

# Teachable Moments

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In these vignettes two master teachers recall cherished experiences from their own teaching and learning – often unintended, often poignant, always true.

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## Teachable Moments Remembered

In retrospect, it is the moments of teaching that are most memorable. As we recall our years of classes, courses, and curricula, these special times of learning come to mind – moments that surprised us as having a life of their own, beyond and above our intentions.

The vignettes of this book are moments remembered from the experiences of two teachers. As we recalled our teaching and learning, as we wrote down the stories, we found a motivating power emerging. These stories stir cherished memories. Somehow they call us into more effective teaching.

The stories may be read for nothing more or less than the slices of teaching/learning that they are. Children will like hearing many of them. Or the stories can be reviewed inductively to find the principles of education within them. They can be used as case studies in teacher training programs. But they will hold differing meanings for different readers, and for this reason we have avoided interpreting them at length.

These are our living responses to the question, “What is teaching really like?” Your answers to that question, your memories, and your stories now need to be written. Our best wishes go with you.

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## Teaching in a Strange Land

She couldn't remember where she had heard the missionary slogan. From somewhere out of an unremembered past it floated to her attention. “If just one soul is won for Christ, this will have been worthwhile.” She wasn't sure just what “this” referred to. Probably some heroic missionary's struggle in a foreign land.

The children were busy with the worksheets that came in the curriculum packet. Busy, yes, but learning? Were they learning anything? Would anyone of them ever look back at this Sunday school time and remember that this was where they learned about the ministry of Jesus?

The girls were changing almost weekly from stage to stage, just like the description in the teacher's book said. It didn't seem like a developmental progression as much as an exciting and confusing explosion into womanly maturity. The boys weren't as caught up in that internal dynamo. They were still boys. Did any of this help to make sense of being a child, a teenager, an adult?

Missie, in her expensive but unfashionable Sunday dress, never quite included. Marty, hauntingly attractive, leading with unconscious talent. Margaret, who was trying to decide whether she wanted to be “Maggie” or “Peg”

or “Sis,” an absorbing decision. Cheryl, with her quick wit and, sometimes, annoying jabber. Did it matter to them where Jesus lived, where Moses traveled, what Abraham heard?

Did David and Robert and Sonny really need to know the Twenty-third Psalm by heart? What did, “Give us this day our daily bread,” really mean to these consumers of hamburgers and fries? They had known divorce from the helpless child’s point of view. They had had death brush by. They had some lurking sense of doom with space wars and nuclear warheads and blown-up embassies. Did Christ’s resurrection touch any of that for them?

The worksheets were almost completed. Some children had raced through with ease. Some wouldn’t get finished until later at home, maybe. Neat cursive, awkward printing. The paper reflected the children, but did the answers make any sense to them?

Sometimes, she thought, going to an exotic foreign land might be easier than this lonely and unfulfilling struggle to teach children. If just one child learns one important thing about Christ..., will this all have been worthwhile?

## Serendipity

Fortunately the floor was tile. Otherwise the “painting” that Jimmie created might not have been nearly as beautiful.

I had taken the big step from crayons to real paint. The easels with their large pieces of paper were ready. The brushes, too. Children were properly costumed in their paint smocks, men’s shirts put on backwards with the sleeves rolled up.

The children were both excited and awed. Just the thought of what we were going to do had sent a visible quivering of excitement through the room. Bright paints, big brushes, large “canvasses” waited in full display on the easels.

Jimmie was at least as excited as the rest and, as usual, ready to be the teacher’s helper whether needed or not.

“Yes, Jimmie, you can help bring the big jars of paint over to where I can pour them into the small containers for each easel.”

Jimmie chose yellow, bright yellow, to bring across the room. Maybe it was the excitement. Maybe it was the added awkwardness of the rolled-up sleeves. Maybe the jar was a little wet on the outside. Jimmie dropped that jar of paint right in the middle of the floor. It crunched as it hit, fell apart in a few large pieces, and bright yellow paint flew and poured and bounced into an enormous puddle.

In that instant I thought of yelling, “Oh, Jimmie, how could you?” In my mind I planned in an instant how to get that mess off the floor as on the quickly as possible. I thought of telling the children that we all now knew why it was so important to be careful and let adults do some things that were too hard for children.

But I didn’t do any of these things. I went to Jimmie and put my arms around him. I turned him around, still in my arms, so we could see the paint. And I said, “It’s OK, Jimmie. And look at what a beautiful painting we have in the middle of our floor!” I asked him what it looked like to him. A flower? A butterfly?

The other children went through their catalogue of expressions in seconds. Stunned. Afraid. Cringing in expectation of the reprimand. And then relaxed and sharing their comments on the painting. We just stood and looked and talked.

We all knew we could not leave it there long; it might stain the tile and get tracked around the room. We had to get the mop and the bucket, and Jimmie was glad to help do that, too. But we took the time to see how pretty some accidents can be.

## Try to Remember

The text for the day was John 10:7ff, the story of the Good Shepherd. At the end of the sermon, the minister looked out at the congregation and said, “Now I would like you to say together from memory, as much as you remember of the Twenty-third Psalm.” The people joined in, “The Lord is my shepherd...” They started out strong. Some fumbled with a word or two in the middle, smiling shyly, but they picked up the rhythm again, and everyone finished together, “...and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

When they had finished, the people in the congregation looked pleased. It had been a long time since most of them had recited the psalm from memory, but for the most part, their memories had served them well. The familiar words, learned in their childhood, had come back to them. Yes, that psalm was something that they had in their heads; they could carry it with them. They had learned it; it was theirs.

One woman smiled at the memory that the reciting of the psalm brought back to her. She remembered clearly the day that she said it through for the first time. She had been in fourth grade. The class had been learning the Twenty-third Psalm as part of its memory work. She had been able to make it through most of the psalm, but she always got stuck on the verse, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life...”

It was frustrating to be able to say the psalm almost all the way through and then be stumped so near the end. “I’ll never get it,” she had exclaimed as she slammed the Bible shut in desperation. “Of course you will,” her teacher had said. “And I have a little trick that might help you. When you get to that part, think of three women trailing along behind you: Shirley, Goodness, and Mercy.”

The girl and the rest of the class had dissolved into giggles. And when she got to that part in her recitation, the little girl had had to try hard to keep from laughing. But the trick worked; she was able to say the psalm from beginning to end without a miss.

Thirty years later, she could still say it all the way through. Thanks to “three women “ and a clever teacher, she had had a success. And she had committed to memory some of the Bible’s greatest words of comfort and inspiration.

## The End of the World

Children rarely ask theological questions at the appropriate times. Sunday school lessons and children’s Bible conversations can go by with nodding acceptance and no deeper questioning about what that might mean in their own lives. Then, as a teacher is on her way out the door or a parent is knee-deep in washing the dog, it will come: “If God made the world, why do bad things happen?” “Can Grandma and Grandpa see what I’m doing from up in heaven?”

The timing is seldom right; the answers rarely adequate. But we adults are forced by children’s directness and naïveté to respond with the simple truth, stripped of all our qualifiers and rationalizations. Children compel us to live up to the words of the hymnist: “If our love were but more simple, we should take Him at His word.” A recent conversation brought this to my mind again.

“Mommy, when I die, will I have to lie down forever and never get ward up?”

“No, dear, the Bible says that we will rise again on the last day, at the end of the world.”

“You mean the world is going to end?!”

“Yes, someday.”

“Then what will there be?”

“Then God will make a new heaven and a new earth. And the Bible says that there will be no more crying and no more sadness and no more sickness and no more dying, anymore.”

“You mean Dukey wouldn’t have to die?”

“No.”

“And Aunt Bette wouldn’t have to be sick?”

“No.”

“And there wouldn’t be any more writing papers at school?”

“No.”

“And there wouldn’t be any ants?” (the abhorred insect).

“No.”

“And I wouldn’t have to eat my beans?”

“No.”

(Silence)

“Mommy, I hope the world ends tomorrow! “

## **A Priesthood of Believers**

The violin teacher said, “Thank God for the uncluttered minds of children.” Her comment was prompted by the incredible ability of young children to memorize music. “Everything they hear comes to a mind that is not cluttered with pieces that sound like, or phrases that are very similar to, something else.”

I thought, yes, and thank God for the uncluttered minds of the laity, especially for minds not cluttered with the reputations of the “great” thinkers and authors of religious books.

The lay people of the church I served included some who found they had time on their hands and a desire to “read something on religion.” My library of personal books was the best at hand since we were a bit isolated from any college or seminary.

I handed out books. I started with the ones written for them, even titled for them – tomes carefully tuned to fit untutored theological minds. I ran out of those as the readers marched through them, and turned to my seminary texts. Some of them, quite frankly, I had purchased with good intentions but had not read myself.

I was delighted with the reaction. They would drop in to leave one book and get another and we would talk about what they had read. With charming and unaffected ease they put themselves in open dialogue with some of the biggest of the biggies in theological thought.

I saw that no one had told them they were supposed to be impressed. No one had convinced them to bow down in proper obeisance before academic degrees and reputations. They took each one at face value.

Sometimes they agreed. Sometimes they didn't. "This fellow gets off to a good start but doesn't go very far." "Some good ideas in this one, and a couple that are just real close to being ridiculous." "Now, I think they wasted some paper when they printed this one." "This is a good book. Has something to say and says it."

What a contrast to the carefully phrased critiques of my seminary days. What a change from the solemn cowering at the feet of the world's best known and most footnoted scholars.

They exhausted my resources and found out they could get almost any book they wanted by requesting it through the county/state library system. Then the fun began. I became their student, and gladly joined in with a new appreciation of the potential in the active lay learner.

## **Come Fly with Me**

We were sitting in the hallway outside the church office, an area that is a gathering spot before the Sunday service. My seven-year-old daughter was sprawled in a chair in a very comfortable, but very unladylike position, with her skirt twisted high above her knees.

"Please sit like a young lady," her father told her, and I silently agreed.

An older woman who was standing nearby, replied, "She has the rest of her life to be a lady."

Just another polite comment, I thought, aimed at helping a little girl feel less embarrassed about being corrected in public. But the unspoken implication stayed with me: "Let her be a child while she is a child."

She is lithe and lovely, and she moves unselfconsciously, with the energy and freedom of a strong young animal. She is still young enough to be Wendy; still believes that Peter Pan could teach her how to fly.

She believes everything I tell her about God, accepts it literally and on faith. How can I, with my ladylike ways, teach this would-be flyer about the faith without clipping her wings? How can I impart my understanding of the Christian life without limiting her own way of understanding?

The answer has to do with letting her be a child while she is a child. Not just tolerating her childish ways, but appreciating them. She is at home in her world – lives at the center of her world, with a striking blend of arrogance and simple faith that befits a favored child. What mysteries might the God who created such winsome creatures reveal to that bright young mind? What wonders might that God share with a child who is so completely at home in the world?

