

## Chapter 22

### *“... We Shall Have to Begin with the Children”*

MARY COWHEY

Mary Cowhey was a community organizer for 14 years. It was a life of commitment, hard work, and unending struggle. Mary was used to these things, and she valued them. But after many years of fighting all the time, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, she felt she was losing her humanity. She decided she needed to do something more hopeful with her life, something less combative, and more constructive. She became a teacher.

Going back to finish college as an adult, first as a single parent and then married with children, was not easy, but Mary excelled. She became an Ada Comstock Scholar at Smith College and graduated with honors, receiving numerous awards before moving on to graduate school at the University of Massachusetts, where she received a Master's Degree with a specialization in bilingual/ESL and multicultural education. Currently a 1st- and 2nd-grade teacher in the Northampton, Massachusetts, public schools, Mary has kept up the pace with breakneck speed: Besides a full-time teaching job, which she does with great talent and dedication, Mary facilitates workshops, gives guest lectures, and collaborates with her colleagues to help create a learning environment that is joyful, nurturing, and demanding. She also has written an innovative curriculum on teaching philosophy to young children, was filmed teaching lessons challenging gender stereotyping for the documentary “Oliver Button Is a Star,” and served as a consultant for the project, among other activities. Mary is particularly proud of having been a delegate to the United Nations World Conference Against Racism in 2001 in South Africa, where she visited and established contact with four schools. Her young students maintain pen pal relationships with the students in those schools.

In 2002, after having been a teacher for just 6 years, Mary was presented with the Milken National Education Award, one of only 100 teachers nationwide so honored. At the awards ceremony at the Massachusetts State House, she explained what she hopes her students learn in her classroom: "I think it is essential for all students to connect with what they're reading, write persuasively, question authority, think critically about history and current events, and consider issues from multiple perspectives. I want my students to speak well, to listen to and hear other voices. I want them to take risks to learn and be problem solvers." In her essay, she describes why she is guided by the words of Gandhi, also the title of her essay.

Sometimes I hear teachers say, "I just love children!" More power to them. Honestly, I do not love all children. (Doesn't that sound awful for a teacher to say?) Surely, I do not love all people. Perhaps because I have witnessed and survived much violence, I guard my vulnerability a bit. I am not mean, but I believe in being honest, being clear about one's biases. I can say honestly that I am *intrigued* by all people. Many people are interesting, friendly, and helpful, and they share common interests and other things that help us connect and grow to like one another. Some people are less appealing, because they are depressed or self-centered, cranky or angry. While I may not like them, I am intrigued by them, wondering what would make them happy. What else might they care about? Are they in pain now? Did someone hurt them before? If this person is unstable or sometimes violent, how can I develop a relationship while keeping myself safe?

Needless to say, I am not automatically in love with my students when they walk in the door on the first day of school. My goal is to love them and nurture them all, so I give myself a head start. I visit all of them at home before the first day of school. I spend some time just visiting, listening, getting to know the parents and guardians who love them, the siblings, grandparents, and others who live with or near them. Often the children show me something important, like a pet or a fort, a special picture, toy, or book. Sometimes they tell me something they really think I should know. One little girl told me, "I can read one word, 'the.' I think I'm ready for 1st grade."

I visited one of my new students, Ahmed, this morning. He said, "Would you like to see my room?" He led the way and then hopped up on the very tall bed. "This is my favorite," he said, and showed me a baby boy doll, with brown skin and thick black hair like his.

"What's his name?" I asked.

"I call him Baby Daniel, because Daniel sounds like the end of my name," he answered.

Puzzled, I asked, "How is Daniel like Ahmed?"

"I have another name, a middle name," he explained. "My family calls me Samuel."

We went into the kitchen to visit with his mother, grandmother, and aunt. Sure enough, I heard each of them call or refer to him as Samuel. I asked his mother why everyone at school calls him Ahmed, when they call him Samuel at home. She shrugged and said, "He has two names."

