

## CHAPTER ONE

# My Wings

*I can't go back to yesterday because I was a different person then.*

—Lewis Carroll

I grew up in rural West Virginia, the son of a Methodist Minister. When I was five, we moved to Davis Creek, a very small community a few miles outside of Huntington. There was no kindergarten in those days, so a year later, I entered first grade in the little school down the road from my house with great expectations but no preparation. I was 1 of 50 students in the classroom, and I proceeded to get lost in the herd. Further, I lived through my imagination and had a tendency to daydream. Consequently, I failed to learn how to read and even had problems with the alphabet.

Today, there is a lot of controversy about *social promotion*, and many states and systems have moved away from it. I must confess; I am very thankful that it was around when I was young, or I would be the oldest first grader in America today. The controversy over social promotion is typical of the way education policy is made. Politicians decide that something doesn't make sense, and they pass policies to do away with it. Never mind that research has been pretty consistent that students tend to do worse when repeating a grade than they do if passed forward with inadequate skills. Neither is a great option, but the one that works best tends to be the counterintuitive one. Most educators understand this;

most politicians do not. It highlights the perils of amateurs making professional decisions. Fortunately for me, in those days, the politicians hadn't yet taken over, so I moved on, without a lot of skills but with my imagination intact.

Because of overcrowding, I was moved on to second grade the next year and fared no better there. I continued to enjoy the dreams and visions inside my head, but outside, things were becoming more of a nightmare. I was in a fog most of the time and had no idea what was going on. School was a mystery to me, and it wasn't much fun. I felt stupid most of the time and thought there had to be a better place than school to spend my time. Once again, they moved me on, so I went to third grade not knowing how to read and thinking school was a complete waste of my time.

I entered third grade with Mrs. Spurlock, who was a very imposing woman. Through my eight-year-old eyes, she seemed to be about eight-feet tall and weighed about 3,000 pounds. She was stern and a little scary. And she discovered two things about me. First, she realized I couldn't read a bit. I had no idea if Spot was running or eating the rug. She also saw that my mind wandered. In today's world, they may say I had attention deficit disorder, but in those days, they just said, "His mind wanders." She set about trying to rid me of both problems.

For my mind wandering, she had a very simple pedagogical technique. She seated me in front of the class, and when she noticed my mind wandering, she applied the end of her yardstick to the top of my head, which refocused my attention and opened my mind to new learning vistas. Her approach to my reading deficit was just as direct and simple. She sat with me to start the process and then piled stacks of books in my arms each afternoon with the expectation I would read them at home and could talk about them the next day. Her techniques and, more important, her expectations let me leave her room at the end of the year a very avid reader. I started reading books about the frontier and about faraway lands. Mrs. Spurlock opened the world to me, and for that, I will always love her.

The rest of my elementary career consisted of struggling to make it through the day and the year. My life outside the classroom was filled with interesting things to do and see. I spent a lot of time down by the creek looking for crayfish. I made up games with my friends. I had a fascination with television to the point that I created

a studio in my house and put on my own programs. I had to give up my studio during my third-grade year because we finally got indoor plumbing, and my studio became a bathroom. I will leave to your imagination what sort of metaphor that creates for current television programming. I made up plays with my friends and put them on for the neighborhood. But in the classroom, I was still a “day late and a dollar short,” as my mother put it.

When I was in fourth grade, we moved several times, and I always seemed to miss long division. I stumbled and fumbled my way through each year and received my first label—*slow learner*. Although I had this wonderfully rich world inside my head, it didn’t seem to translate to my classrooms. I was known as a storyteller, but that didn’t gain me any points either. The teachers thought that I daydreamed too much and wondered about my veracity, as sometimes my stories were quite vivid and clearly made up. Also, when discussions were held I would come up with answers that made a lot of sense to me but were way outside the scope of the discussion. The teachers and my fellow classmates would look at me as if I were one of those Martians from some UFO we were hearing about in the news. Further, I would offer my unique insights that were instantly ignored because they were so divergent only to hear a classmate come up with a similar insight 15 minutes later that was praised by the teacher. That was my first realization that lateral, divergent thinking wasn’t welcome in most classrooms of the day. Actually, as a child, my biggest insight was that I must be really, really dumb. Everyone else seemed to be on the same page, and I couldn’t even find the book.

