

Teacher Tributes

Mr Meier

written in 2016

Standing out vividly among my memories of Elementary and Junior High school is the titanic struggle I had with Math. My report card grades tell the sad tale: I was doing fine in simple Arithmetic up until 3rd Grade. That year my marks began a steady slide from the A of the 1st quarter, down through the Bs, and settling at an ominous C- in the final quarter. From that point on a garish red pen was used most often to record my dismal math grades.

On one of my report cards my father wrote: “Math is going down. We will be helping him at home.” Unfortunately my parents thought I was just being lazy, so their idea of “helping” was to march me to my room and sit me down at my desk with a stern “You will sit there until that homework is done.” And sit there I did, for long miserable hours, blinking through tears of frustration at the incomprehensible numbers before me. Eventually it was decided that I needed some real help: a special class or teacher, someone who could pierce through the murky fog in my brain.

Enter Mr Meier, the champion. If anybody could perform a miracle and unlock the mysteries of math to me, Mr Meier could. I don’t remember exactly what year I went to his special math class; any time between 4th and 6th Grades is possible. We met in a small narrow room near the Elementary library. It may have been some sort of storage room, as I remember shelves of text books and other things lining the walls. There were only a handful of us: myself, classmate Dave R., and one or two others, sitting at a table in the center of the room.

Mr Meier was one of the most patient men I’ve ever known. I can still see his calm expression and hear his quiet voice. Always mild-mannered, always gentle, he would sit next to me or lean over my shoulder and carefully explain the basics of math, over and over, as often as needed. I can’t remember any other details of the class, with one exception: On our final day Mr Meier brought in a bag of Hershey’s assorted Miniatures to share with us. “Something to munch on” he said, and that phrase struck me as funny. Even now, whenever I find myself in the grocery store candy aisle and see the Hershey’s Miniatures, the words “something to munch on” always come to mind.

I’m sorry to say that Mr Meier’s heroic attempt to help me understand math was unsuccessful. He did his best, but no blazing light of comprehension ever burst over me. My tale of numerical woe continued through Junior High. I failed 7th Grade Math entirely, and barely squeaked past 8th Grade Math with a final grade of 69.

I only escaped 9th Grade Math because Mr Mufford took pity on me and gave me an undeserved final grade of 66. I’m sure it was a gift. I think he knew that making me repeat the class would be useless: I would never get it. And he was right. I never got it. To this day I break out in a cold sweat of fear and bewilderment when faced with even the simplest equations. A calculator has been my closest companion down through the years.

Meanwhile, back in Elementary school, the special math class ended and Mr Meier sent me on my way, possibly with a sigh of relief that I was now someone else’s burden. I liked him and respected him, but our paths never crossed again, and this very brief chapter in my school career was tucked away in a back corner of my memory, to be virtually forgotten with the passing years.

When I learned in 2007 that Mr Meier had passed away, I recalled that short time I spent with him those many years ago. It’s true that I remember nothing that Mr Meier tried to teach me about math. But I remember the

man. I remember his kindness and his patience, his quiet perseverance. And in remembering his character and the qualities he displayed, I realised that he had taught me something after all, something perhaps more valuable than math. Thanks, Mr Meier. Thanks for trying. Thanks for caring.

Mrs McGreevy
written in 2001

Mrs McGreevy was my 7th Grade English teacher, in 1977-'78. I have a clear memory of her reading the short story "All Summer In A Day" to us in class. I can still hear her quiet voice as she read that heartbreaking tale, and I've never forgotten how it made me feel. Mrs McGreevy loved kids and she loved teaching them. She told corny jokes in even cornier accents. She pulled her tennis racket out of the closet and pretended it was a ukulele, strumming away while she sang goofy songs. She caused a lot of kids, including myself, to cry in her class. Not because she was mean or harsh, but because she was so kind and gentle, and she taught us to think and to feel and to be deeply moved by beauty and sorrow.

I was a chronic doodler during my school years. Every paper, notebook and book cover, was soon covered with scribbles and stick figure cartoons. I couldn't turn in a test or homework paper without adorning it with some great work of Early Adolescent art. All my teachers gave me heck about this. All but one. Mrs McGreevy was amused, and she sometimes wrote little comments beside the doodles in the margins of my papers when she handed them back. I'm sure I was in love with her.

She didn't stay at Barker very long, two or three years at most. Maybe she was too left-of-center, too unique, too alive for our small conventional school. When I was in Senior High, I listened to some classmates talking about her. They seemed to remember her as a very weird person, and joked that she had probably moved to the planet Mars. Our teacher at the time overheard them and got quite angry. Maybe he had loved her, too. He said that she was living and teaching in New Jersey.

A few decades later, while re-reading "All Summer In A Day", I thought again of my 7th Grade teacher who had touched me so deeply so long ago. On a whim I went looking for her on the internet. A long search later, buried in the depths of some obscure academic page in a back corner of a nondescript web site about New Jersey public schools, I saw a name....McGreevy. And the tears welled up in my eyes when I saw it.

Of course, I had no idea if it was her. But it didn't matter. I liked to believe that somewhere out there Mrs McGreevy was still touching lives and hearts, still singing to kids and laughing with them; and still moving them to tears, still awakening them to the beauty of words and stories and love and life. Some of those kids are still awake. I'm one of them.