

***Putting Literacy in Its Place*¹**

*From ordinary to special to treacherous—a story
of literacy in three generations of an
American family.*

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This is a story about one family's literacy in the twentieth century. It is the family I have shared with my parents, my brothers and sisters, and our children: the McDermotts of South Queens County, New York City. Across three generations, we went from literacy as ordinary, to literacy as special, to literacy as treacherous. For my parent's generation, literacy was available and used in the course of life. My generation of readers and writers had to hit the books much harder; we were promised success, and literacy and degrees were the key, the more degrees the better. The third generation has been promised perhaps even more opportunity, but given more constraints. Again reading and writing have been the key, and not just the more the better, but the earlier the better. Children must now jump over early hurdles, and, if they stumble, they may fall permanently behind in the race to success. This is a new kind of pressure, worked through a new kind of literacy. It is literacy out of place.

This story is partial, but revealing. No one in my family would write the same story, but the overall pattern is clear. My father could not have been called LD when he was a boy. The term did not exist then, but its application is the over-determined fate of his grandchildren. Similarly, there is little way for most of his grandchildren to believe what their parents believed easily, namely, that if they studied just a little harder everything might come their way. These big changes are not peculiar to my family. We are part of one systemic turn in the history of learning to read and write in a self-ascribed

meritocracy. Other turns are possible. My family's literacy could have been different, but only systemically so. I tell my family's literacy story first, one generation at a time, and then point to other kinds of literacy in circumstances systematically well-organized for producing diversity by race and class.

I. LITERACY IS ORDINARY

My father turned 80 in 1984. "I learned something about myself this week," he told me at the party we gave him. "I am a dropout." He had quit high school 64 years before to go to work, and he labored most of his life as an elevator mechanic. He was not a dropout in 1920. He was a worker, eventually a husband, a father, a grandfather, and for his last 10 years a retired worker. These were all labels he liked. "Work will save us," he always said, often to no one in particular.

By the late 1970s, the country was going through a "dropout crisis." Anyone who did not finish high school for any reason but early death, so said the government agency that counted such things, was a dropout. By the numbers, we had too many dropouts, and they were going to cost the next generation money. Those problem kids had become something to worry about, count, devise policy for, remediate. And so it came to be that my father had been reclassified. What had been a normal and responsible act when he quit school had become exactly the wrong thing to do.

"So Dad," I asked, "how long have you been a problem child?" Never one to answer a question directly, he should have replied with one of the double-edged, mostly true half-jokes with which he kept us in line, something like, "I was so busy taking care of you guys, I never had any time to have problems of my own." I had missed his mood. He was more serious, and said, as he had rarely said before, "If I had to do over again, maybe I would do it all different." For 64 years, he read every New York paper (but the *Times*) every day, voted in every election, and hardly missed an opportunity to work hard, but on his eightieth birthday, none of that counted. He read about the dropout problem, and for a moment, he knew himself only as a dropout.

My mother had to leave the same high school a year before my father, and she was furious about it to the end of her life. At 90, she could be heard teaching my eight-year-old child how to say *Nadia es en mi casa*. She remembered it from her ninth grade Spanish class from 1918–19. She also remembered the lines from her class play that year. Between then and her death at age 97, she read parts of thousands of books in five-minute spurts. From 1932 to 1946, she had a child every other year and was hideously busy for the next four decades. Six of the children lived, they all finished college, five took master's degrees, three finished doctorates, and so did a fourth almost. They brought thousands of books into the house, mostly philosophy and religion, but also history, anthropology, biography, and who knows how many novels. She had a non-stop imagination, and reading fueled it to peak performance. She brought us every summer to a beach on the Atlantic Ocean and made us look out on the horizon to see “the Irish mist cottages” she had seen in books. I was forty before I realized we had been looking dead south, more into the mouth of the Caribbean than across to the hills of Kerry. She did not need to read, but it helped.

She had no desire to know everything, only the desire to understand people and have lots to talk about. She read faster than the rest of us, and to the extent she could tell others about what she read, she would remember it in great detail. It was impossible to tell she left school after nine years. In her last few years, she read *Angela's Ashes* (“I had no idea the Irish could be like that”) and *Rachel's Children* (“The people in the Bronx have it harder than the Irish”). In her last few days, she was reading a history of the United States in correspondence (*Letters of a Nation*) and solicited our opinion on Benjamin Franklin's advice to seek out older women.