As I moved into junior high school, I started doing pretty well on the achievement tests but was still struggling in the classroom, so I got my second label—*underachiever*. The teachers felt I could do the work but I just wouldn’t. I don’t remember it that way at all. I was doing the best I could to fit my round self into their square classrooms. I wasn’t holding back. The whole thing just didn’t make much sense to me, and the life I had outside the school was a lot more interesting than the one I had inside. My friends and I would play very elaborate board games, we would create very imaginative games in the woods near our homes, we continued to create plays and performances for the neighborhood, and I continued to read voraciously the books that interested me. None of this had much to do with my schooling. I barely got out of junior high

school making straight *D* minuses in ninth-grade English. You had to pass that class to be promoted, and I barely cleared that bar.

As I moved into high school, all my tumblers fell into place. Suddenly, school became easy for me. My grades shot up, the work seemed easier, and I got yet another label—*gifted*. Looking back, I realize that my learning style is very right-brained, and I had been living in a left-brained world. American schools and most others I have visited around the world are very Procrustean in design. Procrustes was a character from Greek mythology who was an innkeeper. However, he had only one bed in his inn, so when a visitor came, he would measure the guest. If they were too long for the bed, he chopped off their legs. If they were too short, he had a rack he would put them on to stretch them to the right size. I had spent the first nine years of my school life being sliced and diced or pulled and stretched to fit the educational model available instead of the model building off my gifts and talents. High school wasn't easier because they had suddenly personalized my education; it was easier because I had finally learned to play the game.

One day in Mrs. Crum's 10th-grade English class, she came up to me and asked me a question I continue to grapple with to this day. She asked, "Have you ever thought about being a writer?" Now, I was the guy who had barely escaped ninth-grade English. What kind of question was that? But if she saw something in me that I hadn't seen in myself, maybe I should take a look. Now, six books and hundreds of articles later, I guess I am a writer. And much of the credit goes to Mrs. Crum for planting that seed.

Teachers and administrators plant seeds every day in children. Sometimes they are seeds of possibility and hope like the one Mrs. Crum planted in me. But far too often, they are seeds of doubt and despair. The question of "How can I?" is a much more empowering question than the one of "What if I can't?" Teachers need to be in the empowerment business. I was lucky that I had a Mrs. Crum to ask the right question at the right time. It empowered me. It opened up a new world to me.

I had three other teachers in high school that did the same. Miss Reynolds my high school drama teacher took a shy, doubting boy under her wing and gave him the confidence to go on stage and ham it up. I have often wondered what she would think of me today, standing in front of thousands of people giving a motivational speech or appearing on live national television. I suspect she would recognize the seeds of possibility she had planted in me. She also

gave me permission to look inside myself, to examine my self-doubts and my sensitivities, to know that is part of our human passage, and to be courageous enough to be open about them. Most of us spend the majority of our lives hiding ourselves from others. To become powerful you have to be willing to see and acknowledge your weaknesses. It is only in risking your vulnerability that you can become powerful. Miss Reynolds taught me how to do that.

Mr. Ball was my social studies teacher. He took a deadly topic and made it live for all of us. He talked about historical figures as if he knew them. He brought history to life for us and let us understand that social science isn't just about learning people, events, and dates. It is about understanding the human condition. This was aided by the fact that he knew every cliché and aphorism known to man and sprinkled them into his lectures and discussions. Now, the reason a cliché is an overused expression is that it is true. There is wisdom in it. And Mr. Ball's words stuck with me. To this day, I hear his voice in my head. If I am having a bad day, I hear Mr. Ball saying, "This too shall pass." And he's right. It does. Mr. Ball wasn't teaching social studies nearly as much as he was teaching resilience. He taught us how to face life with all its problems with resolve and to know that everything that was happening to us had happened a million times to others in the past.

