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On Being a Mother and an English Teacher

After the boys were born, I was a stay-at-home Mom, but I brought along all the baggage that had occupied me while I had taught at Southern Methodist University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I did a little tutoring, reviewed mystery books for the