father's funeral to get a Big Gulp at 7-Eleven. But what were you thirsty for? Happiness? Stability? At fifteen, you understood, but did you accept?

My guess would be no, considering the year that followed. You did some foolish and reckless things back then, but what did you care? You had suffered before—punishments and consequences seemed extraneous considering what you had already been through.

When we entered each other's lives, I didn't know your past, your sorrow. As you began to let me in, I felt honored that you would let me glimpse into it. On our first visit to the cemetery, I cried for your losses and prayed for the parents who created you, loved you with everything they had, and then left you.

On our wedding day, your parents were there in the church with us, listening to our vows, hoping that I would care for you and love you as much as they had.

But can I keep such a promise? What would happen to you if I died, too? Would you heal and move on? Would you give up on investing your love into someone you might lose?

I don't think I'll ever fully comprehend how you did it, how you managed to carry all of these hurts inside of you and still turn out to be such a strong and good person. Perhaps it is because of these tragedies that you are so strong, that you remain the voice of reason as I go through my phases of self pity and anger, and as we face difficulties that pale in comparison.

Thank you for being my life, my world.

School Reform: Fact Vs. Fiction

Richard Leardi

In the push to reform our contemporary public education system, many ideas have been put forward recently to move our evolving industrialized society forward into the new century. However, far too many theorists are advancing their theories based largely on anecdotal evidence. These gold throated pitchmen would have you believe it is possible to actually reinvent the wheel. Many of the proposals are arguably controversial, including charter schools, vouchers, full inclusions, and administrative shakedowns, school desegregation, and state school system takeovers, to mention a few. These reformers are well intentioned, commissioned or designated committee intellectuals. They will argue their case with passion and a strong belief system that the current educational climate must change. Unfortunately, it has been my experience that far more often than not, these same theorists are far removed from the mainstream classroom. In the name of reform, ideas have been proposed and experimented upon based solely on anecdotal evidence and not empirical hard evidence. That these proposed changes are going to remedy what is perceived to be a failing system is more fanciful than reality-based.

In medicine, clinicians routinely conduct double-blind clinical trials as a matter of course. Scientists conduct experiments before making valid conclusions, and inventors must demonstrate competency before being issued a patent. If real long-term meaningful changes are to occur in the educational arena, then these proposed experiments need to have guaranteed periods of evaluation. Time limits must be put on these ideas and responsibility taken if the experiment fails. Just as our mental health institutes would guard against the possibility of the patients running the asylum, so too must educators guard against zealots mortgaging our children's public educational future. Would any sane individual throw the baby away with the dirty bath water? Do we abandon proven methods that do work in the name of progress? The answers to the last two questions are of course no. And so, too, must the answer be to political leaders and educators whose visions are wasteful of taxpayer dollars. Wasn't it Yogi Berra who is credited with the famous cliché, "If it ain't broke don't fix it"? Today what is popular is not always right and what is right is not always popular.

The realistic solution to reforming our public educational institution is holistic in nature. Educators alone should not be called upon or expected to fix every problem of society's children. It is of no revelation that children who come from an environment of nurture, where there is tradition to learning, respect for authority, and a sense of responsibility and resourcefulness, have the best chance of success in the classroom. Legislators need to modify or implement laws to effectively remove the disruptive students from the classroom. Zero tolerance is a great buzzword but has little merit if it is without teeth. School administrators often have their hands tied when they've diligently built surefire cases to remove disruptive elements from the school environment only to turn around and the next day these same students are thrown back into the mainstream.

School age children are the responsibility of the entire community. Everyone needs to do his or her job if the child is to be productive and prosperous. And, of course, parents must do the job of parenting. The number one problem today in school is the unprepared and/or the unmotivated mind. A child who comes into the classroom lacking respect for authority and an unwillingness to take responsibility for his or her behavior is by far the biggest deterrent in the public school system. Only when this attitude has changed will a real difference be made. Only when everyone consistently cares will genuine quantifiable results occur. If you want the real hard truth just ask a teacher.

So as the trumpet continues its relentless call to arms and the cry for change continues to gain momentum, let the voice of reason be heard. Let us build a system where both old and new ideas are considered and respected. Let us be reminded that the system will change little if the

problems remain systemic. Let us be reminded that when the aorta ruptures, we can't fix it with a Band-Aid. Lastly, let us all be reminded that complete long lasting health requires commitment, consideration, caring, and conditioning across the continuum.

