

THE SMELL OF THEIR TOBACCO

Book Review by
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<p>Freedman, S.G. (1991). <u>Small Victories: The Real World of a Teacher, Her Students, and Their High School</u>. New York: Harper Perennial.</p> <p>Rose, M. (1989). <u>Lives on the Boundary: The Struggles and Achievements of America's Underprepared</u>. New York: The Free Press.</p>
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I was thrilled, as only a child can be, to stay up beyond my bedtime. The television had been warmed up, and I sat in front of it, bathed, pajama-ed, and excited. We were about to watch a TV program about my father's teacher, the infamous Sister "Spike," the principal of the Catholic high school he had attended. She had been the subject of many conversations in our home, and I understood, even then, that the nickname, "Sr. Spike," while evoking a certain awe, was not a term of endearment. Yet, as the first nun in the U.S. to get a pilot's license, she was the subject of tonight's "Playhouse 90" drama, and my father deemed it of value for the whole family. As anxious as I was to absorb this piece of my prehistory, I found the drama flat, dripping, I came to realize later, with a nectar the media reserves for stories about nuns and orphans. When it concluded, my father mumbled that the story didn't indicate how mean she could be. "I would have gone to college if it wasn't for her," he said.

I didn't really understand meanness in teachers until I, myself, reached high school. As an extremely shy Freshman in Latin class, I drew the feared Miss Hambley as a teacher. She was cruel, punitive, vindictive, and hated. While handing back test papers following a nearly class-wide cheating epidemic, she tossed a test on my desk and said, "Well, I know you didn't cheat because you're

The Smell of Their Tobacco (Page 2)

the dumbest one in the class." In the weeks following her comment, she was hospitalized with a serious illness. I used to pray at night that she would die.

In a conversation a short time ago, the topic of Sr. Spike came up once again, and my father repeated, "I wanted to go to college, and I could have on the G.I. Bill, but Sr. Spike told me I was stupid and would never make it. So I didn't try."

I said, "Miss Hambley told me I was stupid too. I guess the difference between us was that you believed it and I didn't." The books by Freedman and Rose have made me reflect on that statement. It is true, my father believed it and I didn't. But why? Part of it is likely due to a different makeup inside of us, but I became convinced there was more to it than this.

Mike Rose's book, Lives On the Boundary, is an autobiographical look at his schooling and his teaching. He relates his experience as the son of Italian immigrants in Los Angeles. He is first stuck in his school's vocational track because his diagnostic test grades were confused with someone else's. When an alert teacher catches the mistake, Rose is promoted to the college track, but he feels unprepared for it. His senior English teacher, Jack MacFarland, stimulates him to achieve beyond his dreams. He goes on to college where his teachers also propel him forward in the intellectual world, but he finds graduate school too narrow and esoteric and drops out to work in the Teacher Corps. The remainder of the book documents his views on the dangers of diagnostic testing, remediation, and the class-laden scripts of our educational system.

Samuel Freedman's book, Small Victories, is a year-long look at teacher Jessica Siegel, her students, her colleagues, and her school, Seward Park High School, on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Jessica is portrayed as a gifted teacher facing burnout, burnout caused by mindless school and union bureaucracies, and by

the lack of balance in her personal life. The book portrays Jessica fighting uphill against all odds to get her students into college, which she views as their only chance to escape from a crime-infested neighborhood. Freedman thoroughly investigates the backgrounds of several of the immigrant students with whom Jessica works so hard. He describes her talented teaching techniques and recounts her heroic efforts on behalf of her seniors.

The two books echo a number of common themes. While lamenting the deplorable condition of their students' outer lives, both Jessica Siegel and Mike Rose express constant amazement at their intellectual depth, inner strength, and perceptiveness. Both demonstrate that if caring teachers challenge and "invite" students into the academic world, they will often risk those first uncertain steps. Both teachers demonstrate that it is possible to take students from what they do know to what they don't know in a humane and caring way.

Both books focus on the particular plight of immigrants in our educational system. I was especially intrigued by this because of my own ethnic roots. My grandparents were four of the four million Italians that Rose cites as immigrating to this country by 1920. I have heard the family stories about how difficult school was for them and how cold teachers treated them indifferently and even cruelly. It was easy for me, in reading Rose, to relate to the Catholic high school experience of my father, who was also the son of an immigrant.

Both books indicate how isolated and vulnerable immigrants can feel in our schools. Jessica sees that her students desperately want to attend college, even though "they are not sure that they can make it, or that they deserve it." (33) They feel like Anzia Yezierska's protagonist in Bread Givers, who says, "I was nothing and nobody. It was worse than being ignored. Worse than being an

outcast. I simply didn't belong." They feel like Rose's Lilia who said "we thought very low of ourselves."

Rose attacks the whole educational concept of remediation with its implied emphasis on disease and cure. He argues that this inclination to look for disease further alienates students who already feel isolated, defective, and violated. The remedial label leads inevitably to vocational tracking. Even if the vocational track were successful, Jackson points out, teaching "marketable" skills means that other things need to be omitted. The result is the perpetuation of an educational underclass, where students cannot gain the education they need to advance, and where labels prevent teachers and students alike from seeing the potential which lies within every individual. Too often, the remediation, which purports to help students, repeats the same methods that led them down the path of failure in the first place.