I asked him, "What name would you like me to call you?"

"Samuel," he answered without hesitation. He had gone through 2 years, politely allowing himself to be called a name he didn't use, unable or unwilling to challenge kind teachers and administrators who called him the name that came on the computer printout. Yet in the first 5 minutes of having me on his turf, having come to learn about him, he was able to use his precious doll to subtly teach me this very important lesson.

By the first day of school, I know where my students live, with whom, and how they get to and from school. I know the names they call themselves. Most important, I know who loves them. If on that first day of school, a new student bites someone else on the face, or throws a chair or refuses to leave the building for a fire alarm, I take a deep breath. I picture

that child at home with the parents or guardians who love him or her. I remember that they have entrusted me to teach and guide their child, and to keep her safe. I probably do not love that child yet, especially if she is hurting or scaring other children and disrupting my teaching, but until I grow to love that child, I borrow the family's love for her. I dip into the well that I have visited, without hesitation. In those sad cases where there is no one loving a certain child, I must find a way to start loving that child more quickly.

I teach because teaching is a job where you get paid to learn with other people. How cool is that? There are so many things I would love to learn more about, from astronomy to history, physics to geometry, statistics to botany, agriculture to ornithology, anthropology to geography. I could read books every day until I die and still not be done learning. I could read many more books at home than I can going to school every day, but it would be less exciting. There would be no one to share with, no opportunity to engage experts, no one with whom I could experiment and observe. If I read a book alone, without sharing or using the idea, I will forget it quickly. When I learn something with my students and in communication with their families, I know we will revisit the topic many times over the coming months and years as news articles, magazine photos, poems, songs, treasures, books, visitors, names of experts, and field trip opportunities keep flowing in.

When you are passionate about learning yourself, it is contagious. The learners around you do not necessarily become passionate about all that you are passionate about, but they learn to value learning with a passion. My third year of teaching I decided that it didn't make sense to start talking about civil rights history with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott. That story really begs the question, "Wait a minute: Why did they have segregation? Who made up this idea that Whites were better than Blacks and why did anyone believe it?" So we started to investigate the history of racism in this country. We went all the way back to Columbus and learned how he brought hundreds of Tainos to Europe as slaves, and how the Spanish plantation owners in the Caribbean began importing African slaves after their Taino slaves essentially were worked to death. We had read about the Middle Passage and looked at a painting by Rod Brown in *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* by Julius Lester.<sup>1</sup> It showed rows of heads stacked above rows of shackled feet above rows of heads, slaves stacked in the hold of a ship.

I had one student, Jimmy, who was very taken with this story of early slavery. Jimmy had a learning disability that made reading and writing very difficult for him, but he was a bright boy with a curious mind. He developed an effective strategy to help him learn. He would approach strong readers and ask them if they wanted to help him with his research. He would point out certain pictures and ask them to read the captions. Jimmy loved science and had volunteered for the job of keeping our beloved science encyclopedias in good order. One rainy afternoon during an indoor recess, I saw him excitedly talking to a student who recently had joined our class. Next I saw him very purposely scoop all of the science encyclopedias off the shelf onto the floor. As I approached to ask what he was doing, I heard him say, "They did the slaves like this!" He curled himself up and squeezed his body onto the bookshelf. "Can you believe it?" he continued, "They did them like they was books!" Jimmy grasped, and was outraged by, this essential idea, that for slavery to work, it had to dehumanize the slaves, that it treated people like objects. Jimmy understood that the institution of slavery required racism in order to function.

On the first day of school the next year, Jimmy approached me excitedly. "Ms. Cowhey, I went to Puerto Rico to see my cousins and look at what I got!" He opened up a carefully folded piece of tissue paper to show me an old-looking silver coin. "I got this where Spanish ships used to come in and sell slaves." He looked at me solemnly. "I think this coin might've been used to buy slaves." This was a boy fiercely captivated by history, a boy full of stories

hundreds of years old that were as real and as wrong as if they had happened to him.

