

Remembering Moments Shared With Marie Clay

Marie, the Teacher

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If we teach as we taught yesterday, we rob our children of tomorrow.
— John Dewey



If we measure success by the number of lives we touch and the ways we reach out to others and truly make a difference, then it's hard to imagine a richer life than Marie Clay's.

The California Teachers Association, in 1955, published a piece of writing by another great teacher, John Steinbeck. It was titled "*Like Captured Fireflies*," and as I reread this piece for probably the hundredth time, I thought of Marie and how she was so like the teachers described in Steinbeck's writing.

Remember how you felt during your training year in Reading Recovery? Probably a lot like the young boy in Steinbeck's writing...Listen...

My eleven-year-old son came to me recently and in a tone of patient suffering, asked, "How much longer do I have to go to school?" About fifteen years, I said. "Oh! Lord!" he said despondently, "Do I have to?" I'm afraid so. It's terrible and I'm not going to try to tell you it isn't. But I can tell you this — if you are very lucky, you may find a teacher and that is a wonderful thing. "Did you find one?" I found three, I said.

In my own career in reading, I found one... Marie Clay.

Steinbeck says "it is customary for adults to forget how hard and dull and long school is. Learning to read is probably the most difficult and revolutionary thing that happens to the human brain and if you don't believe that, watch an illiterate adult try to do it. School is not easy and it is not for the most part very much fun, but then, if you are very lucky, you may find a teacher. Finding a real teacher in a lifetime is the very best of luck. I have come to believe that a great teacher is a great artist and that there are as few as there are any other great artists. It might even be the greatest of the arts since the medium is the human mind and spirit."

Real teachers have some universal traits. They all love what they are doing. They don't tell, "... they catalyze a burning desire to know. Under their influence, the horizons widen, fear goes away and the unknown becomes knowable." But, the most important of all, the truth...the essence of knowledge, becomes beautiful and very precious. A real teacher goes beyond procedures. She breathes curiosity into us so that facts of knowledge are brought in, cupped in our hands like captured fireflies.

When Marie was taken, a sadness came over us, but the light did not go out. She left her signature on us, the literature of the teacher who writes on minds. We have all had many teachers who told us soon-forgotten facts, but only a very few who created in us a new thing, a new attitude, and a new hunger. We are the unsigned manuscripts of that teacher...Marie Clay. "What deathless power lies in the hands of such a person.

Remarks from the tribute to Marie Clay, June 4, 2007, at the 2007 Teacher Leader Institute & North American Leadership Academy in Vienna, Virginia