On the rare occasion when my father would read a book, he would hold it at arm's length as if he were reading a paper on the subway. My oldest brother John tells me that when he was ten, he gave my father two books for his birthday. They were not well received, and two days later, my mother told him to not do that again. As the youngest, I saw my father tackle a few books, each because one of his

kids had an article in it. He had an unpedantic relationship to print. We rarely heard about what he read, although we knew we could always ask him questions and get answers. My mother, on the other hand, while never flaunting what she knew, would earnestly use her reading. "Did you ever read Thomas Merton?" she would ask, hoping someone could tell her something she hadn't heard before. "A wonderful personality," she would say, "but I have my reservations. He could be intolerant." She read to feel sorry for people being nice in the face of great suffering and only occasionally to find the down-trodden overcoming problems. Intolerance and other versions of not being nice were not possible topics of her reading.

My parent's literacy stories are as similar as they are different. My father had more facts, my mother more stories. My father had more opinions, my mother more ideas. My father's literacy brought him peace and quiet, my mother's kept her involved in more conversations. Differences in style aside, their literacies were identical in being simply part of what they did. They did not have a specialist's literacy. They did not have dropout literacy. They did not need remedial literacy. They had ordinary literacy in the best sense of the term: they used literacy as an ordinary part of their life.²

My father did his job, and his literacy did its job. Together they worked, read newspapers, raised kids, and defined the demands on a good person. Responsibility came first, long before any talk of skills. His advice was right: "Work will save us." Neither my father, nor his literacy, needed to be labeled. My father was a remarkable person for his relentless and generous attention to ordinary life, and his literacy and his culture, like everyone else's, were ordinary. We should appreciate people for what they do and ask of their literacy only that it serve their efforts to do the right thing.

My mother did her job, and her literacy did its job. Together they worked, read books, raised intellectuals, and defined the demands on a person concerned with the good of all. People came first, long before any talk of their skills. Her question is worth a lifetime of consideration: "Why do they have to have it so hard?" Neither my mother nor her literacy needed to be labeled in 1919. My mother was

remarkable for her relentless concern for ordinary life, and her literacy and her culture, like everyone else's, were ordinary. We should appreciate people for the ways they care about others and ask of their literacy only that it serve their efforts to help.

II. LITERACY IS EXTRAORDINARY

The next generation, my generation, had a different experience with the printed word. As teachers, professors, administrators, and therapists, we have lived off literacy, and, for better and worse, we have lived for it. Three of us have libraries that will not fit into our houses and offices, and we have read about much more than we have done. Dreams about what was possible after knowing everything, or after knowing just a little more than someone else, anyone else—such dreams were enhancing, entrancing, and expansive. The post-war working-class Irish were on their way up. The economy was expanding in our favor, and just in case the wider society did not come through, the Catholic schools had constructed an alternative credentialing system right up to doctor and lawyer. My three brothers were named John, Joseph, and Robert, and we too, even without Harvard and Kennedy money, were on our way somewhere extraordinary.

When I was ten, I found a book open on my brother Robert's desk, and it contained pictures of streets in China and Japan. I was hooked. What were those signs, and how could anyone read them? Literacy was no longer ordinary, but exciting, smart, and riveting. Literacy was no longer ordinary life, but a promise for an extraordinary life. At 25, when I finally made it to Japan, one of my brothers had lived in Africa, another in India, and a sister in Puerto Rico. We followed our bookshelves in search of careers, languages, ideas, and religions. My parents had been almost nowhere other than, oh no, where they were, but their children read their way around the country and beyond. Eventually the children dragged the parents along. I remember the excitement when my parents took a plane to visit children in Puerto Rico in 1964 and San Francisco in 1968. My parents may have been the last people to discover life beyond New York City. Before the plane trips, there were only two excursions, both four-day

round trips with six or seven people in the car: one visiting churches in Canada, where my sister Mary may have said a sentence in French, the other a mad dash through Washington, D.C., and, for reasons unknown, to a cavern in West Virginia. We were going somewhere, my generation. No one knew quite where, but reading, writing, and educational degrees were the ticket.