Of course, we move on to magnetism or static electricity or the life cycles of plants or whatever, but we are always ready to revisit and keep learning. A parent of a student I had 3 years ago continues to rearrange her work schedule to come on each of the five seasonal field trips I make to a nearby marsh each year, helping us identify birds. My students call her “Mary, Our Bird Lady” and they write her notes whenever they have questions or observations about birds. They like her and some of them want to be scientists in general or ornithologists in specific when they grow up, because she is passionate about birds and that part of our class. You just cannot beat being part of a learning community. I hope as my students grow up they will be lifelong learners and surround themselves with people who keep asking and learning, inspiring others to do the same.

Last spring, my good friend in New York, Joanne, was dying. We had been pen pals for nearly 10 years. About a month before she died, I visited her again. She had just begun to take morphine for the pain, which had become unbearable. She had always been the better correspondent. She apologized that she could not write me letters anymore, because the morphine clouded her mind too much. I said that I would write to her more often and she said no, that she couldn’t read for any length of time anymore either. She said she was so bored, lying on the couch, just staring at the walls all day. I had read her a couple of poems that I had in my pocket and asked her if she would like me to send her a short poem on a postcard each day I wasn’t there. She said she’d like that. While driving to and from New York each weekend, I would compose poems. I also started walking more often, as a way to fend off depression and sort out my feelings.

I composed poems as I walked. I kept my promise, writing poems every day and mailing them faithfully, even after Joanne was unable to speak, even after she seemed comatose. Her sister, who was her primary caregiver, told me how much she liked the poems. I couldn’t help asking, “How can you tell?” She said, “Oh, I can see it in her eyes. And you know that one you wrote about spring snow, the two different ways? I liked the first way better.” I kept writing the poems and driving down to visit every weekend.

At first, I didn’t tell my students that my friend was dying, but I started to bring in the little poems. I wrote them on the easel and would read them with the children. They were so interested in the poems, sitting on the rug, closing their eyes as they listened, then sharing the images they saw in their minds. Inevitably, one would raise his hand and then rise, speaking with the urgency of a child needing to use the toilet, saying, “Can I go write a poem now?”

When the call finally came that Joanne had died, her sister said that she had just read her one of my poems that had come in the mail and looked up to show her an enclosed drawing from my daughter when she saw that Joanne was dead. I gathered the children together on the rug around the easel, on which I had written a short poem by Langston Hughes.

#### POEM

I loved my friend.  
He went away from me.  
There’s nothing more to say.  
    This poem ends  
    soft as it began  
I loved my friend.

I told them about my friend, and thanked them for their patience with my cranky weariness and sadness of the previous few weeks. The poem gave us a way to talk about friends and loss. I told them Joanne had asked me to read “Blue Jay Valentine,” one of their favorites, at her funeral. The whole experience gave me a way to teach the children about reading and writing poetry as a way to cope with and communicate about some of life’s harder moments.

I teach because teaching lets me think critically about everything, starting with the things I thought I knew. While I have heard of teachers who teach the same exact thing the same way every year, I take advantage of the cyclical nature of the school year to rethink as I revisit. Since I teach 1st and/or 2nd grade and loop with my students whenever I can, I like to build on student interests and class history from one year to the next. For the past 2 years I taught 1st grade, but now I am returning to 2nd grade again, so I can revisit simple machines, states of matter, insect life cycles, early colonies, explorers, and so forth, considering what worked last time and focus on aspects of those units I would like to improve and learn more about.

I teach because I was a kid once, and my mother was a kid once, and everyone who makes it to adulthood was a kid once. When my son was about 2 years old, my father’s house was scheduled for demolition. I went there and found an old portrait photograph of myself as a little girl, about 2 years old. I showed it to my mother and asked if she wanted it. She said, “No, I think you should keep it. This way, whenever you start to lose patience with your son, you can look at it and remember you were a child once.” It seems like such a simple pearl of wisdom, but as a 43-year-old in a moment of frustration, one can lose sight of why a 6-year-old simply has not done the required task. Patience, however, is only a little part of it.