The Prodigal Son

Anne Marie Mancini

"And a certain man had two sons." St. Luke 15

I learned very early in life to reject the teachings of the Catholic Church, much to my parents' chagrin. Every Saturday evening at four o'clock, no matter what we were doing, my brother and I had to "get ready for mass." Getting ready for mass, for me, consisted of washing off the dirt that had accumulated on my arms, legs, and face from the day's activities and putting on a freshly pressed dress, opening up a new pair of stockings, and strapping on shiny, black Mary Jane shoes. Getting ready was always much more of a process for me than for my younger brother, Joe. Even if I arrived home before the four o'clock curfew, I always had a difficult time being ready for the four forty-five departure. One reason for this was because I would often pull on my stockings while my legs were still wet, causing them to stick to my legs. Rather than take them off, I pulled harder. Of course, this only resulted in one huge rip that ran from my ankle to the top of my thigh. I still can't figure out why those things aren't made from a material that is more durable. Putting on my shoes was another problem. Without testing to see if the polish my mother had freshly applied was dry, I'd slip on the shoes and strap them to my feet, hoping that the buckle would mask the hole I had just punctured in the stocking. The results were just as disastrous. The black polish would stain my hands and dress. The final part of the "getting ready for mass" process was facing my mother with the ripped stockings, the polish-stained dress, and sitting on the top of the toilet seat in the bathroom so she could yell at me while simultaneously curling my hair. This last part of the preparation was the worst because my mother's talent did not lie in the area of hairstyling, and she often burned the tops of my ears. My brother watched this last step of the process with a grin on his face that reminded me of the cat that I saw in the Disney movie, *Alice in Wonderland*. All he had to do to get ready was wash and slip on a decent button down pull-over shirt, which was usually blue to bring out the color of his gray eyes, and pull on a pair of tan slacks. He didn't have to dress up as much because he was a boy.

"And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of the property that falls to me. And he divided his means between them.'"

We went to Church together as a big family. We (my mother, father, brother, and me) would load into one car, a faded blue Impala, and stop by to pick up my grandmother and grandfather who lived nearby. They always joined us afterward for supper at Camillo's, a local Italian restaurant. I always enjoyed the company of my grandparents, and it was clear that they liked being around us. My brother was named after my grandfather, and from an early age, he took on my grandfather's handsome look. His transformation into my grandfather was noted by all of the older women at Church who usually waited for my grandfather's arrival. Apparently, he was quite the ladies' man as a youth. He was also smart, athletic, and charming. My grandmother's easy-going, friendly personality also made her popular among the people that gathered outside of Church before mass. My grandparents would take my brother and me both by the hand and introduce us to their friends. I always hated this because the women would grab my cheeks tightly in their wrinkled hands, and say, "Oh, she's just a doll, a darling!" My brother never got pinched. Instead, the men would muss the top of his hair and say, "Joe, he's going to be a lady killer, just like you. Can he play ball?" Of course, both of us could play well. My father was a stellar athlete in high school. He didn't pursue a career in baseball because he fell in love with my mother while he was in high school, got married at

nineteen, and had me at twenty. No one wanted to hear about how I went three for three against the Green Hornets the night before. Joe was a pitcher who was infamous for knocking down batters with his unpredictable control, but he was fast, and in the midget division of little league, that wins games. His record was something to brag about.

"And not many days later, the younger son gathered up all his wealth and took this journey into a far country; and there he squandered his fortune in loose living."