Perhaps, if I can enjoy the spontaneity of the nursery, if I can keep from pointing out the impropriety of flying around London in one's nightgown, then perhaps that seven-year-old Wendy will take me by the hand and teach me how to fly... up, up into God's amazing, starry sky.

## Twelve Roses of Sharon

The altar in the first church I remember had twelve roses of Sharon carved on it. I counted them every Sunday. They were white with gold trim and I would have liked to run my finger around the curves of their petals. I would like to have touched the silken outstretched hands of the statue of Jesus, too, but I knew that I couldn't do that, either. It never occurred to me to ask.

The choir processed every Sunday to the same hymn, the first one in the book, "Holy, Holy, Holy." It seemed an appropriate beginning. Before I could read the words for myself, I knew them. They were mysterious words about things I couldn't have explained, but the pictures that came to mind when I sang them were vivid and majestic: golden crowns, glassy sea, cherubim and seraphim. When everyone stood to sing that hymn and the choir and minister came in, it seemed that God, too, would surely be there, perhaps in that unseen space behind the altar.

I don't suppose I understood much of what went on in the service. I knew from the rhythm of the morning when to stand, when to sit, when to be especially quiet, when to close my eyes and fold my hands. I suppose I was down in front on some occasion or other, but my usual place was with my parents in the front row of the balcony. From there I could watch the whole ritual of worship.

In reality I was attentive as much by default as by fascination. My parents had very definite notions about what proper church behavior should be. I was expected to sit very still, not chew gum, not make any noise, and not turn around. Those were high expectations, but the result was that my attention was focused on the sanctuary and the service, and in the ensuing quiet I was rewarded by a sense of beauty and wonder.

I wonder if my own children count arches or roses of Sharon. They have run their hands over every accessible inch of the sanctuary on the weekdays when we have been at the church. They go up to the platform every Sunday for the children's conversation; they like that, but they seem oblivious to the other parts of the service. They are expected to be quiet, but they are allowed to look around and to color pictures on the bulletin. They feel comfortable and at ease in their church, and that's good. But I wish for them also the sense of mystery and awe and otherness that I felt on the Sunday mornings of my childhood.

## No Clapping Today

On the first day of nursery school the mothers sat crouched on tiny chairs around the low tables filling out registration forms and signing up and for refreshments for holiday parties. The room was cheery and inviting, and there was even a teacher's assistant to help the children get acclimated to their new classroom. But the ten four-year-olds hung onto their mothers or tentatively fingered the toys, all the while eyeing one another with and not saying much. All the children had nametags, but that was for the teacher's benefit.

They had not heard each other's names; there was no push for formal introductions. All the faces were new, and as the children looked around at each other, it was clear that they were willing to play side by side, if that was the plan, but that they were not ready to really play together.

A week later my son came home from school and was able to name most of the children in the class. He did not recite the names in a list. Instead he told what each child's special job was that day, and who brought the most interesting thing for show and tell. "I was the snack-passer today! And Tim was the leader. Molly did the weather chart and Scott was napkin passer and Jenny watered the plants and..." On and on. Day by day they were learning the faces, learning the names. The ten separate four-year-olds were becoming a class.

It was the end of the second week that he came home and said, "We didn't get to clap today." It was the kind of statement that I had come to listen for, an offhand remark that usually revealed more than was immediately apparent. "What do you mean?" I asked. "We didn't get to clap. We clap when everybody's there. Megan was sick, so we didn't get to clap." And off he ran to get his tricycle.

One child absent, so there was no clapping. One missing, so the class was diminished.

I wondered whether when the children heard, some time in the future, the story of the shepherd who left the ninety-and-nine to search for the one lost sheep – and finding it, brought it home rejoicing – whether they would recognize the similarities. Probably not. But probably they would understand the reason for rejoicing, because when they were four years old there were some days that they did not get to clap.

## **In His Arms Securely Fold You**

It was close to my fiftieth birthday when I received in the mail from Lucille the little name card that she used to keep track of the infants in the nursery at First Church. She had kept it all those years and thought I might like to have it.

The little card was shaped like a cradle with a smiling infant in it, and a place for a name. On it was written in careful script, Baby Donny Rogers.

I was placed in Lucille's care every Sunday from a short time after my birth until I was ready to move on to the toddlers' room. I have no memories in my mind of that time, no conscious memories. I remember Lucille from the years that followed. She was one of the constantly present, caring people in my life for all the years, even today.

What did she teach me while I was in her care? She taught me the warmth of receiving arms. She taught me the loving attention to my cheerful or fretful needs. She taught me of a place that was bright, cheery in appearance, clean and fresh. She taught me that there were adults other than my parents who were delighted with me.

Indirectly she taught me as she gave reassurance to my mother and father, who did not hesitate to come to church with their small baby. She taught me as they relaxed in their class and worship knowing that I was being cared for with the greatest of concern.

In later years she taught me that she knew that her ministry was to supervise the nursery care of that church, and that it was a ministry of the highest calling. She taught me that faithfulness to a task is one of the key responses to being a good servant of Christ. She taught me that a loving care that began when I was an infant could continue as she followed my growth, my education, my career, my joys and sorrows all my life.

Sometimes I hear Sunday school dismissed with the comment, "It's nothing but babysitting!" "Then I think of Lucille and say to myself, "Oh, if that were only true! If some teachers could only reach that faithful loving care that Lucille gave to me and many others, how fine the church's nurturing ministry might be!"

## **God's Easter**

The Easter sunrise service had been in the hands of the youth of this inner-city church from a date too far back for anyone to remember. There weren't many youth in the church, not many people of any age in fact. The pressures of the city, transitions of residence, uncertainty about integration had all worked against this congregation.

I and the few youth worked at putting together a service. Joy and celebration were our key motifs. Easter Sunday arrived and another tradition I did not know of came into play. The service, I found out later, had never begun on time.

That year we began on time even though the worshiping congregation was sparse. The service was politely received, but the feelings of joy and celebration had also neglected to "get there on time." The service was routine, unexciting, disappointing.

Then there was time to fill. Most of the youth had come from a distance too far to go back home and then return for church school. We stood around awhile and then all piled into a couple of cars to find a doughnut shop for some breakfast.

That accomplished, we still had time to fill. “Let’s go to the park,” one girl suggested. Off we went to “the park,” even though I knew nothing about what that might be. “Turn here, and then left at the next light,” were the directions. “Now, take that little street right there and we’ll be there.”

I turned, followed the narrow entry road and then gasped. Stretched before us were hundreds of flowering cherry trees in full bloom. The park was miles long, although only a block or two wide. It was a glory of pinks and whites and pale reds. Mile after mile stretched out before us. We parked and began to walk among those trees.

Nestled in the midst of this tired section of a large eastern city was a living hallelujah of cherry trees. They were in full bloom. Later in the day the park would be filled with cars and people. In this early hour we had the whole place to ourselves.

The disappointing sunrise service experience was blotted out by God’s own celebration. With time to fill we had been filled with a timeless memory of new life.

## Images

Imagery often helps us to understand something better. It gives us a picture to look at, a familiar reference for comparison, a vivid mental “snapshot” to help us remember.

When I was a young adolescent in confirmation class, the pastor used imagery to help us begin to understand two intangible and difficult concepts: the Trinity and eternal life.

It was hard for us literal minded thirteen-year-olds to comprehend that something could be one entity and three at the same time. Saying that it was one thing with three different faces or forms helped some, but not much. Finally, the pastor turned to the image of electricity. Electricity, he pointed out, was a source of power. It could take the form of light, or heat, or current. Each was somewhat different, but each was still electricity.

Well, we knew something about that, from basic science and from experience. Although none of us could have explained the origins of electricity or just how it worked, it was familiar enough to make the image useful. If the comparison seemed a bit clinical, at least we had the general idea.

The image that the pastor chose to illustrate eternal life worked better. Eternal life, he said, was like the floor that runs under the door. We can’t see into the next room when the door is shut, but we know that the floor is there, just as it is in the room in which we are standing. At death, we open the door and enter another room. The second room may be different from the first, but when we cross the threshold, the floor will continue.

I liked that image. I pictured the hardwood floor that went from the hallway into my bedroom. It was solid; it was sure. I pictured it going on, far into the distance, with the door standing ajar. That image captured for me both the mystery that is suggested by a closed door, and the certainty of something as strong and reliable as a floor. It was reassuring to imagine myself or my loved ones opening a door and walking into the next room on sure footing.

## Time for Bill

For the first few weeks of the adult Bible study class I tried to make constructive sense of Bill’s comments. That was a challenge. When he spoke, it was in the form of an authoritative conclusion. Question marks didn’t intrude



on Bill's remarks. Nor was it usually possible to see much connection between what he said and what we were discussing.

But I was intent on being kind. At first I tried to "clarify" what he said by turning the comment around in a way that put it back in his lap. That was not a good strategy, for it only prompted another declamation of equal irrelevance.

My next move was to add to his comments with an extended interpretation, a free interpretation that finally wound up back on track. The trouble with that was the interpretation often took longer than the original comment and added little.

One day I met Bill on the street. He was waiting for the bus. I had not imaged Bill as a bus rider, for he had the air of white-collar success complete with automobile. I learned that he was forced to live frugally because he was unemployed, and had been for some time.

Our brief conversation planted a new picture in my mind that grew from subsequent casual conversations at the church coffee hour and chance meetings. I used those times to gain a feel for Bill's life. I began to realize that he was very lonely. His conversation was never easy to follow; most people had just given up, avoiding him whenever possible or confining their encounters to routine greetings – "How are you?" and "Nice weather!"

Then I saw the pattern. Bill needed his moment each Sunday morning in that class. He needed to have the floor for a comment. One comment was all he wanted. He wanted to be able to speak, to be acknowledged, thanked, and allowed to return to the comfort of a largely passive role.

That was what I did from then on. Once each Sunday, when Bill looked ready, I called on him for a comment. He spoke. We listened. I thanked him. We went on.

The atmosphere changed. Instead of the ripple of anxiety that had once rolled across the class when Bill interrupted, we now gave him that needed attention.

He was one of the most faithful members of that class. I'm not sure what he learned about the Bible. I hope he learned – as we finally were able to give – that he was accepted there on his own terms, and understood as a human being in need.

## **What Do You See?**

Kathy volunteered to help me find out what children – very young children – think about their church. We tried one way and another and found that the best way seemed to be to have the child take one of us on a tour of the building.

As we walked around, the children would explain what this room was for, who worked in this room and what he or she did, what they liked best. They also told us obliquely about their experiences and feelings and interpretations of church life.

