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From Resistance to Rebellion, and Rebellion to Revolution: Notes on Transformation in First Grade

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**FROM RESISTANCE TO REBELLION, AND REBELLION TO REVOLUTION:
NOTES ON TRANSFORMATION IN FIRST GRADE**

jenna laslocky

It's late May and, as always, a sense of foreboding is taking hold. A sadness hides just behind every mark tallying the days of the school year, just behind every powerful conversation. There's a catch at the back of my throat as I read the last chapters of *Charlotte's Web* about the parting of Charlotte and Wilbur. The children notice, but don't seem to mind. We are all feeling things a bit more strongly than usual.

As ready as I am for the slow pace of summer days, I don't want the year to end. I don't want to say goodbye. I never do. The children don't, either. They never do. Certainly the reasons for our reluctance are different. With just kindergarten and first grade to inform them, the children can't know that everything will be all right in second grade—that after a few September hugs in the hall and an already promised lunch date in October, they will find themselves in whole new worlds that will satisfy them absolutely.

As for me, with seven school years by which to judge the future, I know to savor this last bit of time together. I know that I'll care just as deeply for next year's class as I care for this one, but I never trust this knowledge. Not when I look at the particular faces that are part of my everyday. Not when I think about who we are together, the unique nature of our collective experience, the things that have brought us together, tightened our bonds.

Some years, things come easily. On the first days of school, a gentle warmth sets its roots down, friendships evolve and flourish among children, among families, between families and myself. The spirit of mutual support prevails. Other years, our community is galvanized by a profound sadness—the loss of a child's parent, the reality of racism we witnessed together on what was supposed to be a benign neighborhood walk, the smoke and ashes and fear drifting over the school yard on September 11th.

This past year was, as I see it now, shaped by a sort of revolution that was initially harrowing, at times heartbreaking, and ultimately inspiring. I didn't see this back in November, when first asked to think about resistance in the classroom. Two months into the school year, I was for the most part witnessing the vital role it played in the children's transition to first grade. Many children were, quite appropriately, reacting to my authority, to the rigors of the workshop model across the day,

the abbreviated nature of Choice Time. Margaret used every meeting as an opportunity to shape her performance skills, drawing gales of laughter and routinely drawing attention away from any instructional objective. Thomas would spend Writer's Workshop discretely poking holes in the other children's work. William would simply remain in his seat when it was time for the class to leave for lunch or any other special activity. And certainly there were those early, more collective efforts at chanting, just as there are every year.

My feelings about these acts of resistance were, just as they always are, complicated. I was eager to establish a harmonious, smoothly functioning classroom community. Together with the children, I wanted to create a place where their hearts, minds, and bodies were safe, a place that was conducive to learning in all its forms. At the same time, I wanted the children to hold onto the unique identities that they were expressing through their rebellious actions. I wanted them to hold onto their spirited irreverence for the *status quo*. I wanted them to give voice to their wants and needs, to question authority, to test limits. The various acts of resistance showed the children doing just that.

This familiar autumn quandary was further complicated by my concerns about this particular class. If, some years, a quiet harmony takes root during the first few days of school, then this year started with an emotional upheaval as a number of powerful individuals bumped up against one another in a terrific clamor. Every recess was punctuated by conflict. Almost every reading, writing, math, and walking partnership wrestled with dominance issues, if not the actual outbreak of discord. And there were the delicate individuals. There were children new to the school and frightened by the vast expanse of the backyard; children with complicated social issues; children who wandered aimlessly around the classroom, frightened by having to make a choice about where to sit; and children who were, most simply, very shy. I was afraid that the clamor was making them even more fragile.

Given this state of affairs, I had to set aside many convictions and ideals. There was no room for the centrifugal energy of resistance. I needed to create a safe place. Perhaps later we could carve out a place for constructive rebellion. I was firm. Parents were contacted, behavior plans adopted, and by November we'd cobbled together a delicate harmony. Dominant figures were a little less dominant, soft voices were just a little louder. Things were still a bit tense. Unkind whispers punctuated meetings from time to time. At the end of lunch period, I was still met with a host of raised hands eager to convey to me the latest schoolyard or cafeteria infraction. But even if the focus was still upon the ways that things go wrong rather than the ways that things go well, at least we were on ground that I recognized and thought I could negotiate.