These types of interactions with their friends made Church an exciting place to be for my grandparents. But it was always evident to me that no one else, including my parents, wanted to be there. Even though they made us go to Church every week, they sent out not-so-subtle messages that showed me they'd rather be somewhere else. My father would make up sophomoric rhymes like "The Pope is a dope," and my mother used to moan out the words on Saturday morning, "Don't forget to be home for C h h u r c h." Neither one of them paid attention to the service. I used to regularly catch my father nodding off, and my mother spent the time gossiping with my grandmother about things like if Mrs. Manhattan's purse matched her shoes. These things didn't help me to feel very spiritual. What was even worse was that I always felt that the teachings in the Bible went against what I believed in. I had all of these questions. Why weren't there any women priests? If God is a forgiving one, why is there a hell? When I asked these questions, my parents counselled me to listen to the stories in the gospel. The ones I heard didn't make me feel any better. In fact, some of what I heard made me angry, especially the story about the prodigal son. My brother spent his time at mass thinking about how he could trick my grandparents into letting him hold the money for the offering so that he could keep it when the collection basket came around. He used the money to play video games in the arcade that was located in the same plaza as Camillo's. Joe got away with this trick several times before my parents finally began to question him about where this money was coming from.

"And after he had spent all, there came a grievous famine over that country, and he began himself to suffer want."

Up through my youth and into my early adulthood, I continued to attend mass with my family, and listen to the stories of the Bible for answers. Over the years, our routine changed. I no longer had to suffer through the curling iron process. My father quit going to mass altogether, opting instead to meet us at Camillo's so that we could "get a good table." My grandfather passed away, and Joe no longer had to be home for the four o'clock curfew. Joe wasn't required to go to mass; he was a boy (and I suspect that my parents were a bit embarrassed by his actions). At the time, I didn't know how he was spending his hour away from the family. I just knew that he was out the twenty bucks a week that he tricked out of my grandparents, and I had hoped that he learned his lesson. By continuing to go to Church I also learned some things (even though I rejected most of it). For example, I learned that the stories from the Bible were repeated once every year. Once a year, I'd listen to the story of the prodigal son, and I would hate it. It just didn't make sense to me. "Why did the father throw a party for the son who left?" I'd ask every year. "Why did he welcome him back?" This was the only story that I felt passionate about. It was the only story that I'd listen to so that I could derive some meaning. It was the story that I was living.

"And he went and joined one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his farm to feed swine. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many hired men in my father's house have bread in abundance, while I am perishing here with hunger!'"

Over the years, I have come to understand that I was just like the "other son." No matter what I did, Joe got the attention. Before he even got into high school, Joe quit playing organized sports and began to pick up another hobby, gardening. He planted pink, yellow, white, and red roses and brought them in to my mother in a glass filled with water. He harvested tomatoes, my father's favorite vegetable, and cut them up for sandwiches when the two of them ate BLTs together on the family picnic table. He also grew marijuana, more than enough to make up for the lost church money. Tall, lush, green plants grew beyond the fence in my parent's back yard. Later, my brother took up other hobbies like stealing. He broke into the basement of people's homes wearing gloves and a black ski mask similar to those worn by O.J. Simpson before murdering his wife, Nicole. Deciding that this was no longer a challenge, he stole Mercedes Benz, drove them to the seediest areas of New York and sold them to the highest bidder. He was only fourteen.

"I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee. I am no longer worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired men."

One day, while tearing to New York with his latest prize, a red 520 SL with black interior, Joe hit another car head-on and injured a woman. He then tore off on foot into the woods. My parents were out celebrating my father's birthday with some friends, and I took the call from the police department. "We're looking for your brother. Is he there?" The next three hours were the longest of my life. Finally, Joe arrived. He was winded, his jeans were torn, and his body was covered with mud that splattered up from his feet as he ran through every backyard in the neighborhood. Without saying a word, I opened up the garage door, started the family car, and waited to take him to the police station. To my surprise, he came. Even though I knew that the police station visit was just part of the trouble he was in, I hoped that his coming on his own was the start of a new beginning for Joe.

"And he rose and went to his father and his father saw him and was moved with compassion, and ran and fell upon his neck, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee. I am no longer to be called thy son.'"

Joe's problems with the police didn't end with this one incident; it was just the first time in a series of many in which my parents would come home to discover the blinking red light on the answering machine which came to symbolize the flashing lights on a police cruiser. But my parents kept insisting on giving him another chance. In college, he was arrested for selling drugs. After completing seven semesters, he dropped out because his real reason for being there, earning money, was gone. He then took on a job working for my father, showing up whenever he wanted to, and quitting or getting fired on a regular basis. He was famous for starting a construction job and then taking off to Costa Rica or the west coast to surf. He'd simply leave a note that said, "Be back in three weeks." The note excused him from my father's wrath, but it left everyone else running for cover from a five foot ten, 235 pound Italian madman.

