VIVIAN GUSSIN PALEY

The KINDNESS CHILDREN

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The Kindness of Children

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

White Teacher

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To my mother, Yetta Meisel Gussir	1



The moral universe rests upon the breath of schoolchildren

RABBI YEHUDA NISIAH CIRCA 250 C.E.

Time and place have lost their markers for me. The first Monday in September is supposed to end the summer and I should be in school preparing for a new group of children. But that was in another life when my name seemed permanently affixed to a kindergarten door. The days still begin with the expectation that something significant will happen, but there is no pattern I recognize and the pages of my notebook fill more slowly.

This morning, for example, my dog and I suddenly take cover behind a patch of tall dune grass while a great blue heron performs its dainty rituals in the pinktinted dawn. When Cass sees the heron dancing at the shoreline, a ridge of fur mobilizes down his back and he refuses to move forward. So here we sit while I count

the heron's steps: two up, two back, wing flutter, wing flutter, and repeat.

Perhaps it is the emptiness of the beach that heightens the heron's ghostly effect. Most of the houses are shuttered, their owners returned to Milwaukee, Rockford, Chicago, and St. Louis. I have come to this densely wooded peninsula to learn to write of something other than the children in my classes, but the transition is not smooth.

The stately heron possessively scans each approaching wave and I think of Harry coveting the blocks, Harry screaming his bad talk, fighting over every inch of territory. Grabbing and pushing, hot tears steaming up his glasses and matting down a shock of red hair, his epithets left me shaking. "Leave this be, you fucking idiots! Can't you see I need to do this by my *own*self?"

Yet later—how can one explain this?—he would draw pictures of animals running free and there were no storm clouds in his stories. "The sun is shining," he dictated to me one day. "The sun is shining. The puppies are playing and the sun is shining."

As if entering Harry's idyllic scene, the heron undulates its graceful neck toward the first rays of sunlight, looking like something Harry might have crayoned, an uninterrupted line of life and motion. How contented Harry would be on this beach, his castles impervious to



the whims of others. The tides would come and go, but if there were time to complete his work by his "ownself," perhaps that would have been enough.

The unfinished business of the classroom pursues me. I long to describe the bark of the red pine and the pale yellow mushrooms dotting the forest floor but classroom scenes intrude. I want to celebrate the fiery ball about to burst through the horizon and instead see the anguish in Harry's face and feel it in mine. The jailed and the jailor.

The heron is completely still now, one leg suspended in midair. Then, spreading a huge expanse of wing, it skims over the rolling foam, dipping its head to capture the fish of its choice. As deftly as Harry would seize the perfect block.

In a swift grey blur, the heron swoops upwards until it is beyond the tallest pine at the top of the dunes. Fingers of scarlet and orange cross its path like a divine hand carrying it aloft. Harry's crayon would be off the paper at this point and I can hear my automatic warning, "Please don't mark up the table, Harry!"

In October, I travel to London to address a group of schoolteachers. They might be interested in Harry and the heron but I've lost the urgency of the connec-

tions I made that day on the beach. I seem unable to grasp life's deeper meaning in the behaviors of herons or mushrooms. Only a classroom of children can organize my experiences into a story. Like a child, without a story I cannot explain myself.

On the morning of my talk, I visit a nearby nursery school attended by children of many backgrounds, but on this day another sort of child has come. Every Friday a small group arrives from a school for severely disabled children. None is able to walk or even sit unaided. They are pushed in wheelchairs or carried by teachers.

These four- and five-year-olds have come to be with ordinary children. Just to be with them, no miracles expected. A boy named Teddy sits strapped into a wheelchair, his head protected by a thickly padded helmet. This is the second time he has come to Miss Eliot's classroom and apparently he remembers that after the storybook is read the children are allowed to play.

Teddy stares ahead as if he cannot see. However, the moment the book is closed he turns to the young woman beside him, his head bobbing dangerously. He wants to say something, but it will not be easy. The effort begins in his torso, wrenches through twitching shoulders and flinging arms until at last a single word emerges. "Car?" he asks.



His teacher smiles at him and leaves the room, returning soon pulling a small red car into which Teddy is strapped and cushioned. A complex arrangement of pulleys enables him to inch along by himself and he pedals to a group of children playing store among a collection of wooden crates and empty food containers. Once again, Teddy contorts his small frame in order to speak. "Crispies," he whispers, extending a hand as if it contains money.

The Indian child at the toy cash register waits patiently for Teddy's request, watching him closely the entire time. How easily the children do this; even the most impulsive child is not uncomfortable with awkward mannerisms in others. Children are deeply curious about odd behaviors and seldom offended or worried by them. What a remarkable gift to bestow upon another person, it occurs to me, and so difficult for adults to accomplish.

The boy pretends to take money from Teddy and, in exchange, gives him two little cereal boxes, saying, in a clipped accent, "Here you go, sir. Two for the price of one!" It is a simple transaction, such as might be seen any place where children play, but the joy it brings to Teddy's face fills my eyes with tears. What could I ever do to cause him to gaze at me that way?

