

Reflection and Prayertime: Seeing our Strengths

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Every year when school starts I think about the kids for whom school is not easy. I came across this story today by Joe Becigneul.

Gillian is a seven-year-old girl who cannot sit in school. She continually gets up, gets distracted, flies with thoughts, and doesn't follow lessons. Her teachers worry about her, punish her, scold her, reward the few times that she is attentive, but nothing. Gillian does not know how to sit and cannot be attentive.

When she comes home, her mother punishes her too. So not only does she Gillian have bad grades and punishment at school, but she also suffers from them at home.

One day, Gillian's mother is called to school. The lady, sad as someone waiting for bad news, takes her hand and goes to the interview room. The teachers speak of illness, of an obvious disorder. Maybe it's hyperactivity or maybe she needs a medication.

During the interview an old teacher arrives who knows the little girl. He asks all the adults, mother and colleagues, to follow him into an adjoining room from where she can still be seen. As he leaves, he tells Gillian that they will be back soon and turns on an old radio with music.

As the girl is alone in the room, she immediately gets up and begins to move up and down chasing the music in the air with her feet and her heart. The teacher smiles as the colleagues and the mother look at him between confusion and compassion, as is often done with the old. So he says:

"See? Gillian is not sick, Gillian is a dancer!"

He recommends that her mother take her to a dance class and that her colleagues make her dance from time to time. She attends her first lesson and when she gets home she tells her mother:

"Everyone is like me, no one can sit there!"

In 1981, after a career as a dancer, opening her own dance academy and receiving international recognition for her art, Gillian Lynne became the choreographer of the musical "Cats."

Hopefully all "different" children find adults capable of welcoming them for who they are and not for what they lack.

Long live the differences, the little black sheep and the misunderstood. They are the ones who create beauty in this world.

After my father passed away, I found his high school yearbook and there were the standard things for all students in years – a prediction my dad would become a farmer and a quote from him that said something like farming won't do you no harming and "if silence is golden, then William Helton is a pot of gold" or something to that effect. But strangely, there was one single student essay in the yearbook and it was written by my dad and entitled "The Grumbler" which was shocking to me because I never experienced him grumbling. I think he had a bone to pick and a point to make and I re-read his essay every year at the beginning of the school year. Here's "The Grumbler" by William Seth Helton.

I can't see why my class has selected or elected me to be the "Grumbler" when I don't even talk very much, saying nothing about grumbling. as the job is mine, I must perform in some form or

fashion. It is not so hard to do after all as it is kindly contagious, everyone does it. I have decided that this is a world of grumbles all crumbled together. No one is satisfied, but if one could find a satisfied person he would be a worthless person, so why grumble about grumbling?

I'm going to leave this school. It's too bad, but I just can't stand things any longer. I heard Mr. Mitchell say the other day, speaking of me, "His mind has just one dimension: thickness." It's not fair. I know a lot of things but they never ask me the things I know. They all hurry me, too, especially Miss Eva. She looks at me and says, "Do you know?" and then under her breath, "No, you wouldn't," and doesn't give me a chance to think at all. Of course, I never do know, but how can she be so sure that I don't. Tell me that!

I can tell all about the birds in the woods and the flowers in the meadows. I can fix a leaky pipe and raise a garden or even paper a room, if I don't have to use the rule in the book to find out how much paper I need. Honestly I know lots about such things, but I can't spell and the best mark I ever got on a composition was a D minus. I usually get an E in red ink. But I'm awfully good at straightening up the rows of desk and changing the water on the goldfish and going for the janitor when the pipes don't get hot. Mrs. Mitchell said to Miss Eva, "Thank goodness there is something he can do!" So I guess she missed me when I left her classes even if I couldn't pass the citizenship tests.

When Mrs. Neville would take the Science Class out into the country--she calls it a field-day, goodness, it's just a little stroll!--she has to ask me all the birds and flowers and bugs. She doesn't know one from the other, and she's almost--well I don't know how old. Seems to me I get most as much fun knowing what I know as she does knowing what she knows. Political parties and present participles and $x + y$ don't sound half as exciting as woodchucks, blue-jays and tree toads.

It's funny thing how teachers always act different when there's company. You know: Their voices get so sort of soft and kind---not a bit like what it is when we're alone and nobody knows the answers. Miss Lovey Raburn, our Superintendent, was in our room one day and I raised my hand for every question but Miss Eva never called on me. She never does when there's company.

Miss Lucy said the other day, "How can you get along in business, William Seth, when you can't even add in bookkeeping?" And I said, "I ain't going in business, Miss Lucy, but if I was, I'd get an adding machine and a bookkeeper." She thought I was fresh but I didn't mean to be.

I don't see any sense wasting so much time reading things in books. By the time you get something learned somebody else writes a new book and proves all you have learned is wrong. You can't believe all you read, especially what's in the papers.

I did like the poem Miss Eva read to us the other day, though, about trying to do hard things. It said folks should hitch their wagon to a starfish and try to get up and high and be somebody. Seems a funny thing to do, but she ought to know. I haven't any wagon, but could borrow one from Curtis, I suppose. He never uses it.

Curtis is a friend of mine, and we often talk things over. He's a fine chap. Curtis says the teachers don't like me because I ask so many questions they can't answer. They think I just do it

to be smart, but I don't; I want to know. I thought that was what they were for, but Curtis says, "No, they're to ask questions, not to answer them."

They all think I'm stupid and won't ever amount to anything, but I won't be discouraged. I'll just hitch my wagon to a starfish and show'em what I can do. But I'll have to leave school, for I'm wasting my time here.

Curtis says they'll be glad to get rid of me, but that's okay. The pleasure is mutual.

I thank God that we are getting better at understanding and valuing differences in human beings, being willing to see multiple intelligences, and embracing diversity than we did in the 1950's. I thank God for prophetic voices like my dad's and for little girls like Gillian who struggle to fit in but do not give up on themselves or everyone else. Thanks be to God for the mosaic of humanity and for the chance to freely be ourselves. Thanks be to God indeed.