"But the father said to his servants, 'Fetch quickly the best robe and put it on him, and give him a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet and bring out the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and be merry because this was my son, and he was dead, but he has come to life again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to make merry."

On Joe's last trip to the west coast, he met a girl, fell in love, and got her pregnant. He drove her and all of her things back home and the two moved into my parents' finished basement. A few months later, they were married and my parents became grandparents. My brother's wife is an

attractive blond whose outgoing personality quickly won the heart of both my father and my mother. The birth of the baby also worked to my brother's advantage. Like my parents, Joe named his son, Anthony, for our father. Anthony is a pudgy little boy with fat hands and feet; he, too, bears a striking resemblance to his grandfather. All of a sudden, Church has become a family event again. Every Saturday at four forty-five, my parents and Joe, his wife, and the baby pile into the car so that they can arrive early and socialize with friends. Now, Anthony is the center of attention for the men and women who stop to talk with my parents. They muss his hair, look into his eyes, and say, "Tony, he's going to be a lady killer, just like you."

The Last of the Firsts

Shannon Piatek

The can rapped rhythmically up the stairs as the hunched over man grabbed the railing tight for support. Despite the arthritis claiming his physical uprightness, he held his head high and proud. Proud for the fact that at 87 he could still climb staircases without an aid other than his own cane. His face showed trepidation as he walked for one of many first times up those stairs to a long ago familiarity not forgotten with time.

The pale hardwood floors looked the same as they reflected the reddening sunlight from the kitchen windows back into his memory. He squinted, perhaps from the sunlight; perhaps from the memory of those other first times up these stairs. The first time as an unsteady toddler barely able to reach the next step. The first time with a girlfriend on his arm to meet Mom and Pop. His first time home from college, and the first time back from that terrible war overseas. And yes, the first time the blotchy orange rug had covered them when he was 15. The faded images slowly filled his mind with colors, textures, and smells as he paused on the second step from the top where he had paused so many years ago. He took in the sight of those floors he had not seen since that day in his fifteenth summer. He noticed right away that sound was absent from his memory. Could it be his hearing had finally crept away in the night? No. The rug had taken sound from this memory. No longer could he hear the welcoming tromp of his dad home from work. No longer could he predict just when Chessie, his springer spaniel, would be pouncing down the stairs to greet him after school was out for the day. Those sounds were muffled as silent pleasures had pleaded from below the woven orange fabric to be set free. Those sounds had departed from his days when that god-awful rug had arrived. He remembered racing down the hallway with his brother to see how far they could slide down the bare floor on their knees.

"Ready? Set! GO!" they would yell together. Then, sounding like a herd of elephants they would gallop down the hall and throw themselves onto their knees. When they crashed into his bedroom door they would break into hysterics and jump up to do it again. He still heard his mother scolding them for ripping holes in the knees of their pants.

His mind flashed back to the kittens that used to scamper across the floor, sliding instead of stopping. They too must have hated the rug, for the carpet corners had become their personal litter boxes. They shredded and clawed at that orange muffler, trying to cover up their mess. The smell had permeated the house on those humid summer days. Maybe that's why his parents had put in the rug—to hide their mess.

He remembered listening to the clikety, clak of his sisters pumps as she paraded up and down the hallway before her date arrived.

"Are you sure I look okay? This dress isn't too casual is it?" Then, they would all complement her sense of fashion just so that she would be smiling when her date arrived.

How dare his parents take away those pleasures! How could they replace them with this unsightly, smelly, nursing home rug! He had hated them for that. He still did, even though they had long since passed onto a more blissful state of being. Soon it would be his turn. He wondered for a moment, if he would forgive his parents before he died. He didn't have much time to decide. He had already outlived his brother and sister, and the longest living relative had only been 85. He figured he was pushing his limits.

As for the rug, it had long since been pulled up, but he had been so far away when his sister had moved into his parents' house. His job had prevented him from staying for Mom's funeral for more than one day. He never got the pleasure of seeing that rug ripped up and torn to shreds, and those hardwood floors so full of memories and meaning. It wasn't just the color of the rug he hated.