The sudden conviction that I am witnessing a sacred

ritual is unnerving. I want to remain inside this scene, watching Teddy's face, but I am summoned into the teacher's lounge for tea and conversation. By the time I return, Teddy is back in his wheelchair, passive and withdrawn. However, he will be allowed to stay for one more activity, something he has not seen before, and the events of the morning will take on new layers of significance for him—and for me.

Several children have dictated stories to Miss Eliot, which they are about to dramatize with classmates. In the first, two sisters find a bunny and take it home, a basic doll-corner plot, but Teddy is startled. His eyes open wide and his body begins to tremble. Pleading wordlessly, he reaches a quivering arm toward his teacher.

Edmond approaches them. His story is next. "Your little boy needs his car," he says. "He wants to be in my story." Edmond's story is about a baby bear, a crocodile, and a puppy frightened by a monster. "Your little boy could be the puppy."

The teacher is kind but also tired. "I'm sorry, it's too late," she tells him. "The van is packed for us to leave."

Teddy retreats into his cushions but by now others are crowded around. "He can't do this without his car, you know," they urge. "He wants to move by himself. We could bring him the car."



A look of astonishment spreads over Teddy's face. Can a boy in a padded helmet really have friends like these who need him in their stories and in their play? Lisa, a Chinese girl, takes Teddy's hand. "Pretend you're the puppy and you didn't learn to walk yet."

Teddy's teacher pushes his wheelchair onto the rug and the children surround him as the story is acted out. I cannot see his face but his muted cry follows the monster's growl.

After the van leaves, I sit at a lunch table with Edmond and four classmates. They glance my way shyly, waiting for me to speak. "In my kindergarten," I begin, "we also act out each other's stories, just as you do."

"With bad guys and monsters?" asks the boy from India.

"The boys like bad guys and monsters," I reply. "Hardly ever the girls."

"That's the same as us!" Edmond shouts. "What else do the boys do?"

"I'll tell you about one boy. His name is Harry and he always wants to build alone in the blocks." How odd for me to speak here of Harry, yet I really do wonder how these children feel about him. "He becomes upset and even fights if anyone tries to help him."

"That's like Rudy," a girl tells me, pointing to a blond boy at the next table. "Our teacher says Rudy needs

his space. Because he has special ideas that's private to himself."

"And he cries and squeezes us," Edmond adds. "Miss Eliot says let him have the blocks for a while after lunch and don't bother him. That will make him happy."

I watch Miss Eliot leaning over Rudy, explaining something in low tones. How does she know he needs his space, as does the heron, if he is to capture the prize and fly above the trees? Furthermore, why is she so certain, when others are not, that the children will want Rudy to soar heavenward every day after lunch? It must have not surprised her at all when the children begged Teddy's teacher to let them retrieve the little red car so he could move by himself.

Walking to my hotel, a curious notion enters my mind. When God promises Abraham not to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if even ten righteous people can be found, how differently the biblical tale might have ended had Abraham searched in Miss Eliot's classroom.

Teddy hovers over me, out of reach. When I had my own classroom, the children and I kept track of the ongoing narrative as though we were characters in a



novel, repeating each other's words, expanding the plot. Sometimes an event bound us together in such harmony that for a while we seemed to step to a single rhythm. We made rituals of these experiences hoping to recapture the original feelings, building our classroom culture layer upon layer.

Now the Teddy incident resounds in the same way, but there is no context in which to place the melody. However, two weeks later, in a California fourth-grade classroom, Teddy enters the conversation. I have been demonstrating the same kind of storytelling and acting he watched so intently in a London nursery school, and it seems natural to speak of Teddy into whom the stories breathed life itself.

From the moment I begin to describe him, a silence descends. The children's faces reflect Teddy's every joy and sorrow. Manuel asks, "Did they bring Teddy his car?" I shake my head. "No, they didn't. It was time to leave." The children's disappointment is visible; the effect of the story I have just told goes far beyond my expectations.

"I knew they wouldn't," Lucy says. "But, anyway, can you tell that story again?" Her request surprises me; I feel a sense of intimacy with my audience as I repeat Teddy's story and try to recall my exact words. "Those

are nice kids," someone says and Manuel whispers, "I love Teddy." Then, in a louder voice, "If I was in that school, I'd get Teddy his car, even before anyone could stop me."

"Me too," Luis says wistfully, but then he alters the course. "Sometimes people isn't that nice. They move away in the middle of what I try to tell them. Even I had a teacher to do this."

Marianne agrees quickly. "Yeah, people start doing something and they don't even care if I'm there. That makes me sad. And they think I'm lying, like when I say the ball didn't touch me and it really didn't 'cause I'd know if it did! They act like someone else is nicer than me, to believe them, not me."

Lucy is moved by Marianne's complaint. "You don't do that, Marianne!" she calls out. "Everyone remembers, huh?" She looks around the room. "When I came last year and didn't know English? She told me everything the teacher said, everything. And even when it was her turn to be leader with the jump rope she said, 'Let Lucy have a turn!"

I cannot mask my excitement. "But this is what happened to my mother almost ninety years ago!" I exclaim. The opportunity to connect my mother to Lucy—and somehow to Teddy—gives me a light and airy feeling.