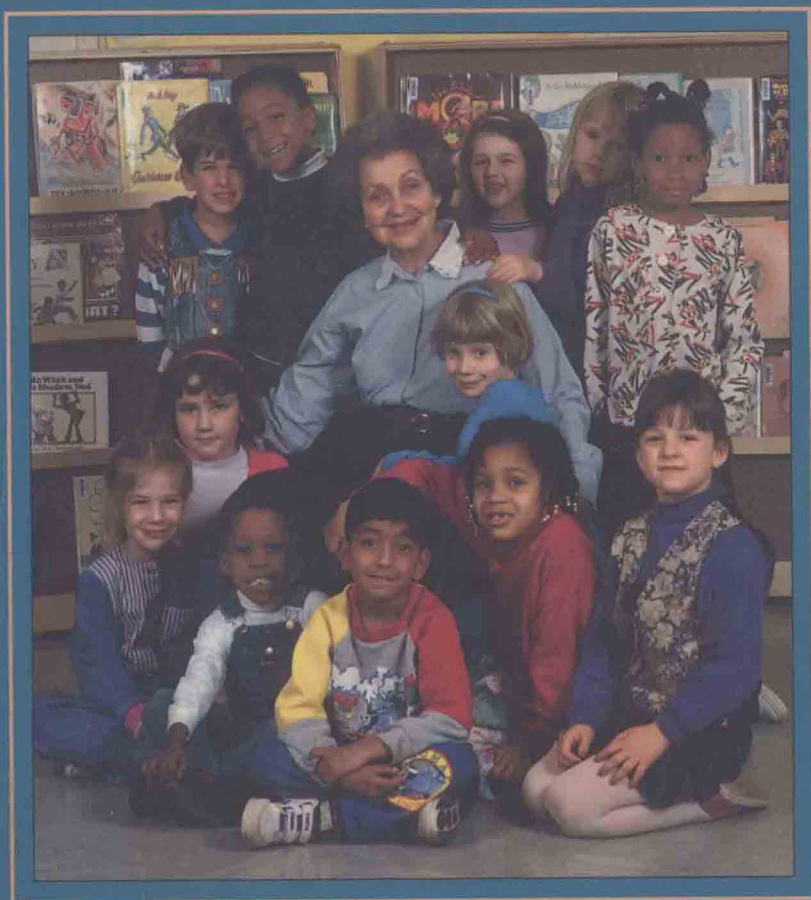


VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

White Teacher



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With a New Preface

Vivian Gussin Paley

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Foreword

JAMES P. COMER, M. D., and ALVIN F. POUSSAINT, M. D.

FEW PEOPLE CAN WRITE about serious subjects from a position of deep personal involvement and remain objective, insightful, entertaining, and wise. But Vivian Paley has done it in *White Teacher*.

Not since Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Teacher* has there been a book so singularly significant to all of us concerned about quality education. Like Ashton-Warner, Paley understands that children are surging, creative, energetic people who must channel their aggressions and acquire the skills of their society. She recognizes too that the classroom is a template, shaping children for adult life in a changing world. But Paley goes beyond Ashton-Warner.

Paley does not believe in preparing children for a society that is so recognizably imperfect. That would be a task filled with contradictions. In *White Teacher* she examines and challenges society's values as reflected in the classroom, not in a self-righteous and condemning way, but through the examination of her own prejudices, blind spots, and shortcomings that inevitably result from growing up in this society. She does not reject all that is old or traditional or lead a crusade against injustice as young educators are often prone to do. Nor does she discard proven techniques by substituting "modern" innovations for their

own sake. In her microcosm—the classroom—she helps her kindergarteners develop the intellectual and social tools necessary to face the world as it is and to move it toward what it should be. She nurtures them to be able to survive society's hardships and helps them to feel that change can occur—that children can live and grow together despite differences in race and social origin.

There is no more important task in America today. We are disturbed that more than two decades after the Supreme Court decision barring school segregation, schools, particularly in the North, are becoming more segregated than ever before. We bemoan school violence between groups that are racially and economically different. We despair because people who are different cannot live together in peace. But these facts should not surprise anyone. Where in the rearing of children do we ever help them learn to appreciate and respect both differences in themselves and others? Without this emphasis we cannot expect to have a peaceful, stable, and thriving heterogeneous society.