Kathy had been on a tour with little Eddy, a wonderful journey through one of those big old churches with a seemingly endless maze of halls and nooks and crannies. Like many other children, he was particularly fascinated by those places where snacks were served, and by cold water drinking fountains. He was proudly possessive of "his room," and a bit awed by the magnificence of the sanctuary.

The church had stained glass windows everywhere, even in the ground floor room used for recreation and social activities. They were fairly transparent windows with a Christian symbol in the center.

Kathy had an idea, Maybe Eddy could tell her about those symbols. So she guided him over near the windows and, pointing at the symbol, asked what he saw.

“A window,” Eddy said, tinged with the tone that says, what kind of a silly question is that?

Kathy pushed on, “Well, look closer, Eddy. What do you see up there?”

“A window, I told you!” was Eddy’s somewhat exasperated reply. Kathy thought, I’ll lift him up so he’s very close and then ask him. She lifted and asked again. “What do you see now, Eddy?”

“Oh, now I see! There’s the big old trash can!” Kathy put him down and took a look herself. He was right. Outside that window sat the dumpster.

Kathy laughed and took note. Sometimes children see straight through the windows with their pretty symbols to come face to face with the realities of the world.

## **Teacher Knows Best?**

The students in my composition class sat attentively, listening to every word I said. Most of them had already put in a full day’s work and now had come to my three-hour English class as one more step in the long, slow process of earning their degrees.

I had been lecturing, briefly, on the difference between various critical approaches when I noticed their interest began to lag. Assuming that they just needed a change of pace, I shifted gears slightly to the topic of possible outlines for their next essay. Suddenly they were with me again, all eyes forward.

I thought to myself, they’re editing my course. They know as well as I do which aspects are really pertinent to them, which will be most useful in the long run. They came here to learn how to write – nothing fancy, just a simple 500-word essay. I can teach them that! They may pick up some theory, some appreciation, some style along the way, but if I keep on track, they can go out of my class having learned to do something simple very well. It seemed to me to be a good goal.

I began to think about the church school class that I would be teaching winter quarter. The curriculum materials, I knew, would be full of ideas and approaches, craft and activity suggestions. I would read it all over and choose some of what was there. But mostly my course would be centered around a few very basic Christian principles, and all the Bible stories that the children’s eager, curious minds desired.

I smiled when I remembered the time that I had wanted the class to discuss a modern-day application of “Am I my brother’s keeper?” and they had wanted to figure out who Cain and Abel could have married. Or the time when I wanted to dwell on the wisdom of Solomon and they wanted to step off the measurements of the temple.

This quarter I planned to meet them where they were, to teach them what they wanted and what they were ready to hear. I decided to trust them. The big questions were important, like theory and appreciation and style, but there would be time for those. I could teach them the foundation, how to place the first, firm stones. I could give them something to build on later. They could leave my class having learned something simple very well.

## **“God Answers Prayer. She Can Do Anything!”**

Those words were written in bold letters across the blackboard. One of the sixth grade girls had come in early and left the message for the rest of us to find. When we came downstairs after the children’s conversation in the morning worship, there were exclamations of “Right on!” and “You said it, Marcie!” It was that kind of class.

There were eight in the class that year, and all of them were girls. It gave the class a special comradery. The theme for the quarter was God's speaking through people in the Old Testament. As a project, my co-teacher and I had decided to let the girls each choose a favorite Bible character, learn about that character's story, and retell the story in a little program that we would put together. It didn't surprise either of us when over half of the girls chose women.

One girl chose Miriam; another chose Deborah. One picked Sarah; another, the Shumamite woman who provided hospitality for Elijah. Shelly chose Eve.

We laid out the Bibles and maps and reference books and turned the girls loose. Off they went to research their selections.

Shelly was in the middle of the second creation account in Genesis when she looked up from her Bible and said, "You know, I think Eve really got bad press!"

The rest of us paused for a minute. "What do you mean?" someone asked.

"I mean," she said, "that Adam took the forbidden fruit from her willingly. They ate it together. It was the serpent's fault; it says so right here. All these years everybody's been blaming Eve. Nobody talks much about the serpent."

As we put together the final plans for the program and had the final rehearsal, the girls talked about the characters that they had come to know a little better: "Miriam was a good dancer." "Sarah had a sense of humor." "I can just see Deborah sitting under that tree helping people figure out their problems."

Shelly said, "I picked Eve at first because I thought I knew the story already. But when I read it carefully, I found out that it was different than I'd thought. I'm glad I can tell about her tonight and set the record straight!"

## **Pick a Pocket**

The second graders came into the class quietly on the first day. There wasn't much talking as they each found a place to sit. It was a new room, with a new teacher. Some of the children were new, too, and many of the others hadn't seen each other regularly during the summer months. As they looked around the room, a colorful bulletin board caught their attention. On it were rows of brightly colored paper "pockets." When everyone had arrived, the teacher suggested that they all go over to the bulletin board and each choose a pocket to take back to his or her seat.

Inside each pocket the children found a note written by one of last year's second graders. "Dear Second Grader," one note read. "You will have fun in this class. Your teacher is very nice. Now that you are learning to read, you can read some of your own Bible stories. You will make lots of good crafts. The snacks are pretty good, too." Signed, "A Friend."

Suddenly there was a bustle of talking and activity. Children compared pockets and tried to read each other's notes. Hands wiggled in the air calling the teacher over to help with unfamiliar words, and those children who were better readers leaned over to help, too.

"In the spring can we make pockets for the next class?" "I bet I'll be able to write mine all by myself by that time!" "What are you going to color on your pocket? I'm going to draw a unicorn on mine."

The chatter continued, and gradually the teacher led the class into the plans she had prepared for the rest of the morning. The shyness and the feeling of strangeness was over. The unspoken doubts and little fears had been

dispelled, not by the voices of reassuring parents, not by the welcoming presence of the teacher, but by a few written words from some trustworthy peers: veterans of the second grade.

## Lord, Teach Us to Pray

Some of the adults felt uneasy about re-writing scripture and a traditional liturgical document, even though it had become clear in the ten weeks of study that The Lord's Prayer had been modified even from its earliest days.

Our challenge was picked up when presented as a means of thinking through the meaning of each phrase in light of personal and contemporary images. The results included this version (to be sung to a tune such as St. Denio as in the hymn, "Immortal, Invisible God Only Wise"):

Our parent, protector, provider and friend,  
Thou art the Almighty who deigns to descend;  
Thy name we remember with honor and praise  
And speak with a reverence befitting Thy ways.

Thy kingdom we pray for, oh may it be now  
Around us and in us, teach us to see how.  
Thy will ever perfect that shall set us free,  
Be done throughout earth as it is close to Thee.

Our bread and our hope and our strength for today,  
Give us as we need it to walk in Thy way.  
Forgive us the sins that would keep us from Thee,  
As we forgive those who to us make that plea.

Lead not to the wilderness, tempting to make,  
But if we are there, lead us out for thy sake.  
When darkness surrounds us and evil reigns free,  
Thou our bright shield and deliverer be.

For Thine is the kingdom, Our Sovereign Thou art;  
Thy justice with mercy dost freely impart.  
The power and the glory forever are Thine,  
Forever the Grace that is Thy Holy Sign.

And this:

Silent Giver of all good,  
Elusive Presence,  
May you be perceived.  
Let goodness last forever  
Instead of just an instant.  
Keep hope alive in us today,  
And do not remember our ingratitude,  
As we forget each other's.  
Do not toy with us,  
But keep us from doubt and fear.  
The world is yours if you will take it  
and keep it, and never let it go.  
Would that it were so.

And so from one to another the prayer of Jesus came to a new depth of meaning.

## **Silent Witness**

I was glad to go visit my aunt. I felt comfortable and welcome in her house. She was always glad to see me, and there would be little signs that told me she looked forward to my visit: sugar cookies in the blue crockery jar, a tiny bouquet of pansies on the table, my favorite storybook laid out for her to read to me at bedtime, even though I was old enough to read for myself.

During my visits, we sometimes went for a walk, stopping to speak to some of her neighbors. I liked to listen to her talk. As I grew older, I realized that what I admired about her conversations was her tolerance and care for issues and people. Even when she disapproved of something, she gave the people involved the benefit of the doubt. I never heard her say a harsh word about anyone. She seemed to speak out of an inner sense of calm and assurance.

During my visit I decided to surprise her before breakfast by making her bed for her. She had gotten up earlier and was already down in the kitchen. My little favor for her also allowed me the luxury of spending some time alone in her room, just looking, enjoying the atmosphere of her private place in the house.

Her house was not pretentious, not expensively furnished. But it was clean and well-cared for and bore the stamp of my aunt's creativity and whimsy. She had an eye for beauty in color and simplicity, and everywhere my eye fell was pleasing to my sight.

As I started to make the bed, I saw on her bedside table a worn, leather-covered Bible and beneath it a small book of daily devotions, opened to that morning's date. I sat down on the edge of the bed and read the verse and the meditation. Then I picked up the Bible. Its binding was soft and lay back easily in my hands. The ribbon marker was frayed and on almost every page there were lightly penciled underlinings or marks in the margins. The gold lettering on the spine had worn off, and only the indentations remained. After a while I carefully put the Bible and the devotional back on the nightstand and went down to breakfast.

Later that morning, when she discovered that her bed had been made, my aunt thanked me. I knew that she didn't mind my having spent some moments alone in her room. We never spoke about the silent witness on her nightstand.

## **Different Beds**

Most of the boys in the day camp were church school regulars. A few, like Jacob, were newcomers from the neighborhood. They all soon became a happy group with no more than the usual jockeying for recognition through athletic skills and playful antics.

The "big event" was the overnight sleep-out, and I do mean out. There wasn't enough room under the shelter, and we would have to just go home if it rained. No tents or bunk beds. Just sleeping out under the stars for at least a few hours of real sleep. Each boy brought his own equipment.

I paid no great notice to what they brought. Summertime wasn't a season when you needed much cover. Some of the rolls of gear were hefty, others were smaller.

We went from day to evening to night. There were games and songs and campfire and roasted marshmallows made into delicious dripping delights with chocolate squares and graham crackers.

Then it was bedtime. Get the gear. Find a place. Ready to hit the sack. In the flurry I watched bedding being unrolled that was good enough to guarantee survival on top of the Continental Divide. I watched the huffing and puffing of air mattresses being inflated. Brightly colored bed rolls covered the ground.

Then I saw. Jacob was waiting off to the side, not moving. Jacob was watching all the gear with averted eyes. And I saw why. His bedding was still rolled up, a small roll, with a well-worn bedspread on the outside. I walked over and said, "Let's get your bed ready, Jacob, shall we?" He nodded and untied the rope.

It was a bedspread, and a wool army blanket. No pillow. No air mattress. No down-filled sleeping bag.