I also remember Mr. Ball coming to our 20th graduation reunion. He got up in front of us and reminded us of our class motto, "Our hopes are high; success is in God's hands." He then proceeded to tell us that it was about the dumbest motto any class had ever picked because if we had not been successful it wasn't God's fault; it was ours. And as he looked at us, he said he didn't think we had made as much of ourselves as we should, and he would be at the next reunion to check us out. And sure enough, he was! Education is something that sticks with you—usually figuratively like Mr. Ball's aphorisms but sometimes literally like his continued interest in our success. Education is also about helping you see that personal responsibility is paramount. Success isn't up to someone else. It is up to each of us. I learned a little about that from Mr. Ball.

Mrs. Sang was my Latin teacher and a good friend and major pain in my life. She was constantly making me try harder and do better. First, Latin wasn't the most electrifying of subjects. But if I wanted to take a major translation exercise and turn it into a musical comedy, she let me. She understood that creativity needed

to be nourished and that the outcome was learning the bigger lessons of life and not the smaller ones required for a grade.

She asked me one day if I was going to college. I told her, "No. I don't think I am college material." You see, even though at that point I carried the label of gifted, it often is the early labels and the more negative ones that are the most powerful. I may have been gifted to the school, but in my heart and soul, I was still a slow learner. Mrs. Sang begged to differ, and we had a number of heated discussions around my going to college. At the end of the day, she won. I was one of a handful of my class that went on to college.

A number of years later, I was the superintendent of schools for the Princeton, New Jersey, school district. I was back in my hometown in West Virginia visiting my parents, and I went down to the old high school. I ran into Mrs. Sang, still teaching in the same classroom, now in the twilight of her career. She was teaching French because they had dropped Latin from the curriculum. I ran into her during a passing period, and we started catching up. When the bell rang, she pulled me into her classroom, sat me in front of the class, and started asking questions, as she had when I was a student. Only this time they were about me.

"Did you go to college?"

"Yes, I did."

"Where?"

"The Ohio State University"

"Did you get a master's degree?"

"Yes I did."

"Where?"

"The University of North Carolina."

"Do you have a doctor's degree?"

"Yes I do."

"Where did you get that?"

"Harvard University."

And then she proceeded to ask me about my work experience. So I shared my teaching career, my time as a principal and as an assistant superintendent, and then about my time in my first superintendency. Then she asked me about my travels. After about 15 minutes of this Socratic dialogue, she got to the money question.

“Where did you go to high school?”

“Well, I went right here.”

And at that point, the class erupted.

“No way!”

“No he didn’t!”

“Not possible!”

She signaled for quiet.

“Why would you say that? Didn’t he just tell you he did go here?”

One of the students gave her the answer she was expecting.

“Because people who have done what he has done don’t go to this high school.”

She knew that was the attitude. She was just using me as an advanced audiovisual technique to teach those young people that they didn’t have to limit themselves or their dreams to the heights of the hills that surrounded that rural West Virginia high school.

Mrs. Sang understood the soft bigotry of low expectations long before they were articulated by national politicians. She understood that education has one basic mission—to give wings to children’s dreams.

I tell my story not because it is unique but because it is so typical. Millions of children go to class everyday in America. Far too often, it is in classrooms that are still too Procrustean in their design, where a one-size-fits-all curriculum meets an incredibly diverse and unique set of children. But millions also go to class with teachers who despite state and federal mandates are still trying to plant seeds of possibility in their children; to give them the world; to help them understand that if they take responsibility, they can become something more than they think. And there are teachers trying to give wings to their dreams. Trying to make these teachers and these classrooms more than heroic exceptions is the challenge of education reform, and that is what this book is all about.