Rose prefers to call these students "underprepared" rather than "remedial." Underprepared implies an incomplete grounding due to cultural or language factors rather than disease. Underprepared insinuates a strategy of building up from a healthy rather than sickly base. It does not confuse potential with environment. He says that the problems of the underprepared reveal the needs of many other students. He wonders why we don't listen to all students to discover how they process directions and information, so we can determine how to better help everyone.

I thought of this as I crossed campus today when I noticed several dirt footpaths departing variously from wide concrete sidewalks and ropes cordoning off other areas to prevent passage. I wondered about the symbolism of schools building sidewalks that guide students along circuitous paths and roping off the

more direct paths they prefer. Do schools have subtle reasons for discouraging routes etched haphazardly in the dirt? Shouldn't schools watch where the paths develop and then build sidewalks over them? Instead, we build sidewalks along theoretical routes and rope off natural paths.

Both Rose and Siegel detest the diagnostic tests that examine students' sidewalk expertise while ignoring their capacities to create footpaths; tests that emphasize what students can't do and effectively rope off what they can do. Rose shows that students like Mille do very well on diagnostic tests if someone takes the time to examine how they process the directions and the information. As Neil Postman reminds us, the formation of the question largely determines the answer. Rose assures us that, if we watch and listen, "there will emerge evidence of ability that escapes those who dwell on differences." Jessica laments that See Wai will suffer on the Regents Competency Test because the test has "no place for insight and invention" and instead emphasizes the verb conjugation and sentence structure problems that afflict Chinese students. Jessica also hesitates to fail her students, knowing that merely sitting through class again will not help them a great deal.

Rose suggests that students gain membership into the academic world by "invitation." He describes teaching as "a kind of romance" which "invite[s] a relationship of sorts," where "knowledge gain[s] its meaning, at least initially, through a touch on the shoulder." He adds, "the more I come to understand about education, the more I've come to believe in the power of invitation." Teaching is helping students to develop tools and resources to become "members of an intellectual community" and bringing them "inside the circle." He cites the many influential teachers and professors who invited him into their circles. Although it

is described in different words, Jessica Siegel had likewise been invited inside the circle by her high school English teacher, Gloria Okulski, and she now extends her invitation to students like See Wai, Carlos Pimentel, and Angel Fuster. Rose and Siegel both illustrate J. Glenn Gray's belief that experience of community is essential to the development of individuality.

These two exemplary teachers (and their mentors) are contrasted by teachers who have no invitations to give. Freedman describes individuals like the Seward math teacher who was "a torpor so encompassing that he ignored the old sandwiches rotting in his desk," and teachers so misfit to make Jessica cringe when she thinks of her juniors "passing into hands so coarse and gnarled." Rose describes Mr. Mitropetros, the parking attendant, who had his class read Julius Caesar over and over; Mr. Montez, who was as prepared as "a doily maker at a hammer throw"; and Brother Dill, who was "a troubled and unstable man."

The contrast of the exemplary teachers with the incompetent and uncaring offers compelling implications for educational reform. Successful reforms will require systemic rather than cosmetic change, systemic in the sense of changing the fundamental organizational structure of schools and the fundamental attitudes of teachers. Institutionally, schools need to be smaller and more autonomous. The sprawling bureaucracies of the NYC schools and the UFT have a paralyzing and demoralizing effect on its teachers, who become mere "employees" because that is how they are treated. School systems need to be able to fire teachers whose sandwiches rot in their desks and reward teachers who feed their students. Individual teachers need to focus on the student instead of the curriculum. To plan a trip, it is necessary to know where we are going, but it is equally important to know where we ARE. Class sizes need somehow to be reduced so teachers can

get to know and understand a student's "starting point," implementing key ideas of Dewey and Bruner. Once we find the locus of each student, we need to invite him/her into our world.

I understand more clearly now why I didn't believe Miss Hambley. Yes, there was something in me that knew she was just mean-spirited; something that knew she didn't know anything about me, mistaking quiet for dumb; something ... that knew she was just plain wrong. But her words still stung and created doubt, and I suspect I looked to teachers around me for sometime afterward to see which of us was right. But I was lucky. In high school, Miss Brezinski read my paper to the English class and told my parents that their son had a real talent (even if she "wasn't quite sure what it was"); and Mr. Kowolski chided me for not taking more math since I was doing so well in his *Geometry* class. In college, Mrs. Davis exempted me from her regular writing assignments because she felt "they were beneath my abilities"; Dr. Browning invited me into his home to discuss philosophy; Dr. Mehoke thanked me for being in his John Milton class; and Dr. Sheehan called me to his office to prod me toward graduate school because he was impressed with my classwork. Rose says his teachers invited him to "enter into conversations" with them. He got to know them so well that he "could smell their tobacco and see the nicks left by their razors." I was so fortunate to have many such invitations. I am thankful that so many of my teachers permitted me to smell their tobacco and to see their nicks. THAT is the main reason I didn't believe Miss Hambley -- she was a lone voice in the wilderness.

So I wonder. I wonder what could have happened if there had been even one voice to counter the stamp Sr. Spike had placed on my father. Her few words changed his life. Maybe an invitation from another teacher could have balanced,

The Smell of Their Tobacco (Page 8)

even canceled, them out. If only someone had cared enough to entice him with the smell of their tobacco