

An Educational Autobiography

Earliest recollections of myself as a learner are interwoven with images of my father. Many an evening, I would be lulled to sleep by his murmuring while he practiced his diction in the living room of our Manhattan apartment. An attorney, he valued impeccable speech and grammar. I was fascinated by an adult studying.

I also remember my father dedicating an entire Saturday afternoon to teaching me to jump rope. I was a six-year-old first grader. One afternoon shortly after school was dismissed, he picked me up from school and had observed that I was one of the two “steady enders”. He wanted me to settle for no less than the full experience and pleasure of jumping rope, which included jumping as well as turning the rope for others. He did not tell me this with words; he taught me by example, to celebrate the personal exhilaration and joy of jumping with the blustery breeze in my hair, my heart beating fast, and a satisfied smile on my face. Through the decades I still cherish the feeling of autonomy and empowerment embodied in that single childhood accomplishment. *“The doer alone, learneth.” Goethe*

One rainy Saturday, my father decided that it was time for me and my twin brother Jake to learn to ride a bicycle. We were nine. He rented two used 20” bicycles and in the privacy of the basement of our New York City apartment building, Jake and I took wing. Jakey was soaring around the laundry room within fifteen minutes. I needed several hours to get the hang of it. I clearly remember my father watching us and smiling as if the only thing he cared about in the world that day was our mastery of the art of balance. I still recall what he said at the successful end of our afternoon as we ventured out into the quiet, slick damp pavement to ride our bikes. “Once you own the skill, you can ride up any hill.” I will never forget the first puddle my bicycle and I glided through. It was wonderful. My father had offered Jake and me an opportunity to learn a life skill and a lifetime pleasure. How ironic that I would lose my twin brother in a bicycle/car accident in 1993. I will always be relieved that my father never had to endure the grief of Jake’s death, having predeceased him five years before.

My father was also instrumental in our learning to swim. When we were nine, my mom arranged for my brother and me to take swimming lessons in a midtown Manhattan “YMCA”. Jake was “dog paddling” within minutes, but I was terrified of the vastness of the pool and repulsed by the hot, smelly locker room. I sat by the side of the pool for the full hour, and for the remaining five weeks of the class. No amount of cajoling could tempt or coerce me into the water. I distinctly recall my mom explaining to my father that the muscular male instructor had remarked--in front of me--that not everyone was meant to swim. My dad responded with a single word, “Nonsense.” There was no doubt in his mind that I would swim one day. My mom took me to another pool on West 23rd Street, where a kind, plump woman somehow managed to lure me into swimming my first lap in two feet of

water. When I balked at the idea of swimming the length of the pool (which would have involved 15 feet of water), my teacher Maria laughed knowingly, “Judy, when you know how to swim, you can swim in a puddle or a pool.” It must have been the word “puddle” that gave me the courage to do it. Her encouragement and persistence resulted in my love of daily lap swimming since 1970.

A teacher and Business Studies Department Chairman of the leading NYC Commercial High School during his tenure, my father instilled in me the excitement of subject mastery and the triumph of successful test taking that results from energetic and purposeful study. Together, we would create our own devices for memorizing material and understanding concepts. He always stressed growth rather than grades. In fact, when report cards were issued, he’d ask me if I was satisfied with the result. Then he’d instruct me to sign his name. I clearly recall always needing more time to understand and complete my schoolwork than my brother did, and it did not seem to matter to him. Though Jake and I were twins, our learning styles and attitudes towards school were vastly different.

As far as learning academics goes, junior high school was a complete waste of time for me. No teacher in Simon Baruch Junior High School aroused any interest in me for any subject and my only concerns during those three years were my deep friendship with Willa Weiner and a relentless, consuming crush on Tommy Ponzio.

However, upon entering Seward Park High School, I met the teacher who would move me in the direction of my destiny. Dagoberto Molerio, a diminutive Cuban with a dramatic moustache almost immediately compelled me to want to become bilingual. His Spanish was exquisite, his energy boundless, and sitting in his class was a daily field trip along back roads and highways of discovery that landed me in one place: wanting more. He seemed to care little about daily homework, textbooks and workbooks; his only demand when we responded was that we be audible and be able to defend our point. Even if our answer was wrong, he enjoyed hearing us think aloud. Interestingly, most of the time we corrected ourselves. I close my eyes and see him waving his arms around and shouting, “Tu opinión no me importa tanto como tu manera de expresar y defenderla.” It was he that instilled in me the conscious awareness of the *process* of learning as a factor in arriving at the product: the grade. I also remember that Mr. Molerio only returned tests to students who had done well. Tests of students who feared having failed were misplaced or lost somewhere. I never questioned this odd occurrence.

I entered Hunter College having chosen Spanish as my major with the intention of becoming a Spanish teacher just like Mr. Molerio. I returned home after my first day of registration and classes. My father was shaving in anticipation of a dinner date with a client. When he learned that I had registered for the Spanish course intended for speakers of English, and that it would be conducted largely in

English, he exploded. What happened next put new meaning and depth to the word, “proactive”. I recall sitting in a taxi en route to Hunter College to change my major to “Spanish for Native Speakers”. My daring to change—or my fear of disappointing my father-- probably inspired me to become “truly bilingual”. I have always wondered how he explained his lateness to his client.

During my undergraduate years, my classmates spoke Spanish. I was often lonely and afraid. I struggled to read lips, watch body gestures to help me understand, and I relaxed between classes with two American friends, Bonnie and Joan. Hundreds of hours I sat in the same college library booth, memorizing lists of words and idioms as seasons changed outside the college window. I remember time being punctured by silent shadows creeping up city walls and screaming sirens careening down the avenue. The wind whined outside the college library, rain pelted the windows, and I studied. *“The only way to discover the limits of the possible is to go beyond them into the impossible.” --Henry Miller*

While on my mission to master Spanish, I studied writing with a tutor and mentor my father hired. He had learned to write this way and he wanted the same for me. He maintained that no learning that mattered occurred in big classes. Individual instruction with a good teacher was key to learning that mattered—and endured. In her apartment on 57th Street with a view of Central Park, Mrs. Dona helped me learn the joy of committing feelings and thoughts to paper with clarity of thought and brevity of expression.

My husband and best friend has been my tennis coach throughout our 37 year shared journey of life and love. We are both so happy when on the court, me showing off for him and he leading by example, how to play with one purpose: joy and excellence: quintessential learning.

I became a teacher because the people whom I have loved the most were good teachers. They unleashed my power to trust myself and learn to live my own best life. Throughout my tenure as a public school teacher of Spanish and English as a Second Language, I have watched children and their families grow because a teacher teamed with them to build skills with strength and compassion, not fear and shame. *“Mastery has no place for misery.”--ljj*

Throughout my twenty-five years of public school teaching and fifteen years in the private sector, I remained true to the teachings of Dr. Harry Wong, Dr. Allen Mendler, Dr. A. Jersild, Rafe Esquith and Dr. J. Barell. As a result, I have proudly and successfully learned along with students ranging in age from two to eighty two.

B9 School is *our* school: mine and yours.

Something good is happening here! ¡Algo Bueno está pasando aquí!