None of us made it to where we were going, of course. Literacy, like life, does not go that far, and in the background we can still hear our late father complaining that we are all “professional gas bags” and even “educated idiots.” He was a loving man and could say insulting things in ways that seldom bothered us—well, rarely bothered me anyway—particularly when we knew he was right. Make that partially right. He seemed to have great respect for each of us, but seemed also terribly confused about all we could not do: fix our cars, go to bed at night, stay married, follow Catholicism. We managed to travel a great deal, and though it is simple to say we have easier and more rewarding jobs than my parents, I am not sure. No, that’s not right. My father worked terribly hard as a handyman for an institution that paid him little money and not enough respect. When forced to retire early because the company was moving, he was making only \$500 more than I would in my first year teaching. Yes, his children have had more rewarding jobs, and only in that sense more disappointing. Relative to what we set out to do, to know everything, to go everywhere, to fix all problems, relative to our most unordinary, unrealistic, and foolish dreams about what might be possible, relative to what our literacy promised, we have fallen terribly short. This is not depressing, but disappointing enough to invite new priorities. To live a dream can be a virtue; to expect it to become true may be harmfully naive. Coming to grips with the disappointments of literacy gives an opportunity to put literacy back in its place.

My generation found it easy to forget what my parents were never allowed to forget. To live an ordinary life is no mean feat, and it should be treasured. We were right to try for more, but foolish to rest it all on words lectured and written. Most everyone leads an ordinary life, and the circumstances that would thrust anyone into special lives

are, well, circumstantial. In the Middle Ages, the genius was an ordinary person momentarily borrowed as a medium for a gift from the heavens. This always sounded right to me, and the inflated, modern idea of individual creativity always wrong. Genius is a lethal idea that defines more the disappointment most everyone experiences at not being one than it defines and celebrates the few momentarily so labeled (McDermott, in press). For every apparent genius, there are millions of ordinary people who make geniuses possible and, in exchange, get to feel less than ordinary and pushed out of place.³

For my parents' children, for my generation, for me, literacy gave up its roots in doing the ordinary. Literacy became tied to being special. It became tied to the ideas of success, smartness, and, in exceptional cases, genius. It was possible and maybe necessary to have a genius in my family, and I remember hearing conversations about who was going to be the genius. In my mother's strong taxonomy of learning types, we had:

- a genius for all to see,
- another child almost as smart, but uninterested,
- still another child almost as smart, but undisciplined,
- and three others who had to work really hard to learn anything.

The last condition was morally upright, but not celebrated. Literacy might have been ordinary in my mother's life, but it was extraordinary in her dreams for her children. Being a genius in advance of any accomplishment is a terrible job to give a child. It may be essential to jumpstart upward mobility, but the promise of genius makes subsequent and real accomplishments seem small. That burden was for the older children. The last of us were allowed to work hard and be surprised by any accomplishment of our own.

Nor is there anything wrong with trying to be special, except if special is defined at the expense of the ordinary. My family has understood this too, but it is a difficult insight to maintain. The rewards of the system are stacked in favor of those who forget that being literate is a way to get jobs accomplished, a way of standing on

the shoulders of others. The system is stacked in favor of forgetting that my father was a fully literate person who went to work instead of high school, or that my mother was a fully literate housewife who never delivered a lecture. Tens of thousands of students have gone through my parent's children's classes. Tens of thousands have graduated from programs in which we have taught, counseled, supervised, and directed. (Actually, tens of thousands of people have graduated just from programs my brother, Joe, has founded—this includes a college program for retired union members, a program our parents attended in their seventies). We have done our jobs. If we have been special, it—the specialness—should ideally be part of the “rest” that T.S. Eliot (1943) says is “not our business”:

And what there is to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once to twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
 To emulate—but there is no competition—
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
 That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
 For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

To be special is just fine, but to want to be special at the expense of the “rest” may be a sin.⁴ Literacy has become an occasion for arrogance, in the language of the Catholicism of my childhood, an occasion of sin. Literacy should be put back in its place. We should acquire it, treasure it, and use it to communicate with ourselves and others. We should use it to teach and learn, and, if we use it to push people around, we must be careful about who they are. We should use it to make the world a better place.

III. LITERACY IS TREACHEROUS

For my parents, literacy was ordinary. For my generation, literacy was extraordinary. For our children, literacy has become treacherous.

The second generation was allowed to delay success until college. We were rarely good students in high school, when studying came behind dancing, after-school jobs, and basketball (the youngest—

that's me—was spared the jobs). Nothing quite counted until college, and even then there was the promise of a future for anyone who wanted to catch up. It was all right to be ordinary for the first twenty years. It was not all right to be a dropout, for it closed off the future. As my father would say, we had “to get that piece of paper.” The rest was detail, to be worked out later.