I had brought a sleeping bag along in case someone forgot, but I didn't know quite what to do. I said, "This ground sometimes gets a little hard after awhile. Maybe you'd like to put this bag down first and make it a little softer." He nodded agreement. But he knew that everyone else knew he was poor.

What he didn't know was that maybe for the first time ever some other boys knew that not everyone was rich; not every boy got everything he wanted. They knew in terms they could understand that there are poor children everywhere.

We slept, finally.

## **"Mommy, May I Have a Sip?"**

Why was it, I wondered, that children could have a whole glass of something to drink in front of them and still want a sip of mine? It happened all the time. If I sat down at the piano, it didn't take more than a few bars before someone small would slide next to me on the bench and begin picking out a very counter melody on the far right keys.

If I started some small repair job around the house or began to repot my plants, helping hands were there in minutes. I did notice that this was more often the case when I was doing something novel or at least out of the ordinary. The desire to imitate didn't seem to apply to mundane activities like doing the dishes or straightening up the house.

Anyone who has spent time with children doesn't need a psychology book to tell them about modeling. It is obvious that children like to mimic adults, and are often more comprehensive at it than the adults would like. Part of the reason, of course, has to do with children's desire to be like adults, to find their way. But part of the reason is that something the adult is doing looks good to the child; it looks appealing.

Among the people who followed Jesus, there must have been those who did so because they liked what they saw. Something about Jesus and about his disciples caught their eye; something was appealing. They came closer for a better look, a taste of the experience, and they stayed.

A pastor I know is beloved for those very reasons. People look at her and her life and they like what they see. They come closer and let her teach them and care for them because there is something about her life that rings true. People want to be like her because they want what she has. They want to find out how to live their faith like that, how to be of a piece.

It is Christ's challenge to me to live my life so that it will not only be a good model for children and others around me, but so that my faith looks appealing to them, and they will want to come closer and have a sip of water.

## Jesus Loves Me

I knew Robbie did not get a whole lot out of the morning worship service. Most of it floated by his simple mind and left little that was new. I also knew that he loved being in the service and had a special fondness for the music.

A few weeks earlier he had had a good day. He had just returned from the Special Olympics, with a ribbon and a trophy. We paid a tribute to his accomplishment, and he glowed as he held the symbols of victory up high for all to see and applaud.

In the Bible study on Wednesdays we had been singing people's old favorites. What were one person's remembered songs and hymns were brand new to someone else. It was good to sing the old and learn something about each other in the process.

I searched the hymnbook for the right hymn for the service planned with the love of Christ as the central theme. I kept coming back to one of those old favorites, "Jesus Loves Me." I did not choose it at first because it was a Sunday school song, a children's song, a bit out of place in morning worship, I thought.

I changed my mind and listed it. We sang it.

Robbie's face caught my eye early in the first verse. He was singing and beaming. The one song he knew without hesitation had finally made it to the morning worship. We were singing his song. He was obviously and transparently happy.

Then I looked around at other faces and saw, to my delight, smiles everywhere, the half-smiles that creep out on your face when something down deep inside feels just right. Young and old and in between were smiling as they sang.

People who usually murmured their hymns just couldn't help but sing. The chorus grew stronger and stronger as if people found out it was all right to sing Robbie's song with full voice.

Robbie's friend, the former neighbor who drove across town to pick him up each Sunday and took him to lunch on the way home so that the whole day was special, responded with a chuckle when I said, "Robbie sure joined in on 'Jesus Loves Me,' didn't he?"

"He sure did," she said. "In fact he sang that song in the car and in the restaurant and all the way home."

## "Teacher! Teacher! Can You Help Me with This?"

The little hand waved in the air, and the childish voice called to me to get my attention. It was early in the quarter and the children had not learned my name yet. Somewhere in the back of my mind a voice from my own childhood reminded me, "It's not polite to say, 'Hey, Teacher. Call me Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_.'" "I knew that I would find some way during the morning to have that child use my name so he would begin to learn it and would not have to call me "Teacher."

And yet, the more thought about it, the more I realized that being called by the generic "teacher" was a compliment that I secretly enjoyed. "Teacher" is what I had wanted to be when I grew up. Whenever anyone had asked, the answer had always been the same. Knowing that, I grew up watching my teachers, emulating them. Mostly, I liked what I saw. It still gives me a great deal of pleasure to watch a good teacher teaching.

Teachers often find themselves in planning or teaching teams, and often that close cooperation results in shared knowledge and skills. My own student teaching was such a period of cooperation. As the novice, I drank up every detail that my master teacher offered. And she, a veteran of many years, shared freely her wisdom and expertise. I saw her plan lessons with great care, yet on the given day, change those plans without blinking an eye in order to follow up on something that had caught the class's attention. I watched her clip articles from magazines because she knew that a particular student was interested in that subject. I heard her praise her students even when to my eyes there didn't seem to be very much progress. I heard her explain a simple principle for the twentieth time that day, without letting a hint of exasperation creep into her voice. I saw her go home at the end of the day with swollen ankles and tired eyes and come back the next morning fresh and genuinely eager for the class to arrive. She asked good questions, hard questions, of her class and of me. And then she patiently helped us figure out the answers. She was a professional. Working closely with her erased any remnants of glamour that I had associated with the profession, but she made me more than ever want to be a teacher.

So when the hands are raised and my name is momentarily forgotten, when I'm trying to decide with an older class whether I want them to call me by my first name or last, I will humbly answer to the name that says so much in its simplicity: Teacher.

## **Nancy's Offering**

We would all have listened more carefully. We would have tried to burn that scene so deeply into our memories that not one detail would ever be lost... if we had known.

During the summer months, as in many churches, the music of the morning worship was arranged with greater informality. The regular organist took some time off. The choir sang anthems only now and then. It was something of a struggle to find sufficient help for the full service music.

The idea of tapping the talent bank of our children and youth sprang out of nowhere – and seemed obviously appropriate as soon as it was suggested. So many of them were taking music lessons of one sort or another; why not ask them to play the offertory if they wished. They could share their God-given talent as an offering to God in the presence of God's people in worship. It would help meet the need – and might even give some of them incentive to practice during summer vacation.

The older children came first on the list, through the urgings of parents and some persuasion. They would step forward to the front of the sanctuary and play their piece. It usually wasn't what purists might call religious music, but no one minded. They did well, unflustered by a mistake now and then, and warmed by the appreciation they received afterwards.

Nancy was not only young, she was tiny. The piano was her recently encountered musical challenge. It took some adjusting to get our piano bench up high enough so she could reach the keyboard.

She walked with direct purpose to the piano that Sunday and climbed up high, her feet dangling far above the pedals. She played, a simple beginner's piece, without error, and climbed down with pretty dress, shining shoes, bright eyes, and bouncing blond curls accenting her pride and joy. Then the Doxology rang out.

Not many weeks afterwards she was found to have a pernicious form of cancer that took her life. She played the piano in her church just that once.

If we had known, we would have listened more carefully. We would have sung the Doxology less glibly so as not to forget Nancy's offering to God.



## **...For You**

The children's church school hour ran from the middle of the morning worship service through the adult coffee and fellowship time. After that, the children went to choir rehearsal with the music director. If they hurried, children's teachers could make it to one of the adult classes without missing too much. The timing was tight, but it was possible to be both teacher and student.

Coming in late, even if only a few minutes late, and for a good reason, was something that some teachers felt uncomfortable doing. One teacher in the adult class made it easier for them. Without breaking stride or calling attention to the late-comers, he managed to bring them up to date on what had happened in the class thus far that morning. He did it with a few summary statements or an offhand remark about something that had been said earlier.

One morning a children's teacher came in a little later than usual. The adult class was in the middle of viewing a short film. When the film was over and some questions about it had been posed, the teacher said, "I think this film warrants a second look. It's short; let's see it again."

Seeing the film a second time was helpful to the class, and the discussion that followed was fruitful. When the class was over, the children's teacher who had come in late said to the adult teacher, "I'm glad you showed the film twice. Thank you."

"Well, the second showing proved helpful, as you could see from the discussion," he replied. "But I would have shown it over again anyway, for you." And he set about packing up the projector.

A polite gesture? Yes. But also the kind of affirming statement that marked that teacher's style. The modification in the day's lesson plan, and the casual comment on it, included and affirmed that late-arriving children's teacher both as an individual and as a teacher in her own right. It acknowledged the contribution that she was making on Sunday mornings and it modeled the kind of graciousness that is truly a fruit of the Spirit.

## **A Place for David**

The small-town church was about ready to begin the annual two-week vacation church school. Just a few days before it was to begin, I received an inquiry from a non-church member. She wanted to know if her son could attend.

She was quick to point out that he was retarded and had not been able to attend church school before because of some problems. She hoped, and asked, if this short-term program might be a place he could have this experience. My answer was, "Let's see."

Conversations with the teachers of the appropriate class followed. The conversations were pleasant and frank, and involved mutual planning.

David came to the vacation church school and found a welcome that was warm and caring, without any sense that David was anything other than a new child. Some special attention was needed from time to time, but the staff had been prepared, and it was given in that same low-key manner.

The days passed and David came each day and left each day with a smile on his face. It was a learning experience for all, and a comfort for his mother.

The last day, in show-and-tell time, David had his moment-in-the-sun of recognition and praise and ran off with others to enjoy the end-of-school special refreshments.

It seemed only minutes later that someone asked, “Have you seen David?” A quick look around sent anxiety through everyone. We thought the worst. Outside was a busy street. Nearby was a river. David was missing. Some ran outside. Others asked other children. “Have you seen David?” They caught the urgency in our voices and began to share our sharp concern. “Where is David?”

Could such a beautiful two weeks end this way? “Where is David?” Tears were very close to the surface amid the joy that came just a few minutes later. David was found. He had returned to his room to play with the toys one more time. He had gone back to the place where he felt at home, where he had been loved.

## **Time for TV**

We had been in the city less than a year. My father worked for the railroad, and when the railroad closed its yards in his hometown, we had to move. The new city was five times bigger than the one we all had been born in. My father went on ahead to find work and a place for the family to live. After a month or so, the rest of us followed.

Looking back on it now, I realize that it must have been a hard move for my parents. They left the small, close-knit town of family and friends to move to a bigger, stranger city in another part of the state. They left the little brick house they had built to move into an inexpensive and unattractive upstairs flat. For my sister and me, the move meant the shyness and uncertainty that we felt among new playmates and in a different school.

What perhaps none of us had counted on in that city of strangers was the comfortable welcome and eventual sense of belonging that we would feel in the church we chose to attend. I don’t remember much about the church itself. What I do remember is the night the pastor came to our apartment to watch TV with us.

It was a live performance of Peter Pan, starring Mary Martin. Perhaps Reverend Koehler’s TV set was broken or perhaps he didn’t have one, but he had been invited to watch the special program with us, and he had accepted. And there he sat in our ordinary living room, eating popcorn and drinking root beer with the rest of us, exclaiming in amazement as Mary Martin swooped across the stage on her invisible wires, squinting his eyes and clapping his hands as we recited with children around the country, “I believe in fairies,” to bring Tinkerbell back to life.