In late November, I was to learn just how fragile that territory was.

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I had started the year in the usual way. In mid-August, I, like so many teachers, had sent letters to the children introducing myself, telling them how much I looked forward to meeting them, how eager I was to start our year together. I had spent the first days of September putting children's names on bulletin boards, on cubbies, on the door, so that they would know, when they walked into the still-barren classroom on the first day of school, that the room belonged to them. It's what we do to ease children into our year together.

And of course, I know that I was easing my transition into the school year, as well: each time I wrote a name, I imagined a child. I pored over files, gleaning as much as I could from the information they contained. Of course much of what I imagined or deduced from the previous teacher's notes was abandoned during the first few minutes of the first day of school—a summer's worth of growth and a new classroom context had rendered so many comments irrelevant. Still, these rituals prepared me for the moment when I would open the classroom door at 8:30 on the first day of school.

Understanding what all of this preparation means makes me wonder about what happens when there isn't the opportunity for it, when there is no easing the transition. What happens for the child who arrives months after the start of school? The one who received no letter? The one whose name is nowhere? And what happens for the children and teacher who receive him? Certainly, these later-in-the-year arrivals have happened nearly every year. And usually, after an anxious day, or perhaps two or three, a child settles in. He has a partner to help him to get from one activity to the next, one place to the next. She has someone to watch out for her at recess, to make sure that she is not alone in this huge school. Partners become friends, and soon, the community folds another person into itself. This year, however, it would be different.

We were having our morning meeting on the Tuesday following Thanksgiving, when an administrator knocked on our door. With her stood a boy and his mother. Introductions were made, smiles exchanged, and I invited Jahnathan into our room. The circle of children looked on as I showed him an available hook for his backpack, and brought him to the rug.

A place beside me in our circle was the best comfort I could offer. Every time I invite a child to our meeting area for the first time, I think what little comfort this actually is, and how I, too, am a stranger. I think about how all of us, child and teacher, and parent just outside in the hall, are all bluffing a bit. We're all acutely aware of the position the new child is in, the sense of exposure he must experience with all eyes upon him, the sense of vulnerability that comes with such exposure. I was, therefore, reassured this particular morning, when I saw Jahnathan manage a smile and look around the circle saying our names as each child said his or her name.

What were his first impressions? What kind of culture did we represent? When he looked at the faces in the circle around him, did he see a group that was,

at least superficially, familiar and comfortable, or did we represent something quite new and different? And if we represented something new and different, how did he feel about this? Confident? Or again, perhaps, disoriented, even alienated? What about the classroom? We'd had three full months of school to transform its first-day-of-school barrenness into a place reflecting our individuality, our collective identity, and a customized version of the school culture. As comfortable as the classroom now seemed to those of us who had made it, it would have been unfamiliar at best to an outsider. And if Jahnathan were coming from a neatly run classroom where teacher-directed order ruled and carefully choreographed work hung on the walls, it might have been disorienting to see stuffed paper cats flying from the lights, paintbrushes filling the sink, and a *papier mâché* tree growing right in the middle of the room.

And how did these first impressions fit with all of the feelings that Jahnathan had brought with him that morning—feelings about his old school, where, just the day before, he'd experienced a sense of belonging, with friends in the classroom, friends that he met in the school yard at recess every day? Was there wary enthusiasm for these new circumstances, or did we represent a certain provocation, a longing for the familiar?

If the way Jahnathan were experiencing the first few moments with us was foremost in my mind at the time, it wasn't the only thing. The class had, as I've mentioned, only recently begun to manage itself as a cooperative community. I wasn't sure that we were on solid ground yet. How would the class manage the arrival of a new child into its midst? Would it be strong enough to embrace him? Or would it fall apart? And what role would Jahnathan play in this small drama?

After our meeting, the class moved into Reader's Workshop. The children scattered to their private work spots around the room and I settled in with Jahnathan. I wanted to introduce him to our workshop model and to get a quick sense of him as a reader. Although he demonstrated a clear grasp of sound-letter correspondence, he wasn't yet drawing upon an internalized sight word vocabulary or demonstrating many reading strategies beyond healthy guessing with regard to text in the earliest level reading books. We had work to do together before he'd find a similarly leveled reader for partnership work. All in good time. For now, I set him up with a small bin of books and showed him how to use it. Then I moved on to meet with a group of children on the rug.