It was what the rug had changed his house into that he also hated. The silenced, muffled, and clashing decor had changed how he played and interacted in his house and with his family.

But as he stood there on that second step, he returned to being fifteen. He could almost feel his bones stand up straighter and his muscles ached to skip up to the top step in one giant leap. He sighed. Those days were long gone for his body, but his eyes still gleamed with delight. He had wanted to see the house one more time before he signed the papers. The new family wanted to begin refinishing the house before they moved in. They wanted to refurbish the floors, and polish them shiny for their new toddler. So that he could begin his first times up the steps.

The man glowed with pride in the happiness he was about to share with this unknown family. With a last glance, he carefully turned, and holding his head high he began the first of the lasts in his life.

Andrew

Vikki Smith

"Are you okay?" Barbara whispered quietly in the teacher's lounge. I simply nodded yes with tears streaming down my face. I was reading the book that my third graders this year had written for disability awareness week. Through the blurred vision, words floated out at me. My children's voices, ringing clear, told in words the special year that we all shared. My classroom was an "inclusion" room. We had students with a range of disabilities from language disorders, ADHD, Asperger Syndrome and a little boy labeled classic autism. It is Andrew that I will write about, and in fact Andrew that most of my students wrote about when telling their stories.

At the end of the last school year, I was approached by Kate, our Special Education teacher to discuss one of her students who would be mainstreamed in my class. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I prayed, please don't let it be the one with autism. Even with a special education background, I had fears of my days spent with a student banging his head in the corner, screaming out at random.

Still, I had always thought that autism was the one disability I would not be successful at teaching. I prided myself on the emotional connection I made with my kids—that's how I refer to them, as "my kids." But, as sure as anything, she kept on talking about Andrew, the little boy with autism. My caution was initially delayed, however, as Kate informed me that Andrew was currently not able to be included for more than 15 minutes a day. The plan was to gradually see how long he would be able to stay in our room.

I just kept thinking, how am I going to deal with this? A large part of me did not want to deal with his differences. I loved building a community, sharing, emotionally connecting in a safe environment. How was I supposed to do that when I would have students who didn't have the ability to interact?

On the day of Andrew's visit for the second grade step up day, I was surprised by him. Entering the room with an aide, he charged in, plowing through all my students and wedged himself in a chair, not even bothering to pull it out from the table. He did however, have this teddy bear like quality. His short fuzzy hair complemented his chipmunk cheeks that hid much of his eyes, which averted any gaze. Clad in a black WWF tee shirt and black shorts, Andrew responded to my hello by cocking his head sideways, squinting his eyes and shrieking "shiiiiiiiiit." Someone had failed to mention his fondness for swearing. The pit in my stomach grew to the size of a large grapefruit. Although I like to think of myself as an advocate for children, I have to be honest and tell you that I wished someone else could be this kid's advocate.

The first day of school finally arrived. I was very anxious as I looked around my room, hoping it was perfect. I had set up brightly colored bulletin boards in pinks and yellows. Curtains hung from the windows and cabinets to help make the classroom feel more like home. The word wall, looking quiet, waited patiently for the oh so important words that third graders want to remember. Large round tables with baskets filled with folders, pencils, markers and journals were anxious to be filled with knowledge. The stereo played classical music softly, and you could still faintly smell the combinations of wax and disinfectant from the summer's cleaning. I could feel the energy and high hopes in the air. When my principal walked in, I straightened up just a little, proud of the child friendly environment I had so carefully created. Then, his words loomed out, "Kate had a family emergency, she won't be in for the first one, maybe two weeks of school. Andrew won't have anywhere to go, can you keep him until we can figure something out?" Suddenly, I was punched in the stomach with that large grapefruit. "Sure, not a problem," I somehow managed to croak. After all, I was worried about the family emergency that would keep our Special Education teacher out for that long of a time. Before I could put more thought into it, quiet, clean and organized little eight

year olds began to enter the room. My day began.

