

## Summer Lessons

I began preparing to become a good teacher one breezy morning in May on Career Day. I was a five-year-old kindergartener in PS 19 on 14<sup>th</sup> Street and First Avenue in Manhattan. Our classroom window was open, and the patch of grass below it had just been mowed. The smell was as exquisite as the sky. **And equally unforgettable.**

My father, a master teacher and attorney, celebrated my choice of profession. After tucking my twin brother into bed that night, he whispered in my ear, “Judel, as long as you continue to love learning, you will love teaching and as long as you continue to love teaching, you will continue to love learning.”

Forty-two years later, I wish I could tell my father what a wonderful mentor he was. I wish I could tell him that my best preparation for ongoing joy of learning and teaching has happened on the beach throughout my life.

Childhood summer days by the shore were long. My family would rent a simple wood bungalow facing the ocean during July and August. The window by my bed greeted the sunrise and Jake’s window faced the setting sun. I remember the sky being on fire outside my window in the morning and it being ablaze outside his window as night fell. The screened-in porch was where we “rested” after lunch, Jake and I, while the wind and waves continued without us. At the end of each day, it was the same: “wash off the sand before coming into the bungalow.” We would do that in the outside shower attached to our bungalow. I loved how the sun leaked in between the cracks in the wood and the shower glistened around me, dancing rainbows. I close my eyes and see my mother sweeping constantly. Sand was everywhere: in my shoes, in my bed, often in the cheese sandwiches I enjoyed on a blanket held down on the sand with four big seashells at the corners, securing it in the face of strong winds.

Could it be that my creative energy was born on the beach on sultry sunny days while the sea crashed and thundered about my soul? If I didn’t watch carefully, the waves would surprise me and knock me down. Once down, I had to get up quickly and regain my balance or another would come and do it again. Who knew the surf was teaching me to take care of myself in the face of a bully? Like waves that surprise us, bullies have always been around. They choose their victims carefully; they seem to select those vulnerable to repeated attack without standing their ground. Could it be the Sea Siren of Courage was instructing the undertow to teach me to stand my ground and be firm in the face of difficulty, to anticipate the pull towards the black deep of failure, of addiction, of despair—to stay wary, not grow weary.

Now I know why my father, resting on weekends on a lounge chair, would reward whichever twin had dug the deepest in our competitive search for China. Sometimes, while digging I would glance at the horizon and wonder if a child in China was digging and searching for me. Would our hands touch if I dug long enough, deep enough? The Sea Sirens of Connection and Tenacity must have lived in the spray of the waves, curling

and sparkling on their way to the sand like white dolphins racing to shore, making the joy of purpose and sustained effort less lonely, sprinkled with hope undying and the belief that it is possible.

Who came every night and enjoyed the starlit banquet of plastic pail “upside down cakes” with a seashell “cherry on top” after I was in bed? Come morning, the hundred or more cakes were demolished or gone, and I ready to begin baking again...for whomever would emerge from the ocean to feast. Was the Sea Siren of Generosity cunningly spinning her wet web around my heart...when I was a little girl, preparing to become a good teacher? And, each day, as another sun set outside Jake’s window, I’ve always known that she was watching as I threw a crust of bread behind me that I had saved from lunch and listened as gulls would descend upon it, and disappear.

I’ve opened my own school now; this is my reward for having retired from public school teaching. And, after working with children or adults who have grown weary of digging, who tire of facing the bully within threatening to drown hopes envisioned on the horizon and splash salty sand on their life wounds, I close my eyes and see my father in his chair counting my sand cakes and my mother sweeping...and, I know there is a hand across the ocean waiting to meet mine, as we continue to dig to China, in July on LBI.

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