Our children, on the other hand, were told early they had to succeed. They did not have to succeed by making ends meet and raising good children like their grandparents. They did not have to succeed by doing well in college and later becoming professionals like their parents. Instead, they had to succeed in the first grade, and then they had to stay on track. High school has become more than a place to get “the piece of paper” while learning to socialize and play. For the new generation, there are no after-school jobs, and sports and other extra-curricular activities are done with an eye to the demands of colleges for the well-rounded applicant.

The rush to genius starts early in the U.S., and many parents are on the lookout for it in kindergarten. There is likely no such thing as a childhood genius (by definition, if genius resides in great achievement); and even if there is such a thing, as in the case of musical or mathematical prodigies, we should worry about kids locked into a manic focus on an exciting, but partial, reality and too well tuned to the ambitions and dreams of adults. Literacy was a meeting of medium and message for my parents' generation: reading and writing carried messages according to the demands of daily life. Medium and message were fused and confused in my generation: we loaded up on the medium often at the expense of messages of relevance for the world. For the new generation, there was no longer a message. Only the medium counted. Reading ability counted, the more of it the better, and the earlier the better. Early test scores predicted the genius and the disabled. It was no longer that one might read something of interest or importance. The isolated and random questions of the IQ test and the strange vocabulary of the SATs address no issues. They say nothing, but they have become a measure of success. It only matters that a child can read faster and better than others, as

many others as possible, so as to achieve a place in the school world. Education suffers, says my daughter Meghan, from “a quantitative abuse of substance.”

In the second grade, my son, Brendan, came home saying he was the dumbest kid in the class. He was in a special school, in the best sense of special. A private school built on the principles of John Dewey and Martin Luther King, it stood on the Harlem border and was racially and economically integrated: approximately half white and half minority, half with money and half without; tuition was ten percent of family income per child, and the poor paid nothing. The school had a purpose bigger than individual success. The teachers wanted to harness the problems of the city and their solutions into a foundation for an education. Smart and dumb were not as relevant as insight and responsibility. Dumb should not have been an option, particularly not in the early grades.

I was furious, and I went to the teacher the next day to tell her something had gone wrong. I expected her to say it was terrible that my son might feel so bad for even a second. I expected her to say she would work on it, find its source, and set about making it all better. To my surprise, she did not say it was terrible. She did not even say it was wrong. My son was taking his time learning to read, but this was not, or at least should not have been, not in that school, an emergency at age seven. The research literature was quite clear: many children are not ready at seven or eight, and no child should be pressed to read before age nine (Rohwer 1971). The teacher did not know the literature, and she was applying enough pressure for Brendan to feel terrible. I went to the classroom and saw, much to my horror, a perfect example of the children I had been studying in my own research, children who spent their early years in school arranging not getting caught not knowing how to read. It takes hard work and careful attention to be consistently missing when it is possible for others to judge whether one reads well or not. It is a full-time job, and my son was a full-time employee. His attention was everywhere but on a book.

A minute of conversation with the teacher told me why my son felt bad. His teacher was treating him as if he were dumb. No, she

didn't say that exactly, not in a late-20th-century private school. "He might be learning disabled. We would like to have him tested." That's what she said. I had worked in a reading disabilities clinic, and I knew my son was no more disabled than he was dumb. (Actually, only a few people are either, no matter how much the culture insists on mass-producing labels.) Worse, I had studied LD children in that same school. I had seen them tested. I knew the procedure, and I did not like it. "Don't touch him," I said, and made a hasty retreat.

I could leave the classroom, but not the culture. As an educational researcher, I could fight ten hours a day against kids getting labeled, but, when it came to my own family, it was difficult to leave behind the intuitions of the culture. By the time I got to the front door of the school, I was full of doubts: "It might be true. Maybe there is something wrong with him." Banish the thought. "It is not possible." I defended kids against just this sort of problem for my living. "I know better." But the doubts returned. "There are some people on his mother's side who are . . . Oh, no!" More doubt. "Some of my distant cousins are questionable. Oh, no, again!" And then there is me. "I was pretty slow growing up; I did everything badly at first." Despite all the evidence I wasn't very bright, it rarely occurred to me I could fail at something if I worked harder. Perhaps I had been wrong. I bring passion and relentlessness to academics, but never the speed Americans call smartness. Perseverance should be enough. For me it was, but it seems harder to survive that way now. The new generation faces failure, and a more total failure, at a younger age, than I could have imagined as a child.⁵