In spite of the urgent need, many of our schools run from discussions of racial and social differences. In the media, stories of racial conflict or even ethnic awareness activities are minimal. And in our classrooms textbooks replete with racial and sexual stereotypes are still being used. Until our own book, *Black Child Care*, there was no comprehensive guide for black parents to help their children grow up with pride in their cultural uniqueness in the face of negative societal attitudes and practices. Until Paley's *White Teacher*, few writers gave teachers a model for a systematic examination of their own prejudices or provided them with

strategies to respond in constructive ways to the natural and healthy inquiries of children from various backgrounds.

Paley is effective in helping people appreciate themselves because she respects human differences but is always mindful of human similarities. It was a relief, and a basis for hope, to discover that she didn't start out that way; that she grew to be comfortable with differences through a personal commitment to fairness and a determined effort to understand herself and culturally different people. The role of the black teacher in this book and Paley's openness in receiving help and insights from her are particularly significant. Too often white teachers ignore or demean the potential assistance they can gain from black parents and teachers in understanding the black child. Paley does not fall into the trap of perceiving differences in black children as deficiencies. Born a Jew in a world controlled by Gentiles, she has sensitivities that may be greater than those of many people. But the fact that she was able to grow and change is what is most significant.

Paley's most beneficent trait is her ability to utilize unspoken questions and nonverbal cues as an aid in understanding her pupils. With the help of games, play, drawing, reading, and writing, she is able to use her perceptions to relieve the children's hidden fears and uncertainties. No area of inquiry is forbidden. All of the transactional relationships in her classroom are opportunities for social, intellectual, and psychological growth. One can almost feel her pupils gain confidence and pride themselves as the stories unfold with suspense and vitality.

Vignette after vignette tells it like it is for the child,

his or her classmates, and the teacher—what they thought and did about it and the outcome. You will laugh at the things which make children all over the world funny and cute—good intelligence limited by the fact that they have not lived as long as we adults, have not gained the kind of understanding of events that we have, but have developed their own “funny” formulations of the way the world works. You will occasionally be outraged by their hostility, threatened by their aggression, and warmed by their humanity and desire to be cooperative. Paley’s understanding that her role is to teach, that love and compassion are not enough, prevents her from losing teacher-child boundaries and slipping into the destructive role of an overaccepting do-gooder who gives all and expects nothing, or who even tolerates abuse to the detriment of the growing child. She remains capable of setting limits and confronting children with misperceptions, misunderstandings, contradictions, and self-destructive behavior. Above all she demonstrates that you can maintain student discipline with a warm, fair-minded, democratic but firm style.

Yet one must be reminded that Paley was teaching in schools that were well-supported, primarily middle-class, and predominantly white. She had the materials and administrative help to make her work effective. Her classes were not overcrowded and they had a good cross-section of youngsters. Often she was able to enlist the support of parents and other teachers. The physical and social deterioration of an inner-city school might have overwhelmed Paley. This is not said to deny her skills and ability, but to point out that

effective teachers function best under conditions that support their teaching efforts. Many more teachers like Paley might emerge in our public schools if adequate economic and administrative support were given to the educational system.

As we read this book we were reminded of how important schools and good teachers are to a child and thus to society. Much of what is called bad behavior and social problems could be prevented or ameliorated if we had more classrooms like Paley's and if a larger number of parents and families functioned in the same way—with patience, understanding, and humanity. This book is not for teachers only, but for everyone concerned about the well-being of children. We hope that many people will read it.

Preface, 2000

In thinking about a new preface for *White Teacher*, I realized how long I have waited to describe a particular scene—one that most certainly belonged in the book. Why, I have often wondered, did I deliberately keep it out?

The year is 1973. A unique event is taking place at our bimonthly faculty meeting. Six African-American parents have come to talk about their children's experiences in our school. I don't recall how the invitation came about. The faculty is known for its liberal ideas and there is a long tradition of rational discourse in our community. That we happen also, with the exception of two teachers, to be white in a predominantly white school hardly seems to matter. We expect to be told, by this panel of black men and women, how well we are doing.