After the program was over he stayed to chat a while. When he finally said goodnight, he thanked us, and even as an eight-year-old I could tell that he had enjoyed himself. When we saw him in church the next Sunday and the Sundays after, it was as if my sister and I shared a little secret with him. He had come to our house and watched TV with us, and he’d had a good time!

## **Koinonia**

The Koinonia Class was the biggest church school class in the church. It was a friendly class where new members seemed to find a place waiting for them. It had good socials, usually delicious potluck dinners at members’ homes. Because of its liveliness, it was able to attract interesting teachers, and the quality of the Sunday morning discussions was intellectually challenging. During the closing prayer circle each week, members shared their personal concerns and prayed freely for each other. People often kept in touch during the week and felt they had a circle of Christian friends they could count on in an emergency. The class was a strong center within the church; it lived up to its name.

Most of the members of the Koinonia Class had children in the church’s educational program. As is often the case, the Christian education committee had trouble staffing its children’s church school classes each fall. They needed, as always, creative teachers who cared about children and who were willing to devote preparation time plus an hour or more each Sunday morning to a children’s class.

The Koinonia Class was filled with people who fit that description. But the pastor and the committee did not mount a campaign to recruit teachers from that class. Instead they let time and the Spirit take their natural course. The subject of leadership in the children's classes came up from time to time in the prayers and concerns expressed in Koinonia. Members whose children were directly affected by the less than energetic program talked about it privately. When Koinonia members spoke gratefully about the blessings they received in their church school class, the disparity seemed great.

One Sunday morning a woman from Koinonia spoke with the pastor about teaching the kindergarten class. He accepted her offer with delight. Without any formal announcement, she let it be known among her friends that she wouldn't be coming to class that fall; she would be teaching kindergarten. Not long afterward, several other Koinonia members followed her example, and that year marked the beginning of a revitalization of the children's church school.

It wasn't easy for any of those adults to give up the enriching experience of their own church school class to teach the children. It wasn't something anyone person had asked them to do. It was a natural outcome of their own spiritual growth, a result of time and the Spirit, and a tribute to the nurturing quality of their own Koinonia.

## **Take a Deep Breath**

My idea was to have the youth group do an original dramatic presentation, a modest original drama, during the Christmas season.

The idea of the youth, in response, was seemingly in agreement. That is, they liked the idea and got to work. My mind went back to scenes with shepherds and angelic announcements, mangers and kings. Their minds raced ahead to a deeper understanding that embraced not only the concept of incarnation but also all of the times they could think of when God had become present to humanity.

The project grew and grew and grew. The place to begin, they decided, was at the beginning, with Adam and Eve and Seth. They wanted to include all of biblical history and move beyond to a concluding modern-day scene based on a Christmas office party.

Whereas I had worried at first about getting them interested, my private agenda now became that of slowing them down. I argued for simplicity of staging. They hungered for lights and costumes and music, sound effects and props and scenery.

I suggested editing. They thought that outdoing Cecil B. DeMille was the appropriate goal. I talked about possible "difficulties" of production and performance (what I had in mind were "disasters" in full public view!). They had nothing but confidence.

Dress rehearsal followed the pattern of all the prior rehearsals – sheer chaos. I trembled when I contemplated such things as the reaction of the congregation to the narrating clown swinging down out of the balcony, popping up in the choir loft, perching on the pulpit.

Performance evening came. Word had gotten out. The people came and I mused – yes, they've come as if to the coliseum to see a spectacular disaster.

The play began. Music, lights, the clown – Scene One. The play continued with pomp and processional and amplification shaking the plaster. I sat in amazed appreciation. It was magnificent! Pathos and humor revealed an understanding of the meaning of Christmas that stretched minds to new insights and new questions.

That's when I began to realize that sometimes the best way to teach is by getting out of the way.

## **Making Music**

I don't know what images lurked in the back of my mind so that I was pleasantly startled by the kindergarten class. Maybe what I half expected was that gym class routine of whistles and shouts and drill sergeant orders. Start, stop, change, move, come here, go there, do this, do that!

I did know that children that young have short attention spans and that a good session would have to move from one activity to another frequently. I did know that each one lived in his or her own world with little inclination to work in groups. And I knew these teachers went about their task with an infectious joy.

They didn't mind my being there as a spectator, so I watched and I listened. I saw the pattern of the class activities changing before I became aware of what was causing this mostly smooth flow from one part of the session to the next.

As the children moved, they sang. They sang the little songs that had become the quiet signals. They sang the simple, direct songs that were made up by these teachers and sung over and over again so that the children learned not only what they meant, but learned to sing them, too.

They sang about putting away toys. They sang about hearing a story. They sang about gathering in a circle. They sang about Jesus and love and children, about where to put the puzzles, and reaching up high, and bending down low, and turning all around.

As the session moved along, one of the teachers would keep track of the time and begin the song. The other teachers would quietly join in, and then some of the children would add their voices. The mood was joyful, calm, bright, quiet.

"Where did you find all those songs?" was one of my first questions afterwards as we talked about the session. "We made up most of them. Took a tune, changed the words. Took some words, made up a tune," was the answer.

"Can I have a copy of them?" I asked.

They looked at each other with puzzled smiles. "I don't think we have any copies of them. I don't think we ever wrote them down. Guess you'll just have to visit us often and learn them that way!" Then they added, "If you learn them real well, we'll even let you lead now and then!"

## **Kittens and God's Love**

There were no children's conversations in the church service when I was growing up. Children went to Sunday school while their parents went to church. There were probably very few children in the sanctuary on a Sunday morning, yet I have more memories of that place than of the classroom, which probably means that I spent more time tagging along with my parents than joining children my own age.

The part of the service that I liked best was the music. I listened to the organ and sang along as much as I could with the hymns. When the lights dimmed slightly and the minister stepped into the pulpit, I knew it was time to get comfortable and maybe doze a little, leaning up against my mother's ample arm.

One morning during the sermon I sat up and paid attention. The minister was talking about the love of God, and was illustrating his point by telling a story about a mother cat who risked her life again and again going back into a burning barn to rescue her kittens. When the last one was safe, she lay down and died.

It was a sad story, but more than that it was a subject I knew something about. I had a kitten, received as the result of much coaxing. I thought about how much I loved my kitten and about how grateful I would have been if she had been rescued from a burning barn. I thought about how sad but proud I would have been if she had been the mother cat in the story.

In the Sundays that followed, I dozed again during the sermons, but I kept one ear open just in case he talked about that mother cat again. Most of that sermon and the others were over my head, but years later I still remember the cat story: poignant image of the sacrificial love of God.

## **Blessed Hands**

I sat in on a planning session for a newly organized women's group in my church. The discussion was about what kind of group it should be, what the goals and priorities should be. I listened for a while and then had to say, "I know that I would benefit from study, if this were to be a study group; and I know that like everyone I need support, if this were to be a support group; and I know that we all have something to share if this were to be a sharing group. But right now, I want to do something. I want my time here to be useful and practical. I want to do something with my hands; I want to work."

I thought back over instances I knew of groups at work. I thought of frontier barn raisings and quilting bees, of harvests using shared machinery, of neighborhood clean-up projects and work days at the Christian Center. I thought of women rolling White Cross bandages and other women making craft items for a hospital charity. I thought of men and women baking and cooking for a church dinner and making trip after trip in pick-up trucks and vans to help someone move.

In all of those cases, the stated goal was a project, a piece of work. When it was finished, those who helped all felt a sense of accomplishment, of success, a sense of a job well done. Those feelings were part of the end product. But along the way, in the quiet times of working side-by-side and in the conversations, in the songs and in the laughter, they experienced a sense of support and of sharing that were important by-products.

How like our children's church school class! When hands were busy, conversation came easily, minds were attentive, the sense of belonging was high. The more worthwhile the project, the better the system seemed to work. So we planned projects that were not quick one-session, craft-time fillers, to be taken home and lost somewhere during the week. Our projects were ongoing, something that fifth and sixth graders could sink their teeth into, look forward to working on, get back into each Sunday. And the projects were shared in some way with the rest of the church. They were worked on for others, but the children reaped as many benefits themselves as did those for whom the work was done. Perhaps this mixture of benefits is what the scripture means in Deuteronomy 14:29, "Bless thee in all the work of thy hands which thou doest."

## **Calling**

There is an old-fashioned custom that has gone out of fashion these days, and that is the act of calling on people – paying a visit for no particular reason except to spend a little time together. For whatever the social or cultural reasons, calling in person is not done as often as it used to be.

When I was a youngster, our pastor paid periodic visits to our home. We would all say hello and chat for a while, and then Reverend Grollmus and my dad would settle back for a longer conversation. No one in our house was sick; no one was a shut-in. We were moderately active in the church. Perhaps Reverend Grollmus was unusually diligent in his pastoral care, but the visits seemed very ordinary. Their effect was simple, but lasting: We were people for whom he took time. Calling was an affirming act.

It seems to me that the affirmation went both ways. We felt good because he had come to us; he felt the warmth of our welcome.

Today, church groups and individuals who have decided to be more intentional about their calling often have training sessions to help people learn how to do just that. Many of the things that are taught in such sessions are helpful and provide would-be callers with the confidence that will nudge them into action. But in the final analysis, even a shy or awkward attempt can be beneficial. The very act of being there can speak more eloquently than carefully planned words.

In recent years I had the privilege of returning some of my pastor's calls. He and his wife had retired, and his failing health kept them close to home. They were favorites among the calls I made when I returned to my hometown. Then it was my turn to be the visitor and feel the warmth of their welcome.

They would inquire about my life and family and work; they would tell me about their days. We would reminisce about people and times past.

When it was time for me to go, they would express pleasure that I had taken the time to come and see them. I think they would have been surprised to know that I was only following their example – that if I was affirming through my call, it was because they had taught me how.

## Reading the Signs

The room was nicely in tune with the needs of the two- and three-year-old children who would spend part of each Sunday morning there. It was equipped with furniture of the correct size, including sturdy little chairs. The pictures and chalkboards were within sight and reach of those little people. There were attractive colors of paint on the walls, a pleasing carpet, plenty of interesting toys and books and supplies.

Only one dissonant note was sounded by that environment. On one wall, at just the right height for the children to read, was a carefully lettered sign: WE DO NOT STAND ON THE CHAIRS.

I noticed the sign the first time I saw the room. I watched to see what happened to it. It remained in place the whole year. For that year I wondered.

I wondered who decided to construct a sign with such careful attention to every detail except the fact that the children could not read. I wondered what pattern of children's behavior had prompted the need for the sign. And I wondered how many times I had made the same casual error of channeling my good intentions about a rule for living that missed my students by a country mile.