After just a few minutes, a whispered tussle broke out across the room. "He's teasing me about my shoes," Asia said. "Shhh..." and then, a few more minutes later, another whispered tussle. "He took my book bin," Tim called out. Jahnathan flashed a grin, returned the book bin, and opened one of his books.

As I had been reassured by his smile during his first time joining our circle, I was again in some way reassured by seeing such acts of bravado during Jahnathan's first few minutes of independent work in our class. Through resistance to the established structures, he was daring to express himself in what was most certainly an

uncomfortable moment. I didn't—I couldn't—untangle the multitude of feelings he must have been experiencing at that moment, not only his eagerness to establish a more personal contact with children in the class, but also, perhaps, a sense of antagonism caused by the books in his bin whose every word challenged him, by the children around the room immersed in their books, by the workshop model itself. Even if I had paused to contemplate Jahnathan's experience, I don't know what I might have done to help him. Not without forethought.

I had hoped to safeguard Jahnathan's way through recess and lunch later that morning by asking several of the children to guide him through this often fractious part of our day. I had hoped that when I picked the children up afterwards, I would see him with several newly made friends. That's usually what happens with new arrivals in our class. Instead, I was greeted with a litany of Jahnathan's perceived misbehaviors, reported with all of the indignation that six- and seven-year-olds can muster when they feel their world being shaken. And, as I heard the snippets of what had taken place in the schoolyard, I could see that that their worlds *were* being shaken by this newcomer. He'd pushed them, called them names, said "shut up." He'd broken long-established rules, the rights and wrongs that held the playground world together for the children.

Jahnathan, meanwhile, hid his face in the crook of the arm he'd propped against the hallway wall. He shook with his sobs. My heart broke for him. In one short day, he'd lost what he knew, was thrown into this whole new world, and already, just three hours into the day, everyone seemed set against him. Standing in the hall that noontime, I wasn't in a position to offer much comfort beyond a hand on the shoulder and a promise that things would be all right. I was still a stranger and would continue to be for a while more.

I also had the rest of the class counting on me to enforce the school rules. I couldn't just ignore what had happened—not if they were to feel secure and sense that there was some justice in our world, especially when they, themselves, had worked so hard to gather themselves around these rules. The rules were, at least in those first few months of school, what held our community together. And Jahnathan needed to understand the parameters of allowable behavior in this new environment.

When we returned to the classroom, instead of the usual after-lunch read-aloud, we went over the yellow sheet of "Community Standards" that is posted in every classroom in our school. No matter how casually I put the need to go over them, something along the lines of "it's always good to go over the school rules, just so everyone's sure what they are and what they mean"—every word was an admonishment. His brow furrowed, his eyes still reddened from the lunchtime debacle, Jahnathan sat with us on the rug. He stared down at the rug.

As the days passed, a pattern of behavior that started on that first morning—Jahnathan's testing of limits, with teasing humor or by asserting himself physically, and the other children's reporting upon his every move—crystallized. It wasn't so much that Jahnathan was doing anything too out of the ordinary in a group of

twenty six- and seven-year-olds. He gently taunted, muttered rudenesses under his breath, pushed and shoved. There was, however, something about the way he did things that seemed to strike a nerve. Maybe it was just that the children had, themselves, been working so hard and long on the same issues that they couldn't help but notice their re-introduction to the classroom. I imagine that some of it, perhaps even a lot of it, also had to do with the language he used: when teasing, instead of using the more familiar "baby," Jahnathan would call someone "little girl," or "little boy." He continued to say "shut up" and that things were "stupid" and "dumb," and the children would react as if he'd just cursed. Jahnathan would also refer to skin color—not derogatorily, mind you, but honestly, though occasionally, incorrectly. This was very nearly a cultural taboo. Such talk, along with the pushing and shoving, seemed to reflect the etiquette of a different playground. It was something that the children couldn't reconcile with the rules of their own world.

