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Everyday Miracles

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by

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An oxymoron or a paradox? A miracle is a miracle just because it doesn't happen every day. In fact, a miracle is an event which cannot be predicted, or expected, or even deserved, and there is nothing which characterizes dailiness more than the everyday life of a classroom. But when our little group of teacher/writers at Antioch New England began to share our stories of rare and hardly to be hoped for transformations in a child, a parent, a group, we could only think of them as miracles.

But could we really call these miracles, we asked ourselves? They seemed miraculous to us when they happened, like an event which happens out of nowhere, as surprising as a new star in the sky, but we were leery of contributing to the devaluation of language in an era when Miracle is the name of a salad dressing and Joy the name of a dishwashing liquid. We tried listing our associations to get at a definition:

a miracle is...

–something unexpected, with an element of surprise, something which could not have been predicted, a gift

–a wonderful event where something greater is at work–something invisible working beyond the visible, like a pattern, but a piece of the pattern is invisible, and there is a connection between the event and a larger framework

–a positive event, totally unpredictable, and yet an event does not spring up out of untended ground, which shows something of love and healing within it.

We talked about the miracle of a blade of grass, the miracle of birth, the mystery of life, the gifts and glories that the poets celebrate, and we concluded: what is more miraculous than children growing and changing? In that spirit we offer these teacher vignettes as everyday miracles. The first vignette comes from Deborah Abbott's 4th grade class in Brattleboro, Vermont, the second from Sharron Cadieux's experience as a primary teacher in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

Sam Wheelock

Sam's father was a convicted felon. He had knifed two people to death, too. There had never been enough evidence on that, but it was common knowledge in town. I first met him two days before school began. I was putting my classroom together after the summer's massive cleaning, rearranging desks, making a job chart, covering the drab homosote bulletin boards with blue and yellow kraft paper, putting up the new map of the world I had bought at the local office supply store. The map that had come with my room lacked a third of the African countries, the Soviet Union was still intact, and Yugoslavia was still ruled by Tito.

The room was calm. I was too, surprisingly. There was still much preparation left to do, and there was the anticipation of meeting a new class to which five new students had been added that day.

A man barreled through the door, short, stocky, built like a fire hydrant with the same explosive powers. His salt and pepper beard, bushy and unkempt, was stained with tobacco juice around his mouth. He smelled of liquor and living.

"You Ms. Abbott?" he asked, his voice bellowing.

"Yes," I said, rising and extending my hand.

"Ben Wheelock. I'm Sam's dad. Sam didn't come but I wanted to tell ya about him."

I pulled out a chair for him, motioning him to sit down. He was off and running.

"Sam's a good boy. But, you know, the way kids'll be. Sometimes he's a little rough. Doesn't mean to be, just has a big body and doesn't know his own strength." A laugh gurgled up from his depths and spilled out over his beard. "He's built like me too, just a little bulldog. He's very loyal–you get him on your good side and he'll love ya for life. But he does have a temper. That he gets from his mother, the bitch. But I'm standin' behind ya and whatever you need to do to get him to behave or do right, you have my permission to do. I want what's best for the boy."

Two days later I met Sam. He *was* built like a bulldog, a roly-poly puppy with huge paws–you could tell he was going to be big. He rolled into the room and stopped in the middle, surveyed the scene, dropped his bookbag and stumbled to the window to look out, leaning over the counter, his feet off the ground, his head and shoulders out the window. "Cool," was all he said.

Over the next few weeks I became acquainted with the best of Sam. In his quiet moments, he sat at his desk or in our morning circle and watched the corners of his mouth. His eyes crossed, and in spite of the angle, one saw the Machiavellian gleam. Through the sides of his pursed lips, saliva dribbled, etching its way over his chubby chin, eking its way to his face's edge, where like a medieval ship falling off the edge of the world, it dropped onto his grubby t-shirt. There was usually an appalled cry from a classmate alerting us to this display, whereupon Sam grinned, the dam burst, and the whole fleet was lost.

Active moments found Sam racing across the room brandishing a ruler, leaping from chair to chair, jumping off desks, scattering anything in his path. Or snaking on the floor under desks, wiggling between chairs, his plump body squeezing through spaces designed for resting sneakers. Our classes were filled with boasting outbursts of shoplifting escapades, beebee shooting sprees, and brawls.

On the playground, his energy had more room to unfurl. When we played soccer, he trampled the ball to the other end of the field, regardless of the direction of his goal. Even my most accomplished athletes wisely stepped out of the way of the charging, tumbling, dervish.