I remembered Ron and his chair. Ron was a mover. He moved all the time. He moved things from one place to another. Mobility was his lifestyle at a relatively early age. One Sunday, Ron's teacher reached the limits of tolerance for his mobility; rather firmly she picked him up and sat him just as firmly in a chair, with the admonition, "Now you stay there!"

Moments later Ron announced, "I came to Sunday school to be loved, not to be sat in a chair!"

I could imagine Ron being one who loved to move chairs to turn them into ladders to reach what had just caught his attention. Standing on a chair would seem a good thing to Ron. Sitting in one was rarely on his mind. I wondered what Ron would have done with that sign, if he could have read it.

## Every Plant Has a Story

“You know, it’s bad luck to sell a plant,” the old woman said. We were standing in her living room, and she was filling up a cardboard box with African violets – gifts for me. I had just offered to pay her for them.

“I have never sold a plant,” she continued. “I’ve never bought one, either. Everything you see here is a gift from a friend, either the whole plant, or slips or leaves.”

I looked around the room. There were plants everywhere. Most of them were violets, but there were others, too, in plant stands, on window sills, in hanging baskets. The woman noticed my admiring glance. “Let me show you around,” she said. “Every plant has a story.”

As we walked around the room, she told me some of the stories. One prayer plant had been a gift to her mother when her mother was in the hospital with her final illness. One spider plant had been a housewarming gift. One ivy had belonged to her sister, who “just couldn’t get it to grow.” One fern had come from a friend’s porch one year when the weather turned cold, and had grown so well that the friend had made her a gift of it. Every violet could be traced to its parent plant, and that to a friend.

I thanked her and took my box of violets home. I put them on my windowsills, and there in the combination of cool temperatures and filtered light, they flourished. When I transplanted and divided them, I kept one of the offshoots of each plant and gave the rest to friends. I have been given other plants over the years, and unlike the woman, I have bought some myself. The ones from friends seem to do better.

When I water my plants or look at them, I am reminded of their origins. They help me recall friends and family and occasions. When I look at the violets, I think again of that afternoon long ago, and the old woman who was my friend.

She taught me more than how to grow violets. She taught me about friendship and sharing, about caring for living things. She taught me about links with the past and planting for the future. “Every plant has a story.” And every person does, too. Some we know, some we will find out, some we will never discover. But the links are there, and in the hands of someone wise and caring, with good soil and water and a space on the sill, each can grow and bloom and live.

## Blest Be the Day of Your Birth

Birthdays are special days for young children. A child’s birthday is the one day above all others on which that child is acknowledged to be special, is pampered and given gifts, is allowed to be the center of attention.

In one nursery school class, the teacher made a large colored paper bear for each child, wrote the child’s name and birthdate on the bear’s tummy, and laminated the bear so that it could be saved and used as a poster or a placemat. At the beginning of school, one wall was filled with a gay line of colored bears. When each child’s birthday arrived, the appropriate bear was taken down and sent home as a remembrance of that day’s celebration.

One September day, my young son sat telling me about his new room. “You know those birthday bears we had last year, like the one I have on my bedroom door? Well, guess what we have in our room this year. Kitties!”

“What color is your kitty?” I asked. “My kitty is brown. Tim’s is gray. Some are yellow and some are white. And Mrs. Conley’s is black.”

So Mrs. Conley had a birthday kitty, too. I was glad. And I waited to see what would happen on her birthday.

What happened was that she did all the things the children did on their birthdays. She brought a special treat to share for the snack time. When they worked at the table, she sat in the special decorated chair. She was the “leader” that day. She heard the children sing “Happy Birthday” to her, and she put the five felt candles on the flannel birthday cake, jokingly telling the children that each one of the five had to stand for more than one year in her case.

What she did was let the children honor her on her special day. It was something that a teacher might easily overlook. After all, birthdays aren’t as magical to adults as they are to children. But by hanging up her kitty and celebrating her birthday with the rest of the class, she taught the children in a very simple way to extend their loving care to everyone, regardless of age. She gave the children the pleasure of expressing their natural affection for their teacher in ways that were familiar and meaningful to them. And in return, I would guess, she found that “Happy Birthday” sounds very sweet when sung by little voices, and that perhaps birthdays can still be special for adults, too.

## Holy Ground

We were on our way to the high snow fields on the north side of the mountain. It was July, but the snow had lasted on that shaded side and we were going to go body-sledding. The prospect of that excitement kept us plodding along through the heat of the day, climbing steadily upward. The leaders kept us from taking the shortcuts from one ridge to the next by reminding us, “Stay level or climb up. Every step down has to be matched by a hard step back up.”

Our only extra gear for the day hike was some waterproof coat or jacket or a piece of plastic that would serve as the “sled” between us and the snow. We each had our sack lunch, and the bigger kids helped carry the powdered mixture we would turn into the noon drink from the little snow stream that was known to run by Raspberry Rock, our midday destination.

The rock was visible long before we arrived and served as the motivating lure over the last stretch. No one gave it more than a casual glance, to note the shape from which it got its name.

Lunch would be a time to rest, eat the sandwich too rapidly, drink the icy cold flavored water we called “rotgut.” Then on to the afternoon adventure on the snow. That’s all we expected.

The word went out down the line as we neared the rock.

“Ladybugs!” “What?” “Ladybugs, thousands of them!” “Oh sure, way up here, thousands of ladybugs?”

Disbelief was encouraged by the memories of old tricks played on the gullible, like searching for our elusive strange beast that turned out to be a bag of peanuts hung in a tree, and similar traditional camp pranks.

This was no prank, as we soon saw to our bewilderment. Raspberry Rock was covered with ladybugs. That in itself was incredible, but it was especially so at this height near timberline in the Rockies. A few comments were made, but mostly we just stared. It was both a beautiful and frightening sight. No one’s knowledge of nature lore was equal to the moment. No explanation for this surprising insect behavior was given.

Better yet, no one tried to turn that sight into a lesson about creation or God or anything else. We just looked. Lunch was eaten quietly, for once, as if we feared a noise might disturb this event before our eyes. Just as silently we moved on up the mountain, storing within each young mind a glimpse of a natural “burning bush.”



## “Who Teaches?”

Lois was describing the earliest memory she has of Sunday school: “I remember the room only as being a dark place, with a hard, cold, cement floor. All I remember about the teacher is that she kept her hat on all the time and seemed to have a cold all the time.

“When women visited at our home we knew they were going to stay a while when they took their hats off. If they kept their hats on we knew the visit was a short one. I had the feeling that my teacher was never going to stay very long because she kept her hat on.

“I’m not sure she had a cold, but she did have a handkerchief in constant motion. She always held it in her hand and discreetly wiped her nose. So I assumed she had a cold all the time.

“The day I remember best was a dramatic day of sorrow and joy. It must have been shortly after Christmas when we were allowed to bring a favorite toy for show and tell. I had received a beautiful doll and I took her to the class. Tragedy struck me with full force when another child started to play with my doll, although I didn’t want anyone to touch her, and dropped her on that floor and broke her head.

“I collapsed into tears, sobbing deeply. My brand new beautiful doll was broken.

“Our full-time custodian, Klaus, happened to be passing by the room and heard my sobbing. He asked what was wrong and learned of the broken doll. He asked if he could try to help and took my doll very gently in his hands and left.

“I don’t remember anything else about the class, or about the play time after class during the worship service. But I do remember Klaus coming back into the room late in the morning with my doll in his two big hands. He handed it to me and said, ‘I fixed her for you. I think she looks OK.’

“And she did! She looked wonderful! You couldn’t even tell she had been broken. Somewhere back in that mysterious room near the furnace, Klaus had done wonders with some glue. Only someone who knew – and I did show what had happened to a few people – only someone who knew could tell she had been dropped on the floor. “I left with my doll, now sick and needing to rest in my arms, with my tears all wiped away and a marvelous giddy happiness filling my whole body.”

## What Do You Say?

An Ohio family had a German cousin staying with them for the summer. They were using the opportunity to improve their German, while their guest was improving her English. One afternoon a little neighbor girl came over to play, and after a while was asked if she would like a cookie.

“Yes, please,” she said.

“Can you say ‘please’ in German?” the mother asked.

“*Bitte*,” came the dutiful reply.

Most of us know a smattering of a foreign language, a few words here and there. Even if we know only two or three words in another language, chances are that they are the simple, but very important words: *bitte* and *danke*, *por favor* and *gracias*, *s’il vousplait* and *merci*, please and thank you.

We learn these words partly because they are useful and partly because they are polite. But there is a deeper reason, one that we sense more often than we say, and that is that they establish a right relationship between people. If we have no other words in common, we can say at least with these few, “I respect you.”

For the Christian, these simple words can echo a deeper relationship. They can be words of witness. For at the heart of heartfelt words of respect and gratitude spoken to another person is the greater sense of respect and gratitude to God, the great Provider.

When we prompt small children with, “What do you say,” we are teaching them more than a rote response. We are teaching them to take a moment’s time to reflect on the gift and the giver.

Our “please” and “thank you” can be more than formalities. When we learn them in another’s language, no matter what other things divide us, we can use these words to say to one another, “I respect you because we are both children of a gracious and loving God.”

When these simple words become a familiar and regular part of our speech, they can reflect a pervasive sense of gratitude and appreciation for all the gifts of this world, from both mortal and immortal hands.

## **Away in a Manger**

Growing up in First Church meant getting more and more important roles in the Christmas pageant.

As a little tyke I sang “Away in a Manger” in the Carol Choir, and stood in awe as the elaborately costumed scenes were unveiled by the parting curtains of the stage in the sanctuary.

Other songs, other choirs followed in predictable fashion as the tradition of the Christmas pageant was carried on year by year.

Then came the big step. The director asked my mother if I wanted to be one of the shepherd boys. Did I ever! That meant a costume, make-up, being backstage in that marvel of light boards and dressing rooms. It meant getting to watch the men glue on their beards. It meant rehearsals and being right there on stage when the curtain opened.

Yes, I would do what they told me to. No, I wouldn’t run around. Yes, I could hold still for the whole scene.

All I had to do was stand still. There was no movement on stage to speak of in most of the scenes, except I did have to fall back in fright during the hillside scene when the bright light came on and the angel spoke. During the manger scene I just stood very still in front of the older boys and adult shepherds.

One thing caught my attention. There was a big manger, big to me anyway. Mary sat at the end and looked in and her face glowed. Joseph was at her side. What, I wondered, was in the manger?

I imagined that they might have a real baby for the performance, but obviously didn’t during the rehearsals. I thought, maybe they had a doll. I decided to find out.

It took some courage. I didn’t want to appear nosy. I didn’t want to do anything that would get me taken out of the pageant. I did want to peek in the manger.