Academic experience became another isolating factor. As teachers, we know that no matter how hard we try to assure children that learning is a personal process and occurs at an individual rate, it's hard to keep them from monitoring themselves, defining an academic hierarchy and locating themselves within it. As disturbing as this phenomenon is, at least it's usually a private one, and I can ease it by helping the children to feel successful, getting them in some way to the fun stuff. It is something altogether different when the children use this hierarchical sensibility to define another child. Because the children were watching Jahnathan's every move, they knew the kinds of books he had in his bin and that he was a little behind most of the class when it came to reading. He had a habit, too, of relying upon a neighbor's thinking when it came to written work. Copying was a survival strategy for him, but the other children didn't see it that way. And so Jahnathan's learning was not a private phenomenon, and in losing its privacy, it became a kind of platform for whispered disparagement.

I was painfully aware of what was happening and troubled by the possibility that our newcomer would remain an outsider in our community. Everyone would suffer this loss. I tried to buy time for the children to get used to one another. Afraid of the brutal honesty that might emerge in open discussions, I took a more teacher-directed route. I did a lot of explaining, both to myself, and to the children—giving the reasons, as I saw them, for what we all were seeing and feeling. We'd talk about how hard it must be for Jahnathan to join a new class after it was already started. The children imagined how upset they would have been, how they would have missed old friends, old teachers, had they been Jahnathan. We talked about what was going on at recess, what it was like when people only noticed the wrong things you did, how it could make you ashamed and angry. We talked about how hard it is to handle shame and anger safely. And if much of this went toward explaining Jahnathan's behavior, we also talked about how his behavior made them feel, how threatening the name-calling and pushing and shoving were. We didn't talk about how threatened the children felt by my apparent willingness to explain

Jahnathan's behavior, by my seeming switch of allegiance. I wish we had. I think it would have set a number of hearts at ease had we talked about my role as a teacher and as an advocate on every child's behalf.

When several weeks had passed and still nothing changed, it was clear that there was no buying time for this problem. No one was growing used to the situation. I began to realize that I was no longer watching the clash of resistances—the class to the arrival of a newcomer and the newcomer to his new class. Disparate acts of resistance on the class's part had coalesced into a rebellion. It was all very subtle: a visitor wouldn't have noticed it. It was, however, profound.

The more powerful social presences in the class, the ones who'd caused such a clamor at the start of the year, united against Jahnathan. Their antagonism was palpable as they fought fiercely for their places on line or spots on the rug, rolled their eyes at his every effort. What is more, these children, by virtue of their social power, became the organizing forces around whom much of the rest of the class gravitated. Many previously cheerful, easy-going children were swept into the maelstrom as they became eager reporters on every playground misbehavior. The children who didn't participate in the antagonism looked on in unhappy confusion.

I don't think there was anything deliberate or premeditated in any of these actions. Not in Jahnathan's behavior on the playground, not in the behavior of the rest of the class. The tensions seemed to originate at a deeper, almost unconscious level, a place where territory matters and where a sense of alienation finds its home. This made it all the more troubling. Primal as it all seemed, I didn't know how I could get at it.

And in the meantime, there was Jahnathan, bearing the brunt of it all. Naturally, as the behaviors against him escalated, so did his responses. A certain justifiable outrage began to reveal itself. Rough play at recess was replaced by all-out fighting. Taunting words were replaced by curses. Pushing and shoving turned to punches. The part of me that knows what it is to be an outsider wanted him to keep fighting back because I never did, the part of me that's a teacher assured him that I understood why he was fighting, that there was nothing right about what was happening, but that he needed to stop. Of course these were all just words.

I like to think that student resistance in the classroom serves as a vehicle for self-expression, fosters a healthy irreverence for the establishment, and, ultimately, provides practice in the shaping of political identities. But that's assuming the classroom environment is a safe and happy one. Our class was anything but this. I was frightened. What if I couldn't turn this around? What were the twenty-two children in my care learning? Again, I realized that my ideals were irrelevant in this circumstance.

Just as I had, earlier in the year, I gave up the explaining, the justifying. I pulled in the authorities—the assistant principal spoke with the class, while I spoke with Jahnathan. I was forthcoming with the parents who called me expressing their concerns about Jahnathan's behavior in the playground. For every time they blamed

the newcomer, I described what was happening. I was discrete but I was honest: not until the children showed some compassion toward Jahnathan would things begin to calm down. Of course I would work with him, but we *all* needed to work on the problem. I resorted to time outs, just because we needed moments when there was no strife, times when the children—all of them—sensed the safety of limits on their behaviors.

