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Near & Far

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Near & Far

Madeleine Grumet

Like Stearns, I also read stories to my children. I wonder if they, now in their 40s, remember the huge maroon velvet couch we would settle into to read the *Snipp, Snapp, and Snurr* books or *Mary Ann's Mud Day*. Rather than reading to them, their father made up stories for them, leaning against the doorframe or sitting on the children's beds before they fell asleep. And my father too told stories; he made up versions of Dr. Seuss's *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, recounting fantastic tales of the adventures he had had on his way home from work.

I did not learn how to tell stories until I had grandchildren. Here is how it worked. I had an old book of poems that my kids had loved that I would wedge into my suitcase whenever I visited Bella, my first grandchild. The inside of the covers and the flyleaf were illustrated to show the interior of a four-story house, with 21 children from infants to about eight- or nine-year-olds playing on the various levels. Bella named each child and decided that Stevie, perched on the third floor, would have a chronic sneeze that required frequent visits to the pediatrician. As her intense interest in the dynamics of the family (whom she named the Clumberstones) quickly eclipsed her interest in the poems inside the book, successive visits led to more and more elaborate versions of events interrupted by Stevie's sneezes. Gradually a formula developed: an outing was planned, and lost shoes, sibling skirmishes, and parental urging accompanied the family's departure. Once they had arrived and were engaged in an amusement park, restaurant, soccer game, or department store, the Clumberstones would freeze in horrified anticipation as Stevie's sneeze would slowly build until it exploded, sending dishes, soccer balls, cotton candy, merchandise, and the Clumberstones themselves flying madly through the air. Now a pretext for this ritual narrative, the "Grandma" book provided the occasion for our negotiations. Over the years, Bella and her sister and brother, Julia and Adam, would dictate the tale, in an extended dispute that I would finally, with impatience, settle by declaring that I was the storyteller and must be allowed to proceed.

Stearns's vivid memoir of reading has led me to wonder why I read to my children but told stories to their children. It will not surprise Stearns that I return to *Bitter Milk* (Grumet, 1988), which she quotes in her piece, for an explanation. There I surmised that mothers, engaged in constant and intimate exchange with their children, yearn for the presence of a third party— another parent or caregiver, a text, a world—to give them all a little space as well as the stimulation of the new. Conversely, following the object relations scheme, I concluded that fathers—more distant from their children—would yearn to be the authors of their offspring's experience, in this case becoming the source for their stories.

As the visiting grandparent, living in another state, I too author a piece of the world for Bella, Julia, and Adam. I am shifted into this role by my own desire to claim some part of their experience as well as by their exhausted parents' desire to have a third party intervene. And yet I am in constant negotiation with them as well, for they determine access, presence, and sometimes, texts.

I am intrigued as Stearns juxtaposes her own mothering literacy with her work as a teacher of other people's children. Amused by her account of her daughter's narrative assertions, I recognize Stearns's dismay as she hears, "Can't we just read?" from her students. In their request, I hear them clinging to their text as a retreat from the world we share with them into a place where they can relinquish responsibility for choices and escape the annoying requirement that they negotiate their responses with other students or with us, their teachers. They sound like children who crave solitude—not unlike my own students, university undergraduates, fleeing from surround sound.

After years of standing in the front of the room eliciting discussion of texts, I have exchanged this interpretive stance for a performative one that invites students to express their associations and thoughts first through movement, improvisation, music, or visual representation. And so I am not surprised to see Stearns's students riveted to the cover of *My Brother Sam Is Dead*. Tactile, vocal, and visual associations with text and feeling become vehicles that bring us to the conversations and ideation that Stearns describes as her students later talk about revolution and death.

I know that we are all weary of complaining about the ways that testing and the expanding core standards, in their obsessive focus on exposition, disregard these processes, but let me take this moment to think about the phrase that Stearns cites, "curriculum... is our way of contradicting the orders of biology and culture" (Grumet, 1988, p. 169). Written over 20 years ago, that assertion challenges me to bring it to this piece about the curricula of home and school. What are the accounting practices of our current curriculum craze contradicting? I imagine that this obsessive measuring, sorting, and blaming has evolved to deny anxieties about an economy that is not only flailing but also cannot be understood, successfully predicted, or controlled. Ironically, procedures that evolved to promote equity now stigmatize the poor through a revival of meritocracy fervor whose promises of credentials and security for our dwindling white majority are chimerical.

The curriculum that Stearns describes is not a part of this national clench. She reconsiders the comfort of her father's linear narrative, with its forward momentum that carried her to sleep, as her daughter repeats, returns, undoes, twists, and insists on detours. Stearns finds that mercurial curriculum again in her work with her own students. And as her piece concludes, I am left with the wish that what she has discovered in maternal and classroom pedagogy might be extended into the work of school faculties and their communities so that curriculum could provide a channel that flows from its loving sources to a larger society. Even though curriculum has always presented a world that is more clear, more certain, and more secure than the experience in the world that has authored it, if our collective deliberations about curriculum could tolerate presence, feeling, negotiation, and revision—endless revision—perhaps school might offer our children a place where they actually get to read, together.

References

Grumet, M. R. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.