



Faces of Learning



50 POWERFUL STORIES *of*
DEFINING MOMENTS
in EDUCATION



SAM
CHALTAİN
EDITOR



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For our teachers

Inspiration, hunger: these are the qualities that drive good schools. The best we educational planners can do is to create the most likely conditions for them to flourish, and then get out of their way.

—Ted Sizer

Introduction

This is a book of different people's stories.

Some are about teachers who changed their students' lives. Some describe the moment when a person first discovered how to ask the right questions, or found what they were most passionate about. Others are about making art, or going on a challenging hike, or studying everything from Morse code to *Macbeth* to kung fu. But all of the stories in this collection are about one central thing—*learning*—and what it feels like to discover one's purpose, passion, and capacity for greatness.

The fifty stories gathered here were submitted, along with hundreds of others, as part of a national grassroots effort to change the tenor of our national conversation about schooling by shifting it from a culture of testing—in which we overvalue basic-skills reading and math scores and undervalue just about everything else—to a culture of learning, in which we restore our collective focus on the core conditions of a powerful learning environment. Our goal is to help people define what makes for powerful learning experiences, and work backward from there to decide how best to evaluate and improve our schools, our educators, and the progress of our nation's schoolchildren.

In sharing their stories, our authors—who range from students to social workers to the Secretary of Education himself—were responding to one of two simple prompts:

- 1.** What was your most powerful personal experience in a learning community—regardless of whether that experience took place inside or outside of school?
- 2.** Who was your most effective teacher, and what was it about that person that made him or her so effective?

The purpose in asking these questions was twofold: first, to give people an opportunity to reflect on what they already know to be true about powerful learning and teaching (rather than telling them what some “expert” thinks it is); and, second, to use the insights from these stories to help people see more clearly what a powerful learning environment actually *looks like*—and what it requires.

Based on those insights, the stories in this book are divided into five sections: Challenging, Engaging, Supportive, Relevant, and Experiential. As you read them, you'll see that most of the stories could have been listed in several categories. I hope you'll also imagine how the insights they provide can be used to strengthen the learning cultures of the schools in your neighborhood. Rather than viewing each story as a “best practice” that should be replicated and scaled up, I encourage you to think instead of how these authors’ collective wisdom clarifies a “best question” we should ask whenever we want to improve our schools: How can we make schools that are more challenging, engaging, supportive, relevant, and experiential?

Now, more than ever, our country needs these sorts of schools. Unlike any other pillar of our society, public education is the only institution that reaches 90 percent of every new generation, is governed by public authority, and was founded with the explicit mission of preparing young people to be thoughtful and active participants in a democratic society. And, as these stories illuminate, the good news is that the business of improving our schools doesn't need to be a tiresome, desperate, and futile task; it can be a collaborative, risky, and deeply fulfilling journey that results in us better understanding ourselves—and each other.

I hope you enjoy the stories that follow. Consider putting some of the recommendations we provide at the end of each chapter into action in your life and in your community. And please take the time to share your own story, and read the stories of others at www.facesoflearning.net.

Chapter One



A summer art class. The United States Army. The halls of an urban elementary school. A colored high school in Apartheid-era South Africa. The streets of Philadelphia. A church basement. And three separate classrooms where it was impossible to hide.

As these stories remind us, the best learning experiences are never the easy ones. It's only when we're challenged beyond our usual limits that we have the possibility of

discovering something new about ourselves, each other, and the larger world.

Meaningful learning can be risky, difficult, and sometimes painful. It can also be the moment when we first discover what we're capable of, and why we can never go back to the way we were before.

Jenna Fournel



Hometown: Castro Valley, California

Job title: director of communications and outreach, Center for Inspired Teaching

Current home: Alexandria, Virginia

My ideal school is a place where: children's imaginations are revered and their individuality is honored

My personal heroes: my parents, who were my first teachers; my husband, who is a teacher; and my two-year-old son, who is my current teacher

My personal motto: No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

My idea of perfect happiness: watching my son discover the world; through him I am learning about it all over again

My present state of mind: agitated by the slow pace of progress

My greatest achievement: raising a kind and gentle human being

Quotable: “The teacher who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind.”—Kahlil Gibran

When I was seventeen, I went to the Rhode Island School of Design for a summer pre-college program. I went there to see what it would be like to be an art student and to experience life away from my family for the first time. I was a fairly sheltered child, a do-gooder who thrived on pleasing the adults in my life. As a strong student, I was unaccustomed to failure or, really, even challenge. So, understandably, many things happened that summer that would qualify as powerful learning experiences. But the one that sticks with me to this day happened in the drawing class of Bo Joseph.

