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Matters of Consequence

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Matters of Consequence

Clara was my neighbor and one of my best friends when I was four. She was in her late 50s and recently widowed when we became friends. It started when I asked mother if I could take two of our freshly baked cookies to Clara. I was sure that she must be lonely and maybe hungry for molasses drop cookies.

I got pretty anxious as I climbed the steps of her front porch and approached the side door leading directly into her kitchen. Once relieved of my cookie offering, I climbed into Clara's rocking chair and we began the first of many conversations about life that continued until her death at age 96.

Clara, having given up her rocking chair to me, settled onto a plank bottom chair next to her kitchen table and the conversation took off. I poured out my heart about events in my four-year-old world and she shared her thoughts about living alone, cooking for one, gardening (flower and vegetable), her grandchildren, and, best of all, she let me see her column for the local newspaper.

Clara would read it to me and ask me for additions and corrections. The column was the "RD #4 Notes" and it was all about people I knew; sometimes my name was in it along with my sister, mother, and daddy. I felt important sitting in her chair, pencil in hand, offering suggestions or corrections to this dignified white-haired woman who actually listened and considered my words.

On special occasions Clara would produce a gift for me. Predictably it included a Rainbow Writing Tablet and a box of #2 pencils. The opportunity those pink, yellow, and blue pages represented is inestimable. They were tangible evidence of Clara's invitation to join her and become a writer. Because we wrote together early and often, it never occurred to me that writing required any special talent; you played, ate, slept, and wrote.

Had it not been for Clara, I might have been discouraged when my first grade teacher pronounced my left handedness a serious liability to my future as a student in her classroom. Mrs. Fought's assessment of my potential came out of a deficit model. She saw my lack of right handedness as a barrier, a handicap, a challenge to her teaching, and a personal affront. Our daily confrontations over handedness were unpleasant and puzzling to me because at age six I had been a writer for two years. I didn't need, welcome, or accept Mrs. Fought's intervention. Her assessment of the technical aspects of my ability to put letters on paper paled in the significant light of my being a contributor to the "RD #4 Notes," but I never convinced her of that.

Clara remains in my memory as the affirming elder who opened her door, made a safe place, provided materials, and welcomed me to join her in making meaning from our experiences.