My chance came as we were being arranged on stage for the performance. I stepped up on tiptoe and peeked.

There, carefully placed on a tin pie plate, was a forty-watt light bulb. Jesus, the baby Jesus, was a forty-watt light bulb! I couldn't believe it. The manger scene with no Jesus, no baby Jesus, no baby, not even a doll! Just a forty-watt light bulb casting a heavenly glow on the faces of Mary and Joseph.

## **Doves and Sparrows**

It was lunchtime, and my second grade daughter came home from school in tears. During the morning recess, some children had shaken a small tree on the playground so hard that a mourning dove's nest and its two young birds fell to the ground. Someone called the teacher, and the children involved were reprimanded, but it seemed that nothing could be done to help the doves. Their nest had been destroyed. At noon, the parent bird was in the grass valiantly trying to shelter the little ones under its breast.

"Mommy, they're too little to fly," my daughter cried. "They need a nest, and their nest is gone." And then with a new burst of tears, "I looked on Ricky and Sarah's porch for that old robin's nest, but it's gone too! What can we do?"

What we did was get out the stepladder and climb up to reach a no longer used cardinal's nest in the bushes in our backyard. Then we hastily put together a sandwich for her to eat on the way, took two preschoolers by the hand, and walked over to the school. On the way I tried to prepare her for disappointment in case we were too late, or in case our plan did not work. "Sometimes in nature sad things happen that we can't do anything about," I said.

But she wouldn't hear of it. "This is the school yard," she countered, "and we're here to help."

The principal was typing a letter when we interrupted him, but he heard the story and took the nest to the custodian who came out to the tree with a ladder. By this time, a small circle of children had gathered. One of the "tree-shakers" helped scoop up the baby birds and handed them to the custodian who put them and the new nest securely into the tree. The parent dove watched all of the activity from the edge of the school roof.

After the crowd had dispersed, my daughter turned to me with shining eyes and said, "You know, I could have used that nest for show and tell, but this is more important. We saved the birds!"

The certainty of her faith that something could be done was inspiring. The adults involved were nudged into action in order to live up to those expectations. Moved by a child's compassion and resourcefulness and sense of urgency, we had, together, saved the birds.

## **The Women's Bond**

We strolled into the Book of Ruth as if visiting a well-remembered and loved garden. We knew what we would find there in that lovely story of faithfulness.

The ten women in the Bible study group had examined many books of the Bible together in their years of sharing. The conversation flowed with that ease that comes from knowing each other well. They had studied together, prayed together, worshiped together, worked together. They had stuck with their church as it went on the steepening slope of decline. Each anniversary event in the church had become a time of remembering many who had had to leave, had to die.

The book unfolded before us as we listed and identified the significant details of all the major characters, including those with no names but important roles. Almost in passing, "the women" of the village were included.

We traced out the action line of the narrative, hunted for the climactic turning points, imagined details about the setting and emotions that fleshed out the picture. We puzzled over the unexplained and seemingly contradictory turns of events.

We summarized the book by leaping forward to Jesus and imagining what we might have said to him if he had asked us, “Tell me about those people in my family tree who lived during the time of the Judges.”

Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Obed would be included in our conversation with Jesus. Elimelech, Orpah, Mahlon, Chilion, the kinsman, the elders, the young men...what of them? Should we take the time to tell Jesus about them? And what of “the women”? They enter the narrative in the final verses, but they were surely present and aware of all that was taking place. They announced the good news of the birth to Naomi. They named the baby. What about “the women, her neighbors”?

Slowly a new insight filtered through the study group. In a close-knit patriarchal society a foreign woman had been accepted to become the mother of David’s great grandfather, the ancestor of Jesus. And at the same time, surely, the women had reached out to be the midwives at the birth, the announcers of good news, the trusted namers of the child.

Ruth, a story of faithful women, who lived long enough and carefully enough with each other to bridge the gaps of nationality and see the will of God, became the story of another group of faithful women who had stayed together to bridge the gaps that split apart twentieth century culture in order to name together the name of Jesus, Ruth’s “child.”

## Together

The fall that year was long and mild. One blue-gold day followed another, and it seemed that they would do so until Christmas. In mid-October, when half the leaves were crunchy underfoot and the other half were still on the trees in their burnished glory, the fifth-sixth grade girls’ class planned to spend one Saturday at a nearby forest preserve. The class planned an outing each quarter. They were too young to be included in the youth group and its weekend retreats, and too old for an hour-long party on the Sunday nearest Halloween. A day in the autumn woods seemed just the right thing.

On the Sunday before the outing, the girls were excited. They talked about what they would wear and what kind of lunch they would bring in their backpacks. They all decided to travel light, each carrying her own supplies, with hands freed for holding a walking stick or gathering pretty leaves or acorns. The teachers looked forward to the day too. It would be leisurely and unstructured time to get to know the Juniors better, and who wouldn’t enjoy a sunny day in the country?

But when Saturday arrived, it was raining. Even the most optimistic person had to admit that it was going to keep on raining all day. And it did.

As the teachers and children gathered at the church, they commiserated about the weather. Plans were changed to an indoor picnic, but no one’s heart seemed to be in it. As parents dropped off their children, they asked the teachers incredulously, “You mean you’re really going to spend the whole day here at the church with a group of children?”

The teachers looked at each other with brave smiles and answered, “Yes.”

After all had arrived, they went to the dining room and moved back the chairs and tables. Then they played volleyball and kickball. They posed for silly pictures and got the giggles. They played hide and seek. They explored every nook and corner of the church building, from the boiler room to the attic. At lunch they compared

sandwiches and shared snacks. They made two teams and wrote clues for each other for a treasure hunt, and before going home, they all walked over to an ice cream shop for cones.

At the end of the day everyone was tired, but happy. It had turned out to be a very different day from the one they had planned. They knew they would have enjoyed the outing in the woods, but they had to admit that that Saturday would be hard to beat. And they decided that maybe it wasn't the place that was so important, after all; it was the company.

## **Moses and the Twentieth Century**

Lois knew her Bible well enough that when the local college offered an evening class in Old Testament open to all, she was excited about signing up. She said, "I know that I'm only scratching the surface. I just know I can learn what those times were really like."

When I had the chance to talk to her about the class near the end of the term, she was not so sure it had been a good idea. "What has happened is just what I wanted. I've learned a lot more about what times were like back then. But what I didn't expect was to find it harder than ever to see the Old Testament as related to these modern times."

She went on, "I used to think that someone like Moses was just my granddaddy, only a little bit older. But now I know Moses is a man who lived far, far away in a very different world. I don't know if me and my kids in Sunday school can think like old Moses did or not."

Fortunately, Lois didn't give up teaching her fifth grade class. She kept with it even when the materials turned to the Old Testament characters lessons – the very ones she didn't think could have much in common with modern kids in modern times.

It was the children who changed her mind. It happened on the Sunday they took time to remember Martin Luther King, Jr. Lois knew that King was before their time. In just a few short years the famous become unknown history to the young.

Lois told them about Martin Luther King, Jr. She told them about what he did to make the cause of civil rights a front-burner issue. She told them how he stood up to the authorities when they wished he would just go away and be quiet.

She asked her class, "Now what do you think of Martin? Do you think you understand what Dr. King was doing?"

One of them, Missie, answered, "I think I know, Miss Brown. It seems to me that Dr. King was just like Moses. You remember how Moses stood up to the Pharaoh and said, 'You let my people go or I'll send you a plague'? Well, that's what I think Dr. King was doing. Just the same. Moses and Martin."

Lois said, "Yes, child, yes, I think you understand. And so do I."

## **Not My Father**

Beverly Moore was what the church called a single-person family. That is, she lived alone. Maybe because of that she found it fun, in her profession as Christian educator, to surround herself with children, even when she went on vacation.

She enjoyed taking along with her to the shore two or three children whom she knew would probably never have that trip with their own families, probably never have anything they would be able to write about when the school teacher assigned the fall essay topic, "My Summer Vacation."

She made the arrangements for three children to go with her for her week of walking the beach, watching the waves, soaking up the sun. One of them was called Bud, with an official name of Ralph.

Bud wasn't sure about this vacation thing. He soon expressed the thought that maybe he would rather be home. His feelings built to the point he decided to leave. Beverly helped him pack his suitcase, full and heavy, and sent one of the older children along to watch over him as he plodded off down the beach.

As she expected, the suitcase load and the sand helped to change Bud's mind in short order, and he decided he would just as soon stay.

The next day in a conversation or story or prayer, God was named as Father. Bud picked up on that. He asked, "Is God like my father?" Beverly replied that she thought so. Bud exploded, "Well, then, I hate God, 'cause I hate my father!"

Beverly pondered that comment and, from time to time as the days went by, learned that Bud had some good reasons to hate his father.

Bud got to liking the sand and the water and the "neat" foods they cooked and ate. He did decide to leave again but changed his mind even as they were packing his suitcase.

Late in the week Bud had another question. "Bev, is God like you?" Caught in a dilemma of pride and humility, but remembering Bud's earlier explosion, she said, "Yes."

Bud commented, in that offhanded way that Beverly had learned to love, "Well, then, I like God."

## **A Child's Leading**

One part of our training in the one-day-a-week hospital chaplaincy course was a time of conversation with hospital personnel. We talked with doctors and nurses and social workers. We learned from administrators, dieticians, and technicians.

Our supervising chaplain told us that on the next Saturday we would have the privilege of meeting one of the most remarkable volunteers he had ever met in any hospital.

On that day we listened attentively as the volunteer talked about the way she had become interested in volunteer work; how she found her way to this large general metropolitan hospital and into the volunteer services department.

She answered our questions about motivation and personal rewards. She described in detail the way in which she served on the children's ward. All of this was done with a calm sureness of understanding and a skill in communication that was reassuring.

She had become aware of her own fine health as a gift from God. She knew that others did not share that gift and had to endure long journeys back to health in hospitals. She had decided to help.

Each Saturday she came to the hospital to spend six hours with the children. The vehicles of her care were play and stories and such incidentals. Her understanding of the therapeutic benefits were quietly profound.

The six of us could see why she had been invited by our supervisor to share with us as a highly competent and valued volunteer. By any standard she was impressive.

We were impressed all the more that this sound and dedicated service was the gift of a twelve-year-old girl!

## **Sing to the Lord a New Song**

The task for the day with the fifth and sixth graders was to explore the Bible, becoming more familiar with its basic structure and general contents.

The teachers had added to the curriculum materials some exercises of their own devising, since this had proven to be of interest to the children in the previous week's work.

Using their knowledge, the Bible dictionary, the concordance, and a lot of guessing and searching and calling out ideas, the children wandered back and forth through Old Testament and New, through the Pentateuch and Epistles, through Gospels and Prophets, through History and Wisdom.