Looking back, I now believe that Kate's absence was really a blessing. Andrew was a part of our class from the first day of school. Although his behaviors, screaming, swearing and kicking continued, I was forced to find creative ways to deal with him. Most important in my mind was to build a community around him. Our school guidance counselor and I read the class many books about disabilities. As dialogue opened, students who had been in class with Andrew before volunteered their insight to his behaviors. "If he starts to push, that means we are not giving him enough space," an intuitive Alex stated. Soon, Amy chimed in, "Yeah, he really should sit in the back of the carpet so he can back away if he needs to," and finally, Sean offered, "Andrew likes it when we laugh when he swears. We shouldn't look at him." A discussion followed about autism and Andrew's inability to advocate for himself. I was truly surprised by the kindness the other students were showing. However, I could see fear in the eyes of some students. One student in particular, Jim, was very hesitant around Andrew. I purposely sat them together. For a while it was difficult, but soon, I saw Jim trying to get Andrew to say his name. The day that I saw him using hand over hand assistance to help Andrew write his name, I knew that the kids would be all right. I forged ahead and spoke and treated Andrew like anyone else. When he acted up, he was not removed, but sent to time out on the couch. Soon, when Andrew could feel the tension build, he would go to the couch on his own.

Then, came a day that I won't easily forget. I had been out the day before and the class had a substitute. Upon return, Andrew walked into the classroom, walked up to me and silently gave me a hug. I was won over. Forget that Andrew couldn't articulate his thoughts, that hug meant more to me than I realized. I had already grown attached to Andrew, but this moment made me see into him for the child that he is.

Andrew is kind. He may not be able to speak aloud to others to ask for milk, to ask to play or even to say that he doesn't feel well. But when I look in his eyes, I see understanding and I see who he is. He can be stubborn; he can be playful and joyful. He can be angry and frustrated. Andrew clearly understands what is going on around him. It was on this premise that I built his program for the rest of the year.

One component of our classroom day is literacy centers. I carefully planned centers around activities that the other children could easily work with Andrew. In a reading center, lower readers read Andrew *Arthur* books, his favorite. Not only did this build community with my students, but lower readers benefited from the extra reading practice. In these centers and other cooperative group activities, the students learned more about Andrew than I could ever explain. One day, Michael explained that when Andrew answers no, he means it. But if he answers in an echo, he really means yes. Later on, I discovered that this is common behavior that autistic children display in their acquisition of knowledge.

During the play that the class produced and wrote, Andrew used echolalia to repeat his part in the play. In a second class play, Andrew participated fully because he could easily memorize songs. I will never forget the proud faces of his parents looking on in the first class activity that their son was included in. Another first was Andrew's ride in the big bus for his first field trip ever to Mystic Seaport.

Probably the most memorable moment for me, however, is Andrew on field day. He is not an athletic child, but for the relay races, the students fought over who would be his partner. He participated in every one. The giggles heard when he practiced the bunny hop were the first spontaneous emotion he had ever produced.

The true sense of family and even advocacy for inclusion was evident as I brought up a class discussion about a book local authors had a difficult time getting published. The book told parent stories about their children with disabilities. My "regular" students were incensed that publishers did

not feel that special needs stories would be well read. In response, someone suggested writing our stories about our experiences with disabilities. I can comment all I want about the special bonds that developed in my class this year, but the most important testimonial to this is the stories that were written by Andrew's classmates.

Dreams Make Memories

Barbara Stone

A dream begins with a wish or a desire. When we were first married, we discovered that creating our version of home meant more than just owning a home. When we moved into our first house, a month from delivering our first child, we put all our unpacked boxes in the attic. Bewildered, friends asked "Why?" We explained that we would need them in three years.

The three years turned into six before we found that special piece of property that would give birth to our dream house. It was fourteen acres of beautifully treed land situated on a glacial deposit in West Suffield. The significance is that there are no other hills around until you get to the Ridge. Drilling a well would turn out to be very time consuming, very deep, and very costly.

Finally, the house was designed and the plans were completed. The decision to sell our house was made. Amazingly enough, the house sold in two days. That posed a bit of a problem for us. Where would we live while the house was being built? We put all of our furniture into storage, purchased a 21 foot camper trailer, and parked it at a local camp ground. That was fine for the summer. When it was time to start school, we convinced the town into letting us put the trailer on our property. This was totally unheard of because there was some town ordinance against living in trailers.

