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Dirck Roosevelt

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**Review: Vivian Gussin Paley's *You Can't Say You Can't Play***

by

**Dirck Roosevelt**

Nature is hard to overcome but she must be overcome.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

“We must be told, when we are young, what rules to live by.” So Vivian Paley (1992, p. 110), joins in the long debate about the nature of human nature: Is something like original sin our defining characteristic, or is a version of Rousseauian innocence our birthright? Is nature (and is childhood), as Wordsworth (1807/1965a, p. 134), sometimes suggests, a place of “perpetual benediction,” or is Tennyson (1850/1971, 56. 15), nearer to the mark in saying that she is everywhere “red in tooth and claw”? Is it good to tell ourselves that “man was born free (but is) everywhere in chains,” (Rousseau, 1743/1968, p. 49), or would we do better to regard freedom and decency as the aspirations and (maybe) accomplishments of maturity?

Either we start out close to goodness and innocence and are corrupted by experience, or we start out blighted by evil and must be checked, trained, and corrected. Is morality a birthright, a part of our natures, to be nourished and preserved and learned from, or is it an *unnatural* achievement, a transcendence of our fallen selves—impossible without divine intervention, but something toward which we can humanly strive? Education then is either a “leading forth” of the native powers and goodness of the child, or a “leading away” from original impulses, an effort to improve.

It is never quite clear, if humans are hopelessly fallen, how adults can expect to make the young better than themselves, and better than the adults; neither, if all of us begin in innocence and goodness, is it clear how things can go so profoundly wrong. Some continuum from original sin to original innocence does seem to describe fundamental tensions in our views of ourselves as human beings, and almost all educational policies—wittingly or otherwise, local and particular, or centralized and general—can be seen as exemplifying a world view located close to one extreme or another.

In *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, Paley's seventh book based on her work as a kindergarten teacher at the University of Chicago's Laboratory School, we are asked to consider the possibility that our “natural” inclinations as human beings are toward social exclusivity, rejection of our fellows if they are not like ourselves or amenable to our wishes, and a conception of “friendship” typified either by pride of ownership or dependence. We are urged by the story Paley tells, by the morals she herself draws, and by the remarkable verisimilitude with which she renders the children's speech to seriously consider this version of the “original sin” proposition and to consider its implications for classroom practice. Paley portrays herself coming to believe that “we must be told, when we are young, what rules to live by.” She works to persuade her children, her readers, and at times herself that this is so. She shows herself being taught: by reflection on her children's experience, especially that of the ones who are typically not included in the “free play” of their classmates, who sometimes retreat in tears to their cubbies; by older students in the school (who vividly experience rejection and selection of and by their peers now, and in the past); by the Bible; and, in a Wordsworthian touch, by a chance encounter in a park, a “leading from above” (1807/1965b, p. 51).

In a bad time, Paley goes running at dawn in a park (a more or less pastoral setting) far from home, and is startled by a magpie who seems to be—who *is*—offering her direction, guidance, a way out of trouble. Things have not been going well: her kindergarten children are quarreling and crying too much, she is unhappily conscious of how often some of them are shut out of the others', the popular ones', games, and she herself is ill, hoarse, and almost speechless. Her spirits much improved by the run and the bird, Paley sets out, when she returns to school, on an experiment. She will institute a new classroom rule: "You can't say 'you can't play'"—all children must have free and equal access to each other's companionship in play; anyone who starts a game of house, a project in the blocks, or a game on the playground must let any classmate who wishes join in. The new rule is perceived, even by those who would like to be included, as an unnatural innovation. Many regard it as an intrusion into the privileged, connected, domains of *play* and *friendship*.

The contours of Paley's experiment are pretty well indicated by her chapter titles. There is the definition of a problem and an analysis ("You Can't Play: The Habit of Rejection"), an investigation of a possible response to the problem as framed ("The Inquiry: Is It Fair? Will It Work?"), a change in practice ("The New Order Begins"), and a concluding reflection showing that the story goes on ("It Is Easier to Open the Door"). What this summary misses is the rich diction and near musical structure of the book. It is composed of alternating narratives: Paley's exposition of her experiment, rich with extensive samples of the children's own language; and a story she tells the children, a fable about a magpie, a girl who has lost her mother, and a witch who wants to be included but does not know how, among other characters. Here is part of a discussion early in the exploration, before Paley has definitively established the new rule.

Teacher: Should one child be allowed to keep another child from joining a group? A good rule might be: "You can't say you can't play."