Part of the exercise was done as a group; part was done individually with pencil and paper. As the students worked away, the teachers mingled to give help in response to frustrations and questions.

It was during this time that we noticed that one small group had separated themselves from the others and were in huddled concentration. Our attention was drawn to them because their conversation became intense whispering.

We worked with the others and let that group continue, since they asked for no help and were intent about their reading.

The time came to move to the next activity, but that small group was deaf to our instructions. Over there by themselves they kept at their work.

Finally, it became necessary to include them, and one of us moved over to see what had become so interesting. They quickly closed their Bibles and gave us full, if somewhat strange, attention.

The class ended and they went off to join their parents in the worship service. I left too, only to be stopped down the hall by the co-teacher.

"Well," she said, "I found out what was so interesting. Guess!" "I have no idea," I said. "What?"

"Some of our class have discovered the Song of Solomon! "

My reply was, "Oh," then silence. And then with a smile, "As I remember, you are in charge next week as lead teacher. Good luck!"

## **Holy Ignorance**

What is it about the door of a church that makes it a magic portal where ignorance is blessed? It seems to happen all the time.

Business people who handle complex financial decisions seem to lose all those skills when it comes time to decide how to invest a very modest church account. Managers of corporate divisions have no wisdom on how to reorganize a church school. Decision makers struggle to decide what kind of lawn mower the church needs, and end up referring the matter to a committee for further study.

Is there some perception of the church that renders irrelevant those skills? Is there some aroma of religion, creeping into people as they walk up the steps and through the door, that produces this sudden incompetency?

That issue was again on Bob Walter's mind. It was prompted this time by his adult Sunday school class. This class was proud of their style. They weren't going to just sit passively while some teacher expounded on a Bible passage. No way! This was a class of active minds and aggressive souls. They loved to discuss, and the more heated the interchanges the better they liked it.

They had sought out a teacher who could stay with these verbal free-for-alls. Bob was pleased to have been asked. He tossed out the ball, acted as referee as the conversation flowed, helped the less aggressive get time on the floor, held the outspoken from dominating, blew the whistle when time was up and ventured a summary conclusion.

The process was lively, but, Bob noted, progress was elusive. These people didn't like to be pressed to show the biblical roots of their opinions. The discussion never seemed to lead to the need to dig into the theological roots of an issue.

Bob thought, down the hall is a class that goes over and over the Bible and yet has no interest in seeing connections with life beyond the level of platitudes. This class has no interest in exploring the Bible for insights into the problems they love to bat around.

I've got to check that door again, Bob mused. Somehow it blesses ignorance.

## **Learning by Heart**

When the children of the Vo family visited their friend Jo's house, they went through a ritual of learning. Toan, Tien, Tie'n, and Ton would go around the downstairs rooms pointing and asking, "What is that?" "Where did that come from?" Jo would carefully tell them the name of the object or the country it came from or some other interesting fact.

After the circling inquiry they would then settle down in the rocking chairs and smile and rock and say, "Nice." They had not been in this country long, did not have a command of the language, but exhibited the polite inquisitiveness that they brought with them from Vietnam.

After rocking a while they would begin to sing the one song they knew well in English, "Jesus Loves Me." The first verse was sung over and over again to the rhythm of their rocking.

All sang the song, except Ton, the youngest. Dear little Ton had not learned the words, although she knew the melody. She sang words she knew, mostly phrases from "Happy Birthday" with a "Jesus Loves" and "Bible" tossed in, along with a few words in Vietnamese that Jo could only guess also fit her happy mood.

They left the city for a few days to go to visit others from their country who were distant relatives, and also refugees.

When they returned, the learning ritual was repeated, with one difference. Ton made it clear by her looks and gestures that she was ready to sing "Jesus Loves Me" all by herself.

The little three-year-old began, then floundered. Jo, wishing to avoid any awkwardness for her, said, "I'll help you sing." "No," Ton said, with that firm authority that a determined three-year-old can muster in any culture. "I can sing it!"



She began again, and again, and finally got all those strange words in the correct order. Everyone applauded and she beamed. The frequent rehearsals in the car during the trip had made the song hers.

## **A Teaching Ministry**

I had to be led through four sets of locked doors to visit Wilma. She lived most of her life on the back ward of a state mental hospital. She had been “diagnosed” as senile by a judge at the request of her relatives some five years earlier. The whole process looked highly suspicious from what I came to learn about her.

Each day she planned her day around the needs of the other women confined to that ward. Some could not take care of themselves and needed the help she gave to supplement that of the paid attendants.

She also helped organize the recreational classes that were being taught by townspeople. She assisted the chaplain in the preparation of the weekly worship bulletin, and sang in the choir.

She read widely and thus kept up on current events and contemporary literature. She helped teach the Bible class. She had a significant ministry inside that institution.

Trends in the care of mental patients turned another corner and the hospital was urged to find places outside for those patients who could manage on their own or in a nursing home environment. Wilma was one of the first to be notified she could leave.

I greeted her, soon after that message came to her, with a naive sense of justice finally prevailing, freedom near at hand. Soon she could be out in the world!

She had known this change was in the wind. She had thought about it carefully. She wanted to stay in the hospital. Since I knew that sometimes those who live in such an institution develop a fear of leaving, I pressed the issue. We talked at length.

No, she was not afraid. Perhaps someday she would leave. She was confident she could manage “out there.” But she knew those who could not leave needed her. That was really when I found out what she did, when I learned the details of her days, the dimensions of her ministry.

Wilma stayed. The lesson about ministry, however, could not be confined by four sets of locked doors. Many learned from Wilma, and I was one of them.

## **Through Her Eyes**

We were on vacation, spending a month at one of those church centers that grew up during the Chautauqua glory time. The center was designed for comfortable living near a lake, with a program of Bible and religion and “Great Preaching,” of family movies and miniature golf and tennis and musical concerts and...well, the whole range of light cultural enrichments.

My wife was busy being part of the music program. My boys were running from one thing to the next with great enthusiasm fed by frequent stops at the soft ice cream shop.

I found myself suffering from loose ends that turned into a mild depression and lethargy. I wasn't looking forward to being in this setting in this mood for a whole month.

My anxiety climbed when I saw who had rented the cottage next door for two weeks. Too many kids to count piled out of the two automobiles. Three adults were with them; two parent types and one grandmother type. As I

viewed this menagerie and had visions of noise and squabbles and more noise, I was dismayed to see the two parent types give the rest a fond farewell with shouts of “Have a good time. We’ll see you in two weeks,” as both cars chugged away.

All those hyper kids and one undoubtedly dear but overworked grandmother for two weeks! I wondered if I could file a formal complaint – or move – or leave. Just as I expected, the noise level soared.

What I didn’t expect was the action of Denisse, fourth grade imp, the one quiet part of the group. The next day as I ventured from our cottage, Denisse saw me, walked up and said, “I’m Denisse, who are you?”

I replied, “I’m Don. I’m glad to meet you.” At a loss for words in the face of this bold confrontation I said, “Would you like an ice cream cone?”

“I’ll ask my grandmother if I can,” was the reply. She could. As we walked off down the street toward the ice cream shop, she reached to hold my hand.

I got to know all the kids, brothers and sisters and cousins. We ate ice cream and walked and talked. We went to her first-ever concert and stayed for the entire first half. We played golf and talked about everything.

It was a delightful two weeks, turned to joy by a little girl.

## Surprises

It had worked with the Cub Scout pack, had made quite an impression on me, in fact. As a member of that pack, I had watched as the leader passed around a bundle of sticks. Each of us was given a turn at trying to break the bundle. No one could.

Then the bundle had been untied and each of us received one stick. We were then asked to break the bundle, each taking one part of it. It was easy to do, and the moral was not lost on us. Cooperation makes difficult tasks easy. So these many years later I wanted to encourage cooperation in my junior high youth group. Before we left on retreat I prepared the bundle of sticks. The first night, I thought, we’ll get off to a good start with this impressive object lesson in cooperation.

We sang some songs around the campfire. We played some circle games to have some group building fun. I read the scriptures about the Body having many parts, but all being important parts of the Body, all working together. Then I pulled out my bundle of sticks. “I want to pass these around and give each of you the chance to break the sticks.”

The first one tried. No luck. The second, the third. And then the sticks were passed to Ansel. Ansel was no Olympic weightlifter in physique – just a wiry junior high kid, with much more strength than I had bargained for. He grasped the bundle, measured the task, adjusted his grip, and snapped the whole bunch into two neat parts. The kids cheered, and my heart sank. My object lesson had just taken a twist I wasn’t ready for.

I think they knew as soon as I spoke that I was fumbling for words. I forced out my own congratulations and a too-hearty laugh. I saw my leadership role vanishing like a chipmunk on the run and my lesson going down the hole right after the chipmunk.

I gave in to reality and explained what I had intended to happen. The task that no one person could do could be done by all working together. It sounded hollow.

The best laid plans of mice and men...youth leaders and teachers...

## Was It Magic?

I was reading the Gospel of Matthew with a biblical commentator's opinion in mind. "This Gospel is organized in a manner that suggests it was designed to be a teaching text – a curriculum piece of the early church."

With the scholar's help I could see the books inside the book. I could see the grouping of lessons and parables by theme. But my mind wandered to the first time these teachings had been given by Jesus to his students.

How in the world did they learn all of this? Was it some mysterious process of instant memory, total recall? Was this a Spirit-aided bit of teaching magic, where a once-spoken parable was so imbedded in the memory that it could be repeated word-for-word?

If it wasn't like that, if these were ordinary students like ordinary people today, if they were learners with no special help or talents... how did Jesus feel as a teacher?

What did he do when his students were inattentive? How did he react when they got a parable mixed up, or left out the key part, or just plain forgot? Were any of them ever late for class? Did they have excuses for leaving early? Did some of them try to dominate the class while others were too shy to ask questions? Did some of them get impatient with slower learners?

Did Jesus give pop quizzes? Did he have his students recite over and over again in unison? If so, did they feel ill at ease when strangers stopped to listen to them practice?

Could each and every disciple in the inner circle repeat the whole gospel narrative by the time he was sent out to proclaim the good news of a Risen Lord?

Did Jesus ever say the equivalent of "Now, come on and pay attention. We haven't got forever. You've got to learn this and learn it well. You're doing fine but you can't ease up. Now, once again..."

Jesus, Master Teacher, did you feel the thrills and agonies of teaching that I feel?

## About the Authors

In 1969 **Donald B. Rogers** became professor of Christian education at the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio. He is now Cowden Professor Emeritus. An ordained minister of the American Baptist Church, he earned a Bachelor's Degree at the University of Colorado at Boulder and his Master's and Doctor of Philosophy at Princeton Seminary. In addition to teaching at United, he now serves as pastor of the Mt. Auburn Baptist Church of Cincinnati.

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