By the time I got home, I was planning a few years overseas, beyond the stream of school documentation, perhaps in a culture that did not worry about such things. Even home was not safe. The school called and asked again to have him tested. I declined, and they asked why I didn't want to help my son. "I do and that is why I do not want you to test him." I had caught myself in time. A year of tutors later, my son read *The Phantom Tollbooth*, and he cried at a sad part near the end. Reading was not the problem his teacher had thought, but he had been wounded. Yes, he had learned to read, but that didn't

mean he was going to do it often. Reading was for other people. It took great strength for him to take such a stand. He had four parents, three with doctorates and one with a master's degree, and he was blowing off elementary school. He became good at saying "No." Doing well in school does not have to be the only pathway to maturity and a full life. There should be alternatives to entering a middle-class life exclusively through school, but they are rare. It is good to have learned to say "No," but it is not an easy life.

Fourteen years after the dark days in the second grade, my son began work on the interface between computers and video production—more imagery than words, yes. He spent those years also writing poetry—imagery again, this time with words. We used to meet sometimes at a local pub, and I'd find him in a corner fighting with words, doing literacy, but on his own terms. The son I always wanted had to be working on his own terms. My son did not write much poetry in high school and college. Poetry came later, on his own terms, when it was time to say something, time to lay out all the negatives, time to let in some light, to lighten up, to add a little "Yes" to all the "No." Eventually, he self-published a volume of poems, *Uirbeach Madra* (Irish for *Urban Dog*), for his small public. Dark stuff and angry—I couldn't help thinking about his second grade and his saying "No" to literacy and to school. The poetry also had a sweet side, a romance for New York City and its secrets. One was named after the Brooklyn Bridge he loves so much:

A gateway to the city
The rusted locks of opportunity
are sealed.
You're on your own.

There is a "Yes" that comes through, not in the sealed locks, but in being able to handle life "on your own." In elementary school, he got the "No" part down, and the rest of his life might be more about saying "Yes." In the last three years, he has put himself through culinary school and works as a chef and keeps books full of recipes. Ordinary literacy is special when it makes for great food. Kitchen work is as fast

as a video game and as delicate as a poem. The son I always wanted might have been right all along.

In the movie *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, a young boy likes chess, and he wants to play. Because he is good, his father gets him a tutor who brings along a system for keeping track of his progress. Because he is very good, they put him in a series of tournaments, and many people keep track of his progress. Soon, his father's love focuses more on the son's progress in chess than on the son. Finally, the adults try to teach him contempt for other players, and the boy and his mother draw the line. In my parents' generation, literacy was more like the chess the boy wanted to play. In my generation, literacy was more like chess tournaments, with everyone keeping track of everyone else's progress. In my son's generation, literacy took a next step. It is as if every child in the country was expected to play chess by age six. Chess readiness tests were invented. Diagnostic and remedial schemes were developed for those who did not learn chess fast enough. My son drew the line, and millions more do the same every year. Literacy, like chess, should be fun. Literacy, more than chess, should also be useful, but this does not mean it is a complete and worthy guide to the futures of six-year-olds.

Suppose we put literacy in its place as a tool to help us get jobs done? In its place as a source of information, or as a source of pleasure? Literacy should not be a measure of a person's worth. It should not be a measure of a child's future. Learning to read and write should never be a source of pain. We should not worry too much about how to help children acquire literacy; if we do not get in the way, they will all learn to read eventually. We must worry more about children getting labeled disabled or illiterate. The acquisition of children by LD is occurring at an alarming pace (McDermott 1993). We must remember, says my daughter Meghan, that to acquire in the corporate sense can refer to a "hostile takeover." So it is in the school sense. How did we let literacy get so far out of place?

My family's experience with literacy captures a trend in twentieth-century American education. The school system has become more competitive. The stakes are higher, and the rush to success and

failure starts much earlier. Children are faced with many more tests and diagnoses than previous generations. This is not to say schools were not oppressive sorting machines for many children in the first half of the century. Many children today receive an extraordinary education, and those who find school difficult have more people worrying about them and offering more positive services than in previous generations. The good news can be stated twice: there are more success stories and more people than ever before to help those who are not succeeding. That is the good news. And here is the bad news. It is precisely this combination of great success for the few and more services for the rest that creates more failure, more documented failure, that is to say, more kids diagnosed, labeled, remediated, and catered to, and thus more institutionalized failure (Varenne and McDermott 1998).

