

Guides Posted January 2021

The months ahead of us are new, like virgin snow or the forest primeval. Like a book freshly selected from the bookstore shelf and purchased. Although the book will lead us from one scene or idea to another, any attempt to spend the day snowshoeing through the backcountry, which displays no trails, or a forest which gives no hint of trails, must include the services of a guide, or a compass, or a well-studied map, or the intuitive sense of direction that some of us—certainly not this writer—possess.

As I not long ago filled my 2021 calendar with birthdays, appointments, and other special markers, I began to wonder what journeys, stories, and events this new year has in store for me and my family and friends. I wondered about the avenues I will find myself on. I wondered how I made it through 2020. I wondered how I would make it through 2021. Of course, a seasoned and smart guide would be of help. Not a Sherpa, whose responsibility is critically focused, but one who knows the world and the people in it. One experienced in the politics and prose and culture of many global points. One who is kind, patient, gentle, and helpful.

I thought of the teachers I have had in my life.

Ask nearly everyone who it was who made a mark in their lives, and most will answer, “Well, I had this teacher once....” They will go on to tell you that this teacher seemed to know them so well, seemed to understand them, or just knew the right thing to say. Another teacher is described as having read so many books or as having cracked the code of survival to math word problems. Another was fun, animated. Another scared the heck out of everyone in the class and then somehow instilled in them the love of the particular discipline. We can’t remember what we had for dinner yesterday, but we can remember the names of so many of our teachers. We can remember where we sat in the class. We can remember his or her warm, guiding hand, as cursive writing suddenly bloomed from our pencil-clutched fingers. How often have we heard this: “If it hadn’t had Ms. Smith or Dr. Hansen, I wouldn’t be where I am today.”

I wouldn’t have had a life dream to be a teacher, had it not been for Sister Clarence. I, one of about twenty little girls under her tutelage at the Convent of Mary Immaculate, was petrified by her in the early weeks of school, and not just because she called me cry-baby on the first day of class. She had a manner that suggested a locomotive. Her round, flushed face seemed squeezed to near-bursting by her wimple, her oversized wooden rosary clanked like chains from the rope that gathered her black tunic about her thick waist, and her heavy black-leather shoes resounded on the convent’s classroom floor as she swooped toward a trembling first grade girl who had somehow lapsed into a daydream. As well, Sister Clarence glared.

Yet, as the months rolled on, Sister Clarence softened. We knew our additions, we knew our posture, we knew our prayers—top of the list “The Act of Contrition”—and we knew respect and sharing. Some, though, didn’t know their reading. On a hot and humid-heavy spring day, while the novitiate Miss Appleby drilled the bulk of the class in subtraction, Sister Clarence gathered these struggling readers about her and whisked them outside to a circle of wooden benches nestled under Coconut Palm trees. She whisked me along as well, and I was mortified. I thought

I knew my reading! I loved reading! I hardly ever stumbled, I was not too fast or too slow when I read aloud, and I sounded out my words carefully. Whatever was going wrong in my life?

Sister Clarence directed everyone to a seat, I included, nearly hysterical. She then puffed up and announced that this afternoon, Pamela would be listening to everyone's reading. Pamela would correct and assist, but most importantly, she would listen, so everyone was to read with some level of animation. Pamela, she went on, was a good reader. Pamela. That was me. And Sister Clarence the Formidable was telling everyone that I was a good reader. In my sophomore year of college, I declared English Composition and Literature as my focus of study.

In late summer of 1960, I walked into my first public school classroom. I was shocked that there were no pictures of the Blessed Virgin and Jesus on the wall at the front of the classroom. No picture of the Pope, no pictures of Nuns canonized Saints. No wall fonts filled with Holy Water. I couldn't even genuflect before sitting at my desk because there was nothing to genuflect to. This was New England Protestantism at its highest. We caught busses to the school. There were no palm trees, and within weeks, a winter chill had settled in. A fourth grader, transplanted from the island of Key West to Rhode Island, I did not fit in.

Miss Ruth M. White sensed that I felt like a palm tree in a cold and rocky bay cove. When I stood before the class to give a report, she formally introduced me—as she respectfully did the other students—by giving my full name and gently placing her hand, with its graceful long fingers, on my shoulder. Sometimes, she placed Miss or Mister before our last names. She was very tall and slender, with proper posture. Her gray-white hair she secured in a bun. She wore straight skirts and jackets made of New England mill wool. A lover of geography and history, she made sure that we could recite all the states, with their capitals, and had us memorize the new president's entire cabinet. She was quite proud of “our own” John F. Kennedy. That Christmas, because the shy little girl had come out of her shell, Miss White gave me as a gift a little ceramic and wood nativity scene.

To expand our vocabulary, Miss White had us cut and staple lined pages inside construction paper covers. We decorated the covers with crayon drawings and stickers and wrote VOCABULARY in bold letters at the top. These narrow, little notebooks were where, during test time, we wrote the words as Miss White read out the definitions. We made a different booklet for each month. I received A+ on nearly every test. I loved these booklets, and all the other booklets and posters and crafts that Miss White had us create for nearly every unit of every month. We held contests and played games and acted out scenes and learned songs and even played instruments of our making. Oh, learning was play time! Learning was not rote and recitation. Even our penmanship was called “art”, and Miss White, allowing me to use my left hand, patiently helped me turn agitated chicken scratch into loops and swoops and twirls and whirls. Sometimes I am amused at the many fourth grade strategies I have brought into my high school and college classrooms.

I could go on. I could talk about Miss Yancey, who taught her fifth grade class respect for students with disabilities. Or sister Karen Marie, who talked to her seventh-grade girls as if we were all dear friends. Or Mister Garrett, my high school Lit teacher, who wept as he read aloud

of Hester Prynne's plight in *The Scarlet Letter*. Or Dr. Glover or Miss Hanna, who lit in me a love of prose. Or William Jolliffe, who reminded me that issues and people are many-sided.

If this musing can be a paeon to teachers, then let it be.

If it can be a musing of thanks, then let it be.

We would be lost without these guides.