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The Contemporary One-Room School House Teacher as Motherteacher: A Look at the Future Through the Past

Gloria D. Nixon-John

Introduction

I have always been drawn to the one-room school house with its quaint cupola, reverent steeple, wrought iron bell. And in those we claim as monument, I can still hear the voices of my professional history. I can smell the chalkboard dust that fell from the writing on the wall that bid me to learn and then to teach. I was, therefore, delighted to learn that there are, to my amazement, eighteen rural one- and two-room school houses still in operation in Michigan today. Much has been written about how the one-room school does or does not function as a viable educational institution in today's world, but this work will not enter into that debate. Instead, I will begin with the narrative of a particular one-room school house teacher as she reflects on her own schooling, her profession, and her school, and then move beyond the specific narrative of this teacher to consider her as a symbol of the motherteacher.

We might also use the study of this particular one-room school house as a warning that the ethics and the care so carefully bred in this symbolic edifice, might also be reduced to relic or to memory, unless we focus once again on a curriculum so naturally developed there, a curriculum rooted in care.

The Interview

I had imagined she existed only as memory or fiction. I had conjured an image of an old schoolmarm who might have punished my Mother or Grandmother with a dunce cap or a switch for talking out of turn. Instead, I sat across the table (in a small local restaurant in the town in which she teaches) from a woman several years my junior—a woman who spoke rather matter-of-factly in a voice so soft and gentle that I was put immediately at ease.

At one point, she saw me dialing up the volume on my tape recorder, and she laughed. *"I remember one question that one of the Board members asked me in the interview for my job was 'Don't you get any louder than this?' But actually, I got the job before I graduated from college. I interviewed over spring break that year, and they just happened to like me."*

Because I sincerely believe that most teachers have a special story about their calling, I asked the most obvious question another teacher might ask. I asked her how it was that she became a teacher.

"Her name was Mrs. Coty. She was my third grade teacher. She is probably the reason I became a teacher," she began. "She was very kind and understanding. There was just a special bond between the two of us. She kind of patted me on the

back and encouraged me to head in that direction. I was the oldest of six, came from a dairy farm. My family had problems and she kind of took over, asking me how I felt; almost a grandmother type, but I got to see her every day rather than every other weekend or whatever. In a country school like that, you get very involved with the families of the community. I think we just looked at her as the stability in our life that was always there.”

Later, Emily chose to put herself in a larger context. “I’m kind of repeating history here, because I attended a country school ... the teachers I had were on the strict side and academics were important ... everyone looked up to them. We didn’t have a lot of extras, like science and art were not included in our program. After that (country school), I went to high school. Coming from the country school, I was very afraid ... nervous as can be. There was a lot of social pressure, too ... not fitting in because I hadn’t come up with all of the rest of them. I was the outsider trying to fit in, the farm girl. All of a sudden, I felt like I was in a prison or something. The place was big and cold.”

When I inquired with regard to other possible reasons Emily chose teaching as a career, she talked about her life at home, on the farm.

“I’m the oldest of six, so I always had the responsibility of making sure everybody was where they were supposed to be, at the right time. Mom and Dad ran a farm, and Dad went working out in a factory and I pretty much ran the household. It was a busy morning on the farm! The majority of the family would go to the barn. I was responsible for the little ones. I had to make all the bedrooms up. I had to pack lunches and sometimes that meant making cookies or cake first thing in the morning, boiling the eggs to make egg salad. I don’t remember what time we got up. It was before daylight. They would start coming in from the barn. I had to make sure they had washed up and gotten clean clothes. I had to make sure everybody got on the bus and were where they were supposed to be.”

When I asked Emily about her parents, her eyes welled up with tears.

“There were some complications with my family. I grew up rather fearful of men ... my mom was driven real hard to hold things together ... another thing with my mom, I remember that I had a lot of

problems learning how to do division, and I do remember my mom sitting at the kitchen table at night. If it hadn’t been for her, I probably wouldn’t have learned how to do division. I can (also) remember her sitting on the bed reading to us.”

Emily’s story sounded much like my mother’s story, but my mother’s childhood was some seventy years ago in rural Pennsylvania. It had never occurred to me that someone younger than myself, living in America, could have had a life as hard as my mom’s life was. When I shared this revelation with Emily, she was very interested in my mother’s life and asked what my mother did for a living. When I told her that my Mom was a factory worker once she left the farm, but that she had always wanted to be a nurse, Emily nodded as if she knew what I was going to say.

“That was another option for me. As a matter of fact, that was probably my first preference, but my Mom got deathly ill and my Dad took me to see her when I was too young ... tubes running from every place ... that was the end of that there!”

Later Emily told me that she was the first in her family to complete a college degree, but her step-grandmother was a teacher and teaching was her mother’s dream as well.

“Teaching was something Grandmother did and Mom would have done if she didn’t have to mother all of us.”

And from what Emily told me about her school and the children in her class, I believe that her classroom is an extension of home for many of her children. When I asked about her routine day, she mentioned that parents often come in the morning.

“Parents are very welcome in the school. If they have a problem (with the kids), they come in, and they usually do that in the morning. Many days, the kids may have a story to tell about something that happened overnight and over the weekend. And before we really settle down, they’re telling me just what’s on their mind.”

I thought about how threatened some of the teachers I know would feel if parents came in on a regular basis, and I also thought about what a production line most city and suburban public schools are with little time for casual conversations with students. I thought, too, about the decisions many teachers make in city and subur-

ban schools, decisions that are imposed by an organized (and rather segregated) approach to the various disciplines. I felt I had to inquire about how this one-room school teacher planned her instruction and asked how she managed her time.