The story that emerges is entirely different. "If six boys are running in the hall," says one father, "the black boy will be singled out." Another parent is even more specific: "I have watched teachers make so much of what a white child says, then barely acknowledge the opinion of a black child. It has happened to my own daughter." And so it goes around the table, each speaker declaring the existence of prejudice and unfairness in our school.

We are caught by surprise, as though none of us

has a clue about the things we are hearing. "You're wrong," a teacher says. "There's absolutely no color line here. All the children are treated the same."

My colleagues and I become silent. The meeting ends without further discussion and we go our separate ways into the dark wintry evening. Later it is discovered that someone neglected to turn on the tape recorder. The meeting is never referred to again at school.

The next day, however, I begin to watch myself: Do I respond to each child in a similar way? What sort of behaviors draw my negative attention? The self scrutiny proceeds with no formal plan but is rather a collection of random thoughts and fragments of conversations on scraps of paper. I enter them into a notebook on my desk whenever I have a free moment.

This notion of collecting the goods on myself turns out to be strangely exciting, and, wanting to think about my interactions with the children more carefully, I establish an early-morning writing routine. The narrative increases at a startling rate, and not all of it has to do with the subject at hand. I never imagined that we did so much talking in the kindergarten or that there were so many things to think about in what we said to one another.

The children's words and mine were giving me a script to examine, and my desk at home became a place where I could relive each day's experiences. Often I would ask myself the question posed by the parents: Am I fair to the black children? But soon the issue became more complicated than that, for it was my tendency, I observed, to ignore anything about a child that was different or might cause him or her anxiety.

Besides race and religion, I seemed to avoid all sorts of personal attributes and family circumstances. The list was long; it had been accumulating all my life.

In the schools of my childhood, attended by the children of immigrants, nothing that might connect me to a certain people or place was ever mentioned. Whatever I learned at home about myself as a Jewish child was left at the schoolhouse door. Suddenly at five I became a stranger in a world that belonged to others.

The teachers defined us as obedient or naughty, fast or slow, popular or invisible, according to their preferences, and we accepted the roles we were given. Few of us were able to recapture our self-image while in school, and even in college I pretended to be like everyone else. Those of us who became teachers adopted the conventional wisdom that teacher knows best and fashioned our classrooms in the manner of those who went before us.

Then came the unheralded and now forgotten panel of black parents into my life. Suddenly I was eager to look into the hidden curriculum of one classroom and discover my own identity in the process. The narrative I began that year in *White Teacher* continued into the books that followed, each in its own way pursuing the original question: Is this classroom in which I live a fair place for every child who enters? Does every child and family have an equal say in the worlds we invent?

It seems right that the worries of one group of parents should have propelled me to such lengths. They were surely stand-ins for my own family, whose voices were not heard in those schools of long ago, and the forerunners of the hundreds of families I was

yet to meet. We have been learning together, on this sometimes painful journey, that until every story is heard and responded to, our schools do not fulfill the goals of a democratic society.

It is a long time since that unrecorded faculty meeting, but the story begins anew every day. A young woman not yet born when I wrote *White Teacher* told me recently that she was disappointed in something I said in the book: "Why do you call us oriental? That is wrong. We are Asian. Can this not be corrected?"

The change has been easy to make, but for me the striking point is that at her age I would have been unable to tell a teacher who I was or what I preferred to be called. The Asian student did a good thing. This is the way we shall advance, one voice at a time, explaining what is important about ourselves.

Every classroom in the land has, in a sense, its own panel of speakers ready to identify themselves, joining a communal search for new definitions of fairness and justice. The task is never completed, and we must be certain that we are all listening.

When rereading *White Teacher* I try to understand why I did not include the meeting with black parents. Was it that I still felt like a stranger and worried about what my colleagues might think of me? Perhaps it is the sort of failure that will always be difficult to examine in public. Yet I am convinced that in the recognition of these errors and omissions we as teachers continually reinvent ourselves in the classroom and thereby enable our students to do the same.

Vivian Gussin Paley

Preface

to the Original Edition

"WHY DO YOU TALK so much about the black children?" The question comes from Elaine, who is a student teacher in my kindergarten class. We eat lunch together nearly every day and our conversation usually involves two themes: What does it feel like to be a teacher? What does it feel like to be a child?