Bo was an almost stereotypical artist-teacher, with his exclusively black wardrobe, passionate but sparse speech, and infuriatingly mysterious instructional style. He would give us enigmatic assignments like: “Go outside. Find something. Make a drawing with it.” In my quest to please my instructor I would stress over the specifics of each direction, vacillating between thinking I was supposed to take them literally and searching for the higher symbolic meaning in his words. My peers did not seem so encumbered. They'd return in minutes with dog feces and popsicle sticks, creating bizarre abstract pieces that always seemed to get Bo's nodding approval. I would sit in a corner trying to draw a bird's nest with a broken twig and he would hardly give me the time of day. “That's not quite it,” he would frequently say of my pieces. “I'm not seeing your inspiration yet. Keep looking.”

My anxiety about his class grew and grew with each assignment as I agonized over how to create what he wanted—and fell flat every time. I was baffled by the ease with which it seemed my colleagues were grasping Bo's ideas and my apparent inability to create anything that would warrant even a grunt of approval.

Finally the last day of class came, and we were to work with a live model for the first time. Bo's instructions were predictably vague: “Create.” Nearly in tears, I gave up. I found my favorite corner; pulled out a large sheet of paper, a jar of gesso, and some crusty watercolor paints; looked at the model for a few moments; and started to move the paint around the paper. For the first time all summer I lost track of the students around me, lost track of time, lost track of that tall figure in black for whom I'd failed in every artistic performance. It was just me, the model, the paint, and something in my head that was telling me what to do. “Finally,” said a voice out of nowhere. I awoke from my reverie to see a familiar shadow across the page. I looked up at Bo and cowered in anticipation of his critique. He lowered himself to my level and looked straight into my eyes. “You've heard your inner voice,” he said. “Now don't you ever, *ever*, stop listening.”

Years later, after being a teacher myself, I know that Bo took on a brave experiment with me. I like to believe he knew it would work, but I shudder to think what I would have become without the breakthrough he inspired. He saw that my desire to please was hampering my ability to create and he pushed and pushed and pushed until I got past the quest for outside approval and found my inner self. The picture is nothing outstanding. It's a reclining nude made of thick gesso with green and blue watercolor paint that has fallen into various scratches and recesses along the form. But I consider it the first piece of art I ever created.

Mark Rockeymoore



Hometown: Paducah, Texas

Job title: consultant, Earth Node GIS

Current home: Montreal, Quebec

My ideal school is a place where: learning is emphasized as a lifelong process, and the skills for living a life of curiosity and exploration are fostered from the earliest ages

My personal heroes: my parents, sacrificial avatars, children from abusive backgrounds

My personal motto: life in the now

My idea of perfect happiness: perfect peace

My present state of mind: manifesting innate potential

My greatest achievement: fatherhood

Quotable: If you feel what I'm saying, it means that somewhere within you, you already know it as truth.

In 1987, when I was a very young man, I joined the army and went to basic training at Fort Jackson in Columbia, South Carolina, and then advanced individual training at the signal center in Augusta, Georgia. I did well on the Army Services Vocational Aptitude Battery and chose to train as a single-channel radio operator, which was a combat military occupational specialty that also gave me access to both the

GI Bill and the Army College Fund. I was also chosen to learn International Morse Code (IMC), which was an additional skill identifier. That course was one month long and consisted of sitting at a desk wearing headphones and armed with a Morse code tapper of Vietnam War vintage. I proceeded to embark upon an amazing inner journey.

The training regime was relaxed. In the first week, we were responsible for tapping out and being able to interpret three groups, repeating what we heard in our headphones. Each group consisted of five dits and dashes (didadadittydadadittyda) that represented numbers and letters. The second week we were responsible for three more, and so on, until the final group of ten that we had to learn in order to pass the course and become certified in IMC.

The first week was simple enough. I was, along with everyone else, progressing normally, and we made our quota. Then, late in the second week, something happened: I progressed from three to twelve groups in the space of fifteen minutes. The sergeant, who had been teaching there for twelve years, could not—would not—believe I'd never learned Morse code before. I remember the room was dark, our desks were side by side, and the groups blended together like a song. One moment I was listening and tapping code, understanding some and having to think to get the meanings of other letters and numbers, engaging in the reminiscence and recognition pattern that typifies all rote memorization learning methods. And then at some point I entered a mode of reverie, where the dits and dashes were only audible as echoes, as my mind blurred the distinction and what had been aural became graphical—there was an actual, physical bending of mental space as if I'd flexed a previously unknown muscle and switched over to another mode where, suddenly, there appeared a depiction of Morse code in a perfect pattern of resonance and