When I was a little girl, I had a life rich with mud pies, climbing trees, digging holes, making forts, and trying to catch fairies. My teachers throughout elementary school knew none of this. Between paychecks we were short on food. Our house was often without heat or hot water in winter. This made it difficult to wash myself and very difficult to wash my long hair. I worried that my clothing smelled of mildew and was ashamed that my face would get flushed in the heat of the classroom. I wondered whether my teachers noticed and worried what they thought of me. What I remember about elementary school was mostly being silent.

I remember that my teachers talked about the Mets winning the World Series and about astronauts going to the moon, but we never talked about why there was fighting in Vietnam and Northern Ireland, why there were riots in American cities, why Martin Luther King was killed, what possible reason there could have been for inventing napalm, why the National Guard shot the students at Kent State, why Patty Hearst decided to join the Symbionese Liberation Army. I wondered terribly about all these things by myself. Finally in 7th grade I had a teacher, Rita Rappaport Rowan, who was willing to talk about the world and who asked me to write about my life, from mud pies to mildew to napalm. She read what I wrote, and wrote back, asking me to write more and more. She was the teacher I needed. She helped me find ways to make sense of the world and encouraged me to question everything, not just so that I could learn the 7th-grade English curriculum, but so that I could learn and learn and learn. I know I am not Rita to all of my students, but I know that I am Rita to some of my students. That alone is reason enough to teach.

My mother often tells a story about herself as a 5½-year-old in 1st grade. She was very skinny, painfully shy, with crossed eyes and thick glasses. Her 1st-grade class had 86 students. One day, early in the school year, her teacher thought she heard my mother using swear words. My mother did not know any swear words and never spoke in class at all. The teacher told her to stand up, marched her over to the coat closet, and shut her inside, saying, “That will teach you to use swear words in my class!” With 85 other students to think about, the

teacher forgot about my mother in the coat closet, and she stayed in there, terrified, all day. Not surprisingly, my mother did not learn to read in 1st grade. She thought she was stupid. Only later, after eye surgery, when she was 9 years old, when her aunt asked her mother if she could teach her to read, did my mother succeed. Every Friday night, she went to Aunt Mixie's house for a sleepover. Each week, they made a cake together. Aunt Mixie taught my mother fractions by having her measure ingredients and cut gum drops in small equal pieces to decorate those cakes. Then they had a reading lesson, and ate some cake. My mother did learn to read and loved it, and at 75 she still reads more books in a week than I read in 2 months.

One day I brought my mother to visit her friend, Betty, who is 84. My mother was telling Betty what it was like to visit my class-room. Mom said, "I just wanted to stay. I wished that could have been my 1st-grade classroom. She asked the children what they thought about things and then listened to what they said. Just imagine if we had teachers like that!" Betty shook her head and said, "I can't imagine that. All I remember of school was wanting to be invisible. All I wanted was to be unnoticed. I hardly listened because I was so busy praying that the teacher would not call on me." As Betty told her story, I thought of what it must have been like to be her, abandoned and abused, raised between an orphanage and her alcoholic father's place, not knowing what a sofa or a birthday party was, a girl without a doll or a sweater or a book of her own, with teachers who never noticed she was there. How I wish their teachers had noticed those little wanting-to-be-invisible girls, had made them feel happy, smart, listened to, appreciated, capable, and loved. Now I pretend that my mother and her friend, as 6-year-olds, are in my class.