My family's literacy has also been tied to our moving up in the social structure. My parents were born in Brooklyn and moved as young children to the more suburban Queens. My generation grew up in tough neighborhoods around Kennedy Airport, and most of our friends and relatives escaped to greener pastures and, gulp, whiter neighborhoods on Long Island and Westchester to raise their children. The problems faced by the third generation were upper-middle-class problems. When white upper-middle-class children were not doing well in school, they were called smart, but disabled in relation to reading and writing. When working-class minority children were not doing well in school, they were called dumb or retarded. Eventually, they were called dropouts. Like my father, they often had more important things to do than school, but that was not as important as the fact they could be labeled and counted as dropouts. Being called LD may not be fun, but the alternative is worse. Being labeled LD can keep a child in the system long enough for other advantages of having money to take hold.

IV. KINDS OF LITERACY BY SOCIAL POSITION

If my family juggled three kinds of literacy in an urban mainstream, imagine the variations to be found among local businessmen

marketing their history-rich New Jersey suburbs (Dorst 1989), alcoholic men living on the streets of small-city New Hampshire (Taylor 1996), small-town fishermen in Maine (Lofty 1992), or African American spirit artists in the South (Gundaker 1998). A full account would offer a portrait of both variation in the ways reading and writing are put to use in different communities and the social structures that make them mutually articulated and distributed versions of each other (Gilmore 1986). All these literacies are ordinary and unique, vibrant and under assault, embedded in ongoing affairs and ignored by formal, school-based definitions of literacy.

A quick look at just two contrasting versions of literacy in and around Philadelphia can help to put my family's story in context. Andrea Fishman (1988) went to the countryside around Philadelphia to work with adolescents reading and writing as part of everyday Amish life. Amish literacy is not competitive. Reading and writing are not measures of intelligence, virtue, or promise. They are simply means of communication within a community. Fishman offers a list of the functions of literacy encouraged by the Amish:

- to pick Amish-appropriate texts
- to follow written directions (as in work manuals)
- to help recall what was read
- to memorize (this is least important)
- to synthesize what is read with community beliefs
- to be empathetic.

Using literacy to expand horizons the way my mother did is not on the list. Using literacy to do better than others the way my generation did is not on the list. Nor is there much concern for using literacy to diagnose and predict the futures of young children. When Amish teenagers organize a newspaper designed to increase contacts across Amish communities in various states, the spelling and grammar go uncorrected. What is exciting is that they receive written responses from Amish kids elsewhere, which they publish in the next edition. The newspaper does its job if it ties people together. It does

not have to look perfect. Similarly, Fishman notes that the Amish actively discourage modes of appreciation and criticism popular in most schools; they discourage, for example, a focus on individuals and their character development. For the Amish, fiction should be read to highlight the wonders of community rather than the anguish of individuals. The news in Fishman's account is that the list of literacy functions contrasts remarkably with an equivalent list taken from adolescents nearby in middle class, white Philadelphia. The more important news is that both lists contrast again as much with an account of literacy among adolescents in the African American inner city of Philadelphia.

Amy Shuman (1986) gives a portrait of two kinds of inner-city adolescent writing. The first is school writing in a format driven by topic sentences and a tight logical order. Literacy instruction in school is formal and rule governed, enough so that it is always possible to get things wrong, noticeably wrong. School literacy is graded and recorded. Teachers implore their students to begin their writing assignments with an identification of who, what, when, and where—all worth points—and the students meet the challenge with a fit of dialect-driven word mash. From a class assignment to write a letter to a local radio station that mishandled a report on a fight at the school, Shuman gives an example:

Some people like color matter what color are you Black white or Spanish and some don't lie I like any color long I got friend with me to play color don't matter what color are you.

What happened to what, when, where, how, and why? Given all that could go wrong in a writing assignment, this student seems to go for broke, or what the school might call broken. The disability label can't be far away. The text is more coherent if read to a rap beat, and the mistakes can be theorized as an inventive form of resistance. Is it possible the students know better how to write mainstream materials but resist doing so?