"I do try to have lesson plans ... not always written down. I usually list what we did at the end of each day ... if something comes up that needs discussing, I'm not going to worry about plans. For instance, the other day through the mail we got a booklet on missing children. The booklet came during the noon hour so I did not go right into math as usual. I used the booklet to start a discussion on missing children and showed them how many were in the book. The kids were very interested. And maybe it brought home a point. My schedule is open to those kinds of things."

Since Emily's students are grades one through six, I was curious as to how she keeps things going. I asked how she juggles the various subjects and grades.

"Right now my third graders are learning multiplication, so the older kids go around to each child and help them ... I'm usually having class with another group, like the fifth graders who are dividing and fourth grade might be doing an assignment at their seats. Everybody is doing something."

And while I don't have serious discipline problems in my classroom, I knew I might have problems if I had the variety that Emily has, so I asked about discipline problems or problems with social interaction in her school.

"They really can be mean to one another. We have a family in the community, the parents do not work and have four children, little on the not-so-clean side, and other kids are mean to them. They pick on these children, call them names. As a result, I had to discuss personal hygiene. I've had to come out (at the end of each day) and say—'Do you remember our little chat on personal hygiene? You need to think about taking a bath tonight, changing your clothes, washing your hair and brushing your teeth.'"

"This (one) little boy had dirt a half-inch thick. Finally, I took the shampoo and my towel to school, and I scrubbed that little boy's head myself..."

My next question was, "What about bad language and inappropriate sexual behavior I have that problem, do you?"

"I don't have too much of that, but, again, I've been in the situation for so long—those kids have known me since they were three years old. It's almost like 'Don't swear around Mom.'"

And although Emily felt that her kids were missing out on many things that children in other schools have, she was very anxious about the (very real) possibility that her one-room school house would soon be closed—would become a museum. She was, of course, concerned for herself, concerned about her livelihood, but it was obvious that she was more concerned about her children.

"The fact that our school may be closing makes me very nervous. What would I do? Stepping out into something new ... is scary. Those students will survive I suppose... I don't worry about them academically. Some of them socially ... they are going to get lost socially. Some of them may get into some of the bad habits that we don't worry about in our situation. I think the bigger your population, the greater the possibility that those students are going to run into the drug scene, sexuality, reckless behavior ... I guess if I had (have) my thumbs on them, I don't worry about them"

At one point, I asked Emily how well her students do on standardized tests, and she made me feel a little foolish with her response.

"To be honest, I haven't even opened my box of MEAP scores," and then she slipped into a more important concern of hers. *"Our society has changed so much. There is so little emphasis on respecting school and teachers and anything that isn't yours. They just don't have respect unless I give it to them."*

How is it that her kids learn to respect each other (a problem I have to deal with constantly in my large suburban school)?

"Sometimes, the older children read to the younger children. They work with flash cards ... if someone is done with their own work, they help another child."

In the course of my eight plus hours of interview time with Emily, the constant intermingling of life skills and the intermingling of disciplines was obvious. It was also obvious that her proce-

dures came more from her childhood experiences, her concern for children, her womanhood, and her teaching experience than it did from books. And during these interviews, we had, at times, each reduced the other to silliness and tears. Each of us shared bits of our lives usually reserved for family and old friends.

When we met for our final, formal interview, I could see a change in Emily. Her steps were lighter, her skin was flushed with excitement. At this interview, Emily shared news for me about her (pending) adoption of a learning disabled fifth grader named Clara.

"I saw her picture in an article called 'Sunday's Child,' and she looks like me, and I knew that finally I had someone of my own to really take care of. I'm scared to death, but it is what I want."

Before we parted that day, Emily was planning Clara's new haircut, her summer vacations, and the books she might like to read. She was posturing herself for the educational battles she would have to fight for her, too. She would be a single parent, but she was finally making both her home and her classroom a place for the nurturing she felt she was called to do.

Beyond the Interview

It is obvious when we look closely at the things Emily said about her childhood, her educational experiences, and her homelife that elementary teaching was an obvious choice for her, primarily because Emily has always been a caretaker of others' children. And while feminists might suggest the role of one-room school teacher—of substitute mother—was forced upon Emily and that other more meaningful work was unfortunately never a consideration, I wish to suggest that Emily's role of motherteacher was an appropriate choice for her. I also wish to suggest that women ought not cast off this role so willingly for other careers, at least not until our society finds some other way to soften the patriarchal values of individual achievement, self enhancement, and competitive success that is forced on the child in every other domain.

Over and over in my interview with Emily I heard her reflect on herself as guide, family member, and custodian. Over and over, I heard

her say that in and apart from that one-room school house she knew her students would survive academically, but that she feared for them in a social and moral sense beyond the confines of the one-room school and her watchful, maternal eye.

The fact that Emily teaches in a one-room school rather than a multi-classroom dwelling is important and is telling, because Emily has complete authority in her domain. She is, in fact, not only the teacher but also the principal, custodian, secretary, repairperson, cook, and librarian. It is telling, because despite her multiple roles, her focus is to protect and nurture. She tends to the physical, emotional, and interactional needs of her children. She worries about nutrition and hygiene along with math, reading, computer literacy, and art! She, in fact, represents what many believe teachers are "called" to be.

Conclusion

Two years ago, my interest in the one-room school house led me to an article in a local paper that pictured Emily with her thirty-five students in front of a modest wooden structure surrounded by country lilac bushes and climbing hydrangea. At that time, I knew that I would eventually visit with this teacher and her students. I expected to find a bit of my history but to be honest I also expected to find regressive educational practices. Instead, I found a place somewhat handicapped by the facilities and lack of equipment, but I found a teacher empowered to let students learn at their own pace, in a place where older students help younger students. I found a place where constant supervision and interaction with the motherteacher provides a symbiosis as specialized, as intimate, and as necessary as the womb.

Suggestions For Further Reading

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