When we played hug tag, he would hug a child off her feet, swinging her around and around before finally setting her down to go tag another. She would stand there holding her ribs, a mixture of confusion, anger, and pain rising within her, the game ended. Sam was a combination of awkward bear, stumbling over his growing paws, and angry grizzly, releasing rage with ferocious swipes. We were all easy targets. We were all exhausted.

It was hard to tell where he stood academically. He never did any work. Papers were handed in with NOTHING NOTHING NOTHING NOTHING scribbled all over them. Math papers sported random numbers, the bigger the better. Yes, no, true, false, in varying patterns, filled pages with blank spaces.

Several psychologists observed him. They were at odds. He was labeled antisocial and hyperactive. A behaviorist suggested I bribe him with promised toys of his own choosing in exchange for completed work.

"Take him shopping. You'll have to spend about two hundred bucks. Let him pick out what he wants and you hold it. When he does his work, reward him."

My class budget for the whole year was $300. What planet did this guy come from? Our choices were narrowed. We did not have the resources to help Sam, and he threatened the learning environment for others. He could be home tutored, or with parent approval, we could try medication to control his hyperactivity and hopefully keep him in the social environment of the school.

Two weeks before Christmas, Sam started on Ritalin. That same week an uncle died. Sam taped the newspaper obituary to his desk. He had headaches and was sick to his stomach all week. His mom came over from New Hampshire to take him home.

After the holiday break, school started up slowly.

I first noticed a change in Morning Meeting. Someone expounded about a cat. I try to stay present when my students share, but there are times I find myself drifting. Everyone's cat, differentiated by atypical spots, unusual colors, and asymmetrical stripes, seems to experience uniform traumas. Names are surprisingly similar: Fluffy, Goofy, Blackie, and Speedball. The discussion was going well. Children were raising their hands, listening, taking turns. My boredom in the subject was relieved by the order of it all. Across the circle from me, Sam raised his hand. He had an earnest look on his face. He was recognized by the sharer.

"My cat does that too only sometimes he gets all roughed up and his fur stands out and he looks like he's an alien."

I sat there smiling. "How interesting," my face said. But I was thinking, "Sam raised his hand. He raised his hand. He waited until someone called on him. Then he commented appropriately and relinquished the floor when finished." It was my turn to say, "Cool!"

In snippets, Sam unveiled the self released through medication.

One day, after lunch, the class finally settled down for thirty minutes of silent reading. The room was quiet, with muffled whispers and the sound of clandestine notes being passed between best friends. Rosemary approached me, book in hand, as I sat perusing a trade journal.

"It isn't fair," she whispered, "that Sam gets to work on his diorama during Silent Reading and we all have to read." She gestured towards the back table. I turned and looked. Sam sat on the edge of a chair, his body leaning forward. His head was half inside a cardboard box which

was perched on its side. Around him were scissors, Elmer's glue, rubber cement, markers, construction paper, and lots of cut up scraps. The floor was sprinkled with scissored paper fragments and confetti spilled from the hole punch. He was pasting something onto the inside back wall. He pulled back and critically examined his handiwork. Then he picked up a primitive drawing, and Rosemary and I watched as he studiously punched a hole in it and attached a piece of string. He glued the string to the top of the box and the paper fluttered. It was a bird.

"You know," I began, thinking the hardest thing in this job is explaining the difference between being equal and being fair, "Sam is working very hard." I paused, framing the next sentence in my mind. Rosemary read my thoughts.

"Yeah, you're right. He doesn't usually do that." She turned and walked back to her seat, opened her book with the finger that had kept her place, and resumed reading.

"The kids notice, too," I thought.

There is much controversy about the use of drugs to control hyperactivity in children. And perhaps, in some areas, doctors over prescribe. But for children like Sam, where a chemical imbalance can be remedied, the change sown by medication, in behavior, in achievement, in respect for oneself and for others, truly reaps a miracle.

In the story of Sam Wheelock above and the story of Bert's father below it is not only the boy and the father who changed. In each case the teachers also came to new understandings, both of themselves and of the possibilities in human interactions.

Walls

He sat there, a tall man slouched in the tiny chair. His arms were folded across his green t-shirt, his work boots stretched out in front of him as if putting a protective distance between himself and the rest of us clustered around the small round table. His face remained closed and unresponsive as his wife, our school social worker, and I discussed his son's difficult transition into first grade. His small daughter sat quietly amusing herself at his feet with colorful wooden shapes. There was a stern edge to his voice when he scolded her for dumping a whole tub of cubes onto the pile of pieces on the floor, but his movements were gentle as he bent to help her pick them up. I tried to assure him that she was fine and that my students would happily sort out the mixed pieces in the morning. He seemed anxious about the little girl's presence though she never said a word. Her mother explained that they were afraid to leave her with the babysitter for fear her brother would harm her.