The other inner city adolescent writing was private and seemingly free of constraint. It showed up after long fieldwork, in an underground of notes moved around the school and in diaries. Interestingly

enough, the diary entries attend to everything teachers were looking for, but unable to elicit:

. . . some of the diaries were written as if intended for an audience who would not know even the most commonplace facts. Entries included details such as “I went to my room. It is at the top of the stairs on the left” or “So I says to Michael, that’s my brother . . .”

Across her years of fieldwork, Shuman began to understand that the difference between the texts is not more literacy in one and less literacy in the other. Instead, she mapped out how the kids themselves had a different continuum for their writings, a continuum of freedom to communicate, a continuum of “storytelling rights.” The more antagonistic the setting, the less their writing was fitted to mainstream patterns. In the privacy of their own diaries, they could write in ways more available to the reader. The students perhaps knew better in some ways.

These distinct patterns of literacy across social space, like the three kinds of literacy in my family over time, are most interesting if understood as complementary versions of each other, each according to its social position. Inner-city adolescents know that literacy can be a dangerous tool of state bureaucracy and accountability. In addition to their experiences at school, adolescents are used by adults as scribes for trips to unemployment and welfare offices where they learn a resistance to the literacy of forms and constrained questions. They learn that clarity and grammatical niceties are reserved for friends. For the Amish, the world, at least the world inside the Amish community, is a far gentler place, and the function of reading and writing is simply to pull people together around moral themes and guidelines, particularly those that distinguish the Amish from the crass materialism of modern America. My generation read our way into the same mainstream that the Amish are trying to stay out of and the inner-city school children are struggling to resist.

Many other literacies can be found across the country, but even a full taxonomy of American examples would pale before the many ways of using literacy around the world. To examine only a few

would show that literacy in my family could have been different—yes, could have been, but wasn't, and precisely because it was a part of a wider web of social circumstances. Literacy is not a prime mover in human affairs. Rather, it aligns itself with local demands. It helps people to do better and more efficiently what they must do with each other within the constraints of their culture. In an ideal society, if literacy helps everyone to do what has to be done, then there should be a high rate of literacy. In a less ideal society, one marked by divisions between various groups, we can expect more kinds of literacy, each one aligning a group to its expected place in the culture—thus three versions in my family and another two in a glance across space and race around Philadelphia. Each literacy—and this includes versions of apparent illiteracy—has its place given wider arrangements in American culture and social structure (Smith 1986). Every literacy has a place in the status quo of a divided society. To say literacy is out of place is to make a complaint about the status quo. To change the status quo, we have to do more than teach literacy. We might instead have to challenge the institutional arrangements that invite hierarchies of literacy. As part of that larger project, we can start by putting literacy in its place in the service of a larger community, in the service of a larger good. ♡

Endnotes

1. A conversation with Elliot Eisner netted me the nice title. Perry Gilmore, Shelley Goldman, Brendan McDermott, Helen McDermott, Meghan McDermott, and Francisco Ramirez offered helpful comments. Versions of section I and II appeared in McDermott, 1997 and 2003, respectively.

2. The adjective "ordinary" should be a compliment. Except in a foolishly competitive society, ordinary does not rule out special, and in the right society, special would always be ordinary. This claim is essential to the pragmatism of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1968; Cavell 1992) and John Dewey (1934; J. McDermott 1986), and has been claimed by some Marxists (Williams 1958).

3. Adam Smith (1776) thought the very idea of genius to be overblown, but Friedrich Nietzsche (1884) viewed ordinary people as fodder for the few: "A people is the detour made by nature to arrive at six or seven great men." And then the corrective: "Yes, and then to get around them." Nietzsche likely

took both points from Emerson's more gentle phrasing: "Genius is always sufficiently the enemy of genius by over influence" (1968; Poirier 1987).

4. Consider Coleridge (1825): "Sin is an evil which has its ground or origin in the agent, and not in the compulsion of circumstances." In American society, savage competition comes close to a compulsion of circumstances, but being special at the expense of others is nonetheless a willful act of the agent. Being special in the service of others is a better goal. What is special about scholars should not separate them from the wisdom of the people, and their arrogance should be reserved for the censure of bad scholars who take advantage of looking literate.

5. When my mother read this paper, she became furious with my son's teacher. She had heard the story before, but hated seeing it in print: "If someone could be mean to a wonderful little boy," she said, "the same story could be used against him later in life." Of course she is right, and from the force of her delivery, I realized that I have been doing her work for the last 35 years. Brendan says he will take his chances.

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