Ben: If you cry people should let you in.

Teacher: What if someone is not crying but feels sad? Should the teacher force children to say yes?

Many voices: No, no.

Sheila: If they don't want to play they should just go their own way and you should say, "Clara, let's find someone who likes you better."

Angelo: Lisa and her should let Clara in because they like Clara sometimes but not all the time so they should let her in.

Waka: I say let two people whoever wants to play. But who they don't want has to find someone else. My brother says that. He's in fourth grade.

Teacher: We should ask the older children about this.

Angelo: Let anybody play if someone asks.

Lisa: But then what's the whole point of playing? ... I could play alone. Why can't Clara play alone?

Angelo: I think that's pretty sad ...

Teacher: Who is sadder, the one who isn't allowed to play or the one who has to play with someone he or she doesn't want to play with?

Clara: It's more sadder if you can't play.

Lisa: The other one is the same sadder.

Angelo: It has to be Clara because she puts herself away in her cubby. And Lisa can still play every time. (pp. 18-20)

Paley does talk with older children in the school and finds that they see the justice of Angelo and Clara's arguments for inclusion. That would be a fine way to do things: kinder and better. However, they readily acknowledge that their own behavior follows Lisa's; they are accomplished



excluders and rejecters. In every class there are “bosses,” popular children who get to decide who’s in and who’s out, and there are children on the outside. In fifth grade, as in kindergarten, everyone knows who is who. Some older children invoke that most favored of justifications for practices which fall short of ideal, or even proper, standards: the “real world principle.” One fifth grade boy says (p. 100), “in your whole life you’re not going to go through life never being excluded. So you may as well learn it now. Kids are going to get in the habit of thinking they’re never going to be excluded so much and it isn’t true.” Others think the “you can’t say you can’t play” rule and the principle it embodies are worth trying, but only with the kindergartners. After that, they insist, they have fallen too far from grace and are too inured to the ways of the world. “We’re meaner than when we were young,” they tell her (p. 51). “It’s too late to give *us* a new rule” (p. 63). It’s not that they think the five year olds are angelic, “but they’re nice enough to follow a new rule. They trust you. They’ll do what you say” (p. 63). It appears that the habit of seeking redemption in the coming generation is learned early, and that the wish to shift the burden (of being better, for instance), off one’s own shoulders and onto someone else’s is learned equally early.<sup>1</sup>

The picture of play and friendship that emerges along the way is disquieting, permeated with the language of control and possession. (Actually, “friendship” may be a word that presumes too much in this context—the more neutral “relationship” might be preferable.) Lisa’s plaint, “then what’s the use of playing?” (p. 20), is echoed throughout. Every game, perhaps every relationship, has a “boss.” On those rare occasions when an outsider becomes—momentarily and incompletely—in, the change is usually mediated by some desirable object in the possession of the outsider (e.g., p. 51). The fourth graders protest, familiarly, that a *rule*, such as “you can’t say you can’t play,” will not induce people to actually like or “be nice to” each other, desire each other’s company, or respect each other. In explaining this, one girl seems to propose that, as “bossing” is dependent on someone’s obeying and being bossed, so “owning” is a form of including (or having), which is dependent on excluding (not having, and not being taken in). *Owning* is equated to bossing, deciding, and including; power is related to powerlessness. “Some people—even me—want to own things. They say you can’t come here and you can’t come there. They say they are the boss and other people agree. Even me. If *that* stopped, then your plan could work” (p. 53). *Liking* and knowing or being known seem to have very little to do with it. As Paley concludes (p. 117), “It is the *habit* of exclusion that grows strong; the identity of those being excluded is not a major obstacle.”

Applying that observation and these concerns to the familiar territory of race and racism, we might say that it is precisely the *denial* of individual identity, or the subsuming of it, the translation of people into categories and types and numbers, that is necessary to the perpetuation of race-based exclusion,<sup>2</sup> (and most of the other popular forms as well, including, in schools, the labeling of children as possessing “special needs” or being “at risk”). That application is something Paley certainly expects, and invites—as when (p. 115) she remarks that one child “is dispensing separate

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<sup>1</sup>In this, they echo, for example, Kozol’s (1991) white suburban high school student interlocutors. Discussing what might happen if schools were truly to be racially integrated, and to be funded equitably, they at first say, “it wouldn’t make a difference.” Pressed, some allow that, “it might work, but it would have to start with the preschool and the elementary grades ... it might be 20 years before we’d see a difference” (p. 126).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, “You Are Balkans...” (Drakulic, 1992) for an account of how one woman nearly succeeds in transforming a *friend* of hers—an individual made up of desires, quirks, and so on—into an *other*—a representative of a type, expected to conform to type—when the friend becomes a refugee.