He had arrived late, wearing work clothes, apologizing for his tardiness. He sat pushed back from the table without saying a word as we tried to fill him in on our discussion to that point, attempting to wear our most reassuring smiles as we told him of our shared concerns about his son after less than three weeks of school. We described Herbert's school phobia, his disconnected, nonrepresentational drawings, his difficulty with peer interactions and following directions, and his inability to perform age-appropriate tasks. We tried not to make it sound overwhelming. Aside from his repeated attempts to harm his little sister, his mother had told us of her own life-threatening medical issues which were very frightening for Herbert. She also explained that the family had been involved in counseling for the past three years.

His face revealed nothing as we chatted and smiled. His lack of response unnerved me. We were talking about tremendous difficulties facing his six-year-old son and his whole family, and yet he remained silent, unmoving, with a stony expression on his face. I can reassure a parent who agrees with me when I express concerns, and we can begin to work together to try to improve the situation. I can listen to a parent who disagrees with my assessment and can work to come to a common understanding. I can even accept a parent's anger and try to negotiate an agreement. But how do I respond to someone who gives no indication of feelings, of agreement or disagreement, of acceptance or denial? How do I respond to a stone wall? I tend to take such reactions as disapproval, and my instinct is to retreat into silence myself. But first we had to get through this meeting, and then I would only need to call future meetings when absolutely necessary.

The meeting was winding down. It was time for final pleasant small talk before we said our good-bye's. I said, "Herbert seems interested in tractors."

"I have two antique tractors. Bert helps me work on them sometimes," he replied, his tone cold and unyielding.

"I got a book about tractors for him the first day of school. He seems to like it. I want to use his interest in tractors to help him into reading and writing," I replied, trying to extend the conversation.

He started to sit up in the tiny chair, pulling up his long legs and leaning slightly forward. "My first grade teacher made my father sell his tractor. She said it was distracting me away from my learning because I liked it too much, and my father did what she said. People did back then. I thought you were going to try to make me sell my tractors, too."

I laughed, "Somewhere along the way teachers have discovered that kids learn more if they're interested in what they do! I think it's great that you and Bert share an interest in tractors. I'm going to try to get him to write about it and teach him letters and sounds that way."

He chatted on about his father and his first grade teacher, about his antique tractors and cars and Bert's interest, and then about the disturbing things that Bert often did, his uncertainties about how he'd handled them, how he, too, was concerned about his son.

He moved closer to the table, leaned forward in conversation, part of this group who wanted to help his son. The walls between us had crumbled, and they both seemed to need to talk about Bert, about their experiences and fears.

I wondered at the power of that first grade teacher to influence this grown man across all those intervening years, her temerity to even think to ask his father to sell something they shared together. And, wanting to do the best thing for his son, his father had sold the tractor! Far from the teacher's desired effect of removing obstacles to his learning, she had begun to build a wall of resentment that grew year after year into adulthood until he had to face another first grade teacher who was telling him that his son was having difficulties in school as he had. The nightmare had returned. He came to our meeting distant and defiant. Despite his teacher's interference, he now restored antique cars and tractors, and he would not give in to a teacher's demands as his father had.

As Herbert's parents rose to leave, his father noticed the old rocking chair in the corner by the loft. "That looks just like my grandmother's rocker I have upstairs," he said with a crooked grin. He walked over to the rocker and sat down. "Yep, it's just the same! I always liked this rocker."

"That's very interesting!" I said with surprise. "When Bert didn't want to come to school at first and was so upset, that's where he went to sit. He wouldn't sit with us on the floor or at a table. He sat in the rocker until he was more comfortable."

His dad smiled. I had let his son sit in a chair that provided some comfort when he was frightened, and I had gotten him a book about tractors. Above all, I wasn't going to try to make him sell his prized possessions–simple, logical, unremarkable actions to me or to most educators, but not what this man's schooling had taught him to expect. For my part, I hadn't retreated into my own protective cloak of silence in the face of his stony defiance. We had both dismantled a portion of our own defensive walls. Perhaps now we can use the fragments to work together to build a solid foundation for Bert as he builds his own understandings and dreams.

A miracle may happen in an everyday world, but once a miracle has occurred nothing will ever be the same again. We know now that Sam Wheelock can learn and can function like a normal kid. We know that life will be different for Bert when school and family can work together, each respecting the other. Teachers struggle on, day after day, year after year, doing the best they can with what they have, hoping for change but knowing from experience that little backward and forward steps is all they can really hope to achieve. Nonetheless they try, and they keep trying. Sharron does have the parent conference, Deborah does keep thinking about how to help Sam. It is from that tended ground the everyday miracles spring.