For the next six months, almost to the day, life was a unique camping experience. Two adults, two small children (ages 3 and 5), one dog, and three cats shared the tight space. Summer brought fleas and flies. Bombing the trailer was a weekly activity. September found three out of four of us back in school with a driveway and a foundation to show for our efforts.

Raising the first wall was an incredible experience. The workers, along with our three year old, pushed the wall into place. Finally, you could say the house building had begun.

While construction continued, the boys found special hiding places and created new games. The walls of the foundation offered great forts and the numerous piles of dirt were parking lots for toy construction vehicles.

Work continued through the fall and into December with only a few hitches. The heater in our trailer died on a regular basis. The biggest hold up was the insulation crew. We were doing much of the work ourselves so there was always something that could be worked on. Scheduling workers was always a challenge.

We finally moved in on December 21 without a kitchen or doors on the bathrooms. The Christmas tree stood that year in a barren family room but sparkled with brightly colored lights and glittering ornaments. Santa actually made his first of many visits to this home. It brought back a multitude of memories when he arrived the following year and spoke about "last year's tree."

Memories abound. So many birthdays, holiday celebrations, and two graduations. If only the walls could talk. They would tell of the happiness and joy felt by the growing family—even now. Many dreams have been fulfilled, but not all. The house still remains for the making of new memories.

Backyard Dreams

Keith Tomlinson

Anthony stands proud in his back yard chucking a beat up tennis ball up against the brick wall of Cagatello's Restaurant next door. Thaukk! Thaukk! Thaukk! goes the ball, pale green and shaved of its fuzz after thousands and thousands of tosses at that wall bouncing twice every time back to its owner. He slaps the ball against the wall pretending to be his hero, Sandy Koufax. He mimics the high, tall leg kick followed by the over his head windmill his right arm imitates. So what that Sandy is a southpaw and he's right handed. And so what his beloved Bums from Flatbush left the neighborhood five years ago; he certainly wasn't going to become a Yankee fan that fast like his brother Joey. Besides, Anthony heard enough Dodgers games on the radio over his twelve years to know how his favorite pitcher hurls that ball. Of course Anthony practiced the pose from the '62 Topps Card of Sandy in his pitching motion every night before he said his prayers. He has that card stuck in the corner of his cracked bedroom mirror next to his holy card of Saint Anthony holding the baby Jesus. Mama would bet her sauce that Anthony worshipped that Koufax card more than he did the other. So what his hero was a Jew; he didn't even know what that meant. In Brooklyn, the Dodgers were all that mattered, and after they beat the Yanks in '55, hey, who cared what god a ball player worshipped. After all, Sandy was a hometown boy pitching 3,000 miles away in L.A., so Sandy's religion didn't matter much to a twelve-year-old kid from Flatbush.

Anthony hurled the faded green tennis ball again and again at that brick wall. He pretended over and over that he was at Ebbets Field atop the pitcher's mound made up of Georgia Red Clay. It was game seven of the series, top of da' ninth, Dodgers up 3-2; Duke just hit a two run homer over the Ballentine Ale sign in right in the bottom of the eighth. Full house in the stands, da' Mick at bat, Jackie at second, Gil at first, and the Duke in center, the best centerfielder in New York, better than Mick or Mays. Mick, battin' right handed, has a three-two count on him; Sandy squints his eyes tight to check the sign from his catcher . . . "Campy" throws down his index finger indicating to Sandy to let Mick have the high heat. Anthony nods to Campy, as he scrunches his royal blue Dodger's cap with the white B on the front, yellowed from the city sun and sandlot clay, low over his brow, just to intimidate da Mick. He clenches that ball so hard and tight it feels like it will explode into dust. He winds up the windmill, kicks his left leg high into the air so it feels like he'll scrape the apartments across the street, and hurls that fireball square in the middle of that box he drew with chalk on the restaurant's wall. SWOOOOSH!! Mick takes a mammoth swing at that one . . . STRIKE THREEEEEEEE!!!! The umpire bellows . . . the Dodgers win the World Series! The Dodgers win the World Series! Two in a row! Da bums do it again over those damn Yankees! "Oh sorry Nawni! I wont use that language anymore. Sorry!"

Anthony continues to toss the ball against the wall hoping someday he can toe the rubber in front of a sold out crowd, then they all would understand why he practiced his windup for so long.