but equal opportunities for play"—though she is slow and reticent to reveal the race of the children she discusses, even though at least two of those who are frequently excluded turn out to be black. A good case can be made for down-playing the color of her students—it is the apparent naturalness of the tendency to find someone to reject, not the characteristics of those rejected, which she is emphasizing—but I, at least, would have preferred it if Paley had at some point articulated, or at least acknowledged, this decision. As it is, an unfortunate impression of coyness is given.

Eventually, in any case, Paley does institute the rule that "you can't say you can't play." The standard of inclusion seems to be a great success. "Exclusion is still practiced, of course," she tells us (p. 93), "but ... when the children are reminded of the rule they comply so readily that it is as if they've been rescued." Over time, the rule is extended and elaborated: telling secrets comes to be seen as a violation; most significantly, in a classroom where (as readers of Paley's earlier work will recall), the children's dramatization of their own stories is a central part of the daily program, the children lose the right to choose who will portray the characters in their stories. Now, every child gets asked in turn, in order, if they want a part in the play. This extension of the rule is resisted at first, with many children vowing never to do another play, but the resistance is short lived. Indeed, Paley maintains that this development is, finally, liberating. "The children dare to take on implausible roles ... girls take on boys' roles and boys accept girls' roles ... those who have never taken roles as bad guys, witches, and monsters are saying yes to such assignments ... Ninja Turtles are agreeing to be newborn babies. ... Perhaps," she speculates, "the storytellers are liberating themselves from the demands of peer expectations" (p. 127).

It is an encouraging and a hopeful conclusion. The idea that a *rule* can be experienced more as a help and a relief than as a constriction or restraint will be familiar to many teachers (and many parents). The standard behind the rule—that it is not "the outsiders (who must) develop characteristics that will make them more acceptable to the insiders (but) the *group* which must change its attitudes and expectations toward those ... who are not yet part ..." (p. 33)—is, I think, the right one. It is a standard—in schools, and in society—too little pondered and, when pondered or avowed, too seldom substantiated by action.

Clustered about the central issue of the human tendency to reject and exclude and our pressing need to correct, control, or transform that tendency, other issues come up which are familiar and well worth continued thought. For instance, how do we determine the proper extent of the teacher's authority (e.g., to intervene in students' relationships); do we know the most significant and demanding implications of the notion that the school should set itself *apart*, as a place aspiring to higher standards of conduct and care than the society around it achieves (and who needs to agree that this *is* the role of the school?).

But the issue of greatest interest to me is the place and meaning of freedom in all this. *Play* is often taken to be a kind of "free space," a place in which the usual rules do not apply—neither those of mundane concrete reality nor the social conventions governing the child's status in society and the world. It is a place for engaging ambitious hopes of bravery and truthfulness and beauty and a place for experimenting with being truly bad, with all manner of sanctioned behavior. It is in many respects a place for experimenting with the feel and the forms of power, a place where the boundaries between "actual" and "imagined" power are, at least, fluid, and sometimes, irrelevant. Paley is clear early on that there are already considerable limits on or intrusions in the "play" that is permitted in school—but it nonetheless arguably remains the situation of greatest personal freedom in the school. It is at least worth discussing whether or not we can ever learn—or learn again, if Rousseau is right—to be *free*, without being able to exercise freedom. And that presumably means being bad as well as good, irresponsible as well as responsible, selfish as well as generous.

The issue is raised, directly, toward the end of the book, when the new rule is extended to include acting in plays. This is when the children lose the "right" to choose who will act out their stories. A child exclaims, "But then I can't say I'm sorry! When I have a fight, a argument, something bad when we're playing, then I say I'm sorry you can be in my story" (p. 124). The boy may have at least a partial case. If everything good is required, what can be freely given? And if nothing can be freely given, in what does the good reside? Is there not a long and still pertinent history of thinking that the problem of good and evil is, precisely, a problem of choice?

Schools should be places which work hard to discover what rules we need to be taught while we are young. But they had also better be places that work hard to think about the relationship between rule, responsibility, and freedom. And they should think about when assumptions of the original sin variety and when assumptions of the romantic innocence variety are most apt, and most fair. But perhaps they should not try to decide the issue conclusively.

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