In honor of Aunt Mixie too, we bake in my class. When I went on maternity leave, one student in particular was having a very hard time with the transition. A family trauma and placement in a foster home the summer before had caused his reading to regress from 2nd-grade to preprimer level at the start of the year. Eventually I had earned his trust and developed a good relationship with him, and he was making good progress. Although my substitute teacher was warm, wonderful, understanding, and familiar, he was angry at her because she was not me. He began a campaign to dispose of her, by taking her coat off the hook where I used to hang mine, taking her lunch bag off my desk, and so forth. One day, he disrupted her lesson, shouting, "I don't want you to be our teacher. You are not like Ms. Cowhey!" She sighed and said, "You're right. I miss her too. Let's all take a minute to think about Ms. Cowhey." She began writing a list of the characteristics the children suggested. This boy looked over the list and cried, "Yeah, and she baked with us . . . every day!" I laughed when my friend told me the story, how in my absence my baking exploits had multiplied and become so memorable.

I teach because teaching lets me fully be the person I am: a poet, a storyteller, an activist, a gardener, a baker, a naturalist, an amateur astronomer, a scientist, a historian, a philosophical thinker. Not only can I pursue all these passions, but I can work in the company of others who share their passions through their teaching: dancing, singing, language, traveling, music, raising animals, racing pigeons.

Last February, I got the flu and was out sick for a week. I was still sick on Valentine's Day, but I got up early and typed a poem I'd just written, "Blue Jay Valentine," on the computer, printing it out on a little card for each student.

BLUE JAY VALENTINE

Because you remind me  
to slow down and just breathe  
I am stopped short  
by the fluttering blue  
in the bare branches  
of a small tree  
between snowy ground  
and looming hemlocks.  
Then falling like blue meteors  
more jays streak down  
from the hemlocks  
to fill the fragile branches  
like animated ornaments.  
Above  
the sky aches  
to be as blue  
as just one feather.

I went to school to deliver the cards, and wrote the poem on the easel for the children. I was moving slowly, and they came in while I was still there. The substitute teacher asked me to stay while we read the poem together. As I watched and listened to my students pointing out their favorite phrases, describing the images they pictured, just loving up this poem they'd been given like it was better than chocolate, I felt much better. This is better than any award, I thought. This is why I come into school on my sick day to tell my students how much I love them. This is why I teach.

I teach because it is a positive way to make change in the world, starting in my community, but reaching around the globe as well. I teach the children how and why to compost and recycle, and then we practice it daily. On every nature walk we carry rubber gloves and shopping bags to collect trash. Writing to students in South Africa, they learn to accept boys or girls whom they don't know as their friends. They cannot tell from the unfamiliar names they struggle to pronounce whether their pen pals are male or female. They begin to rethink American consumption when they measure out a 5 × 12-foot house on the floor and imagine living in that space with a mother, sister, aunt, and two cousins, with all of the family's clothing in two small gym bags.

My students learn where to go for help and how to find out ways they can best assist, like meeting with the director of a local food bank, coordinating a drive to collect most-needed items, and pushing and pulling hundreds of pounds of food and supplies in wagons, carts, and old baby strollers in cold weather to deliver the items to the food bank themselves. They learn about keeping promises, even if that means delivering pies on a snow day for a community Thanksgiving dinner and volunteering to set up the tables and chairs in the hall. I remember Jack, carrying a pumpkin pie through the snow, saying, "You know what the Dalai Lama says, 'It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act,'" and skinny little Sadie showing her muscles to the volunteer coordinator, saying, "We can set this place up so fast because we are powerful!" I teach because children can learn to recognize and help solve problems, to care, to act, to protest, to be truthful and reliable, to take responsibility. Then, no matter how much is wrong and broken in the world, there is hope in these children.

I teach for all these reasons: so that I can make positive change in the world, so that I can live and work fully as the whole person that I am, because I can think critically and keep

learning, and so that I can be there for a child who needs me to notice, to listen, to care.

I teach because I would be foolish to think I am done learning, or that I could learn more by myself than with others. I teach because I would be selfish not to share what I have had the privilege to learn from elders, from books, from teachers, from nature, from experience. I teach because I am part of a community, a country, and a world that could be better. I teach because I agree with Gandhi, "If we are to reach real peace in this world, we shall have to begin with the children."