Elaine continues: "I'll bet you comment three times as often about black children in this class, even though there are only ten blacks to twenty whites."

"Why do you think I do it?" The direction of authority is always revealed by who repeats the questions. Elaine tells me she doesn't know my reasons, but she thinks I feel less certain in my judgments of black children.

She is only half-right. My uncertainties about labeling behavior and intelligence in general have been exposed by my dilemmas concerning black children. My attempts to help black children feel more comfortable in a white environment have made me more aware of the discomfort every child experiences as he realizes he is being judged by someone who does not know him.

The child has already learned which of his characteristics are seen as weaknesses by those who take care of him at home. Suddenly a stranger called "teacher"

is trying to find out not who he is, but what he knows. The further away the teacher is from the child's cultural or temperamental background, the more likely it is that the wrong questions will be asked. The child instinctively knows the questions are inappropriate but soon figures out that *he* must be the one who is inappropriate. Thus he begins the energy-consuming task of trying to cover up his differences.

Each year I greet thirty new children with a clear picture in mind of who shall be called "bright" and who shall be called "well-behaved." Ask me where these "facts" come from and I will probably refer to my professional background. Yet I doubt that the image I carry of the intelligent, capable child has changed much since my own elementary school days. It has been intellectualized and rationalized, but I suspect it is much the same, and that image was never black. The few adult blacks I knew were uneducated laborers and I never played with a black child. During my first ten years of teaching, in a southern city and an eastern suburb, I had a total of three black children.

What then did I bring to this integrated school in which I have taught for the past five years? My luggage had "liberal" ostentatiously plastered all over it, and I thought it unnecessary to see what was locked inside.

The narrative in this book describes my experiences with black children. In the beginning it was more comfortable to pretend the black child was white. Having perceived this, I then saw it was my inclination to avoid talking about other differences as well. Stut-

tering, obesity, shyness, divorced parents—the list was long. My awkwardness with black children was not a singular phenomenon. It uncovered a serious flaw in my relationship with all children.

As I watched and reacted to black children, I came to see a common need in every child. Anything a child feels is different about himself which cannot be referred to spontaneously, casually, naturally, and uncritically by the teacher can become a cause for anxiety and an obstacle to learning.

The role of the teacher changes. From the often negative function of judge and jury, the teacher can rise to the far more useful and satisfying position of friend. Strangers hide feelings and pretend to be what they are not. Friends want to know and talk about everything. It is a good environment in which to learn.

It has been useful for me to record my thoughts and feelings during this span of five years. We all have the need to explain ourselves. Teachers seldom have the chance to do so. Yet our behavior in the classroom becomes an important part of the “hidden curriculum.” My story, like anyone’s story, is a morality tale. You do not share your experiences without the belief that there are lessons that have been learned. And these lessons are invariably obvious ones.

The black child is Every Child. There is no activity useful only for the black child. There is no manner of speaking or unique approach or special environment required only for black children. There are only certain words and actions that cause all of us to cover up, and there are other words and actions that help us reveal

ourselves to one another. The challenge in teaching is to find a way of communicating to each child the idea that his or her special quality is understood, is valued, and can be talked about. It is not easy, because we are influenced by the fears and prejudices, apprehensions and expectations, which have become a carefully hidden part of every one of us.

1. THE BLACK CHILD appeared on the second Monday of school. I would be the only teacher in the school to have a black child. I had the feeling I was getting her because I was most likely to treat her properly. This, of course, was ridiculous. Alma Franklin would be in my class because I was the kindergarten teacher and she was five years old.

I had grown up in Chicago, but my first teaching job was in the south. All the years that I lived in the south I taught in white schools. This was before desegregation. I told everyone that I wanted an integrated class. Society forced me to teach white children, I insisted. I became the school radical, and had fantasies about visiting black children in their homes.

Even so, when I moved back north, it was to a white suburb. I was still teaching white children. The guilt was there. It had to be explained. Look, these kids have to be taught too. It's not as if I was teaching in a private school. This is a public school.

Alma was in my class for two weeks and still she had not spoken to me. She would not look at me, and she would say nothing but "Ysm." She liked the children and their activities from the start. Much of what we did seemed unfamiliar to Alma, but she watched