

Sonny's Story

**Welcome Address by Dr. Betty Siegel
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A Nobel Laureate in physics recently said that he believes the world is held together not so much by atoms as by stories. Stories do indeed connect us to each other and to our innermost selves – they remind us powerfully of who we are and what we can be. I think that we in Invitational Education need to be about telling and retelling *our* story – it is a powerful and important story, one that offers hope and promise in a sometimes frayed and anxious world. Interestingly enough, though, our best stories are really the stories of others, others whose lives have been deeply touched by a caring teacher, an invitational teacher. Here is one such story.

This story is about an 8 year old boy nicknamed Sonny who was in the second grade. Sonny's beloved father had just recently died and his mother had placed him in a Catholic boarding school miles away from home. It was deep in the depression-era in America and the mother had to be free to find some employment to keep the family going. They were really struggling and later they had to live with Sonny's grandmother until they could get on

their feet. At school, Sonny felt deserted, deprived and he became moody and withdrawn. He was angry, hostile and was constantly in trouble at the school; he even tried to run away several times but was caught and brought back. He was doing poorly in his school-work and years later observed wryly that he had accomplished what no one in his family had ever before accomplished – he was failing second grade. One day his teacher – Sister Augustine – came up to him and said, “Sonny, I’ve noticed that you squint your eyes when you read or look at the blackboard. I believe that your problem is that you can’t see all that well, that you need glasses. I need to discuss it with your mother.” Several days later, Sonny had his pair of glasses. Suddenly, he started to read well, to see the blackboard clearly. He started doing better and receiving praise for his good work. In very little time, he went from the bottom of the class to the top. He started writing little stories and poems for which his grandmother paid him. He was no longer a trouble-maker but now respected and revered both by his teacher and his fellow students. Those magic glasses. Years later when he was graduating from college with honors, he said to his mother, “Mom, I was thinking the other day that I had glasses in the second grade but I don’t remember wearing glasses after that and I certainly haven’t needed glasses in college. Peculiar, isn’t it?” His mother replied, “Sonny, you never needed glasses, your eyes

were fine. Sister Augustine came to me with the plan of giving you glasses; she thought it just might get you to do better in school and to feel better about yourself. Those glasses were just clear glass, what we used to call ‘coke-bottle’ glasses. There was no power at all in those glasses – the power was in you. She just found a way to release it.”

Years later, some 70 years after second grade, Sonny’s wife was invited to his old school to give a presentation. He travelled with her and as soon as they arrived he asked about Sister Augustine. He was told that she had died some years ago and was buried in the school graveyard. Accompanied by his wife, he found her grave, asked to be alone for a minute, and then dropped to his knees. He said aloud to her, “Sister Augustine, I really do need glasses now – bi-focals, in fact, and I’m sorry to have taken so long in getting back to you. You changed my life, Sister Augustine, you changed my life and I’m ever so grateful to you. Thank you for caring. Thank you for your kindness. May you rest in peace.”

That story captures vividly what Invitational Practice is all about – a caring teacher communicating to others their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves.

Oh, by the way, “Sonny” goes by his given name now – Joel, Joel Siegel, my husband, who is here today. I well remember the day that I saw him kneel at Sister Augustine’s grave. She ignited a love of learning in him – he went on to get a Ph. D and to teach and later went to law school and is now a sitting judge in our county. What an impact teachers can have on our lives. Indeed, they hold the power to transform our lives. The power of teaching – arguably, one of the most powerful forces on the planet.

Now, as teachers, we fully understand Gandhi’s comment that “the best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” We understand that meaning in our lives can only come through our relationships with others. Indeed, our lives are a web of relationships with others – in families, groups, teams, communities. We not only want to live well ourselves – we want to live well with others in harmony, peace, and mutually satisfying relationships. We want to accord each other dignity, inclusion, opportunity. We want to be what one writer calls “good weavers in the web of humanity.”

And we live in a time of immense need. We need to create for our world a better future – a future where we honor diversity, pursue social justice, promote civil discourse, treat each other

with dignity and respect, serve the common good, care for the least among us.

And in a world of hurtful division, we need to reach across the gender divide, the generational divide, the ideological divide and to unite in common cause. We need to cultivate partners and allies to shape for our world that better future. We need to create for our world what the poet Alan Brownjohn refers to as the “Commonwealth of Decency,” a world wherein all people, *ALL* people have a decent opportunity to craft for themselves a decent life of their own choosing.

It will be the mightiest of struggles – so struggle we must and struggle we will. In conclusion, I say along with the poet Nikos Kazantsakis:

I struggle to discover how to signal my companions,
To say in time a simple word, a password,
Let us unite, let us hold each other tightly,
Let us merge our hearts,
Let us create for earth a brain and a heart,
Let us give a human meaning to the superhuman struggle.”

TO THE STRUGGLE!!