In the beginning there was no change. But with so much grown-up consternation, perhaps the children understood the gravity of the situation. Maybe the soil got loosened a little bit so that, slowly, change could happen. I didn't realize it at first. I have to think back, try to put the pieces together to figure out when and how the shift began. And even thinking back, I'm bound to miss a huge part of it. Here, anyway, is what I remember: Out of frustration because it seemed nothing was working, I asked the children, "Why do people bother to be nice to each other?" I think it was the first truly honest question I'd ever asked—the first time I wasn't trying to orchestrate order or compassion, the first time I wasn't in some way addressing misbehavior, thinking that I could somehow manage it. I needed to know what the children believed so that I understood the raw social and moral materials with which we were working.

I don't remember precisely what was said, but I do remember how everyone was listening, how everyone had something to say and the urgency with which they said it. I remember how the small bodies around me leaned forward in the circle. I remember that the conversation started with "so people will be nice back to you" and ended with something like "kindness grows kindness." I remember that I was relaxed—that somehow the ball had been tossed into the children's court. It was up to them to carry the conversation forward—and they owned that responsibility wholeheartedly.

Of course the classroom climate didn't improve immediately. But we all started to watch for acts of kindness and generosity. At first, in that typical first-grade way, the children reported on what they had done. "I got Emily her lunch box." "I asked Alexander if he was okay when he fell." But then something interesting started to happen. I'd pick the children up at lunch and I'd hear, "Jahnathan cleaned up the whole table at lunch today."

Jahnathan's inclination to help out was not new to me. (Nor, for that matter, was the fact that he introduced "thank you" to the class vocabulary.) From his first morning in our room, he'd always gone the extra distance to wipe down the desks, pass out folders, lend me a hand. No matter how publicly I thanked him, the children had not been prepared to notice or appreciate this generosity of spirit. And up to this point, Jahnathan's behavior at lunch had not been the best, even as the adults in charge had reported it to me. But one very wise lunchtime supervisor had thought to subvert Jahnathan's disruptive tendencies by drawing on his helpful inclinations.

I might have been concerned had Jahnathan simply taken on the task of being “lunchtime monitor.” I might have worried that he was isolating himself in an under-appreciated task. I might have worried that he was relying too much on adult approval and attention at the expense of peer companionship. But I began to notice other changes. When I picked up the children after lunch, for example, I was met with “Jahnathan let me help him clean up today.” Parents who’d once expressed their concern about the newcomer were asking me why the children were stuffing plastic shopping bags into their backpacks before they left home in the morning. It turned out that Jahnathan was asking the children who brought plastic bags for lunch table garbage—wrappers and baggies and such—to help him. The children began to regard themselves as a team—and one which received praise for their contributions toward making lunchtime easier for everyone.

Bit by bit, this cooperative spirit began to seep into the classroom. Instead of all the pushing on the rug, tussling on line, the children would save spots for Jahnathan. And he was saving spots for them. Then it was early April and we’d just come back from a fieldtrip. Lunch was late and picnic-style in small groups on the classroom floor. Jahnathan sat with Nile—Nile who’d been so powerful, so antagonistically disposed—and a group of other boys. They were talking about their lunches, the kinds of food they liked. It was an easy, simple conversation. And I realized that there was no newcomer, no outsider, just a group of boys talking. Perhaps there hadn’t been one for a while and I’d simply not noticed. But from then on, there was no one set apart, not in the classroom at Reader’s Workshop and at Choice Time, nor at lunch and recess.

Resistance, which had become rebellion, had changed once more, this time into a magnificent revolution. We were absolutely different from what we’d been—what we were before Jahnathan’s arrival, and what we’d been with his arrival. Whether we were aware of it or not (and I know a lot of us were not), we’d faced a demon or two and, in doing so, understood ourselves and one another better. Our differences remained as powerful as they ever were, but they no longer mattered quite so much.

And now it is late May, after all of this good hard work, after seeing what we’ve become, I do not want to say goodbye. I want to linger over this transformation, admire it a little longer. We talk about it sometimes. We talk about how we’ve changed. The children remember the cruelty of before and the tolerance and mutual appreciation of the present. I hope that they remember it always. They have the ability to change things, to change themselves or, more accurately, their behavior, and improve the world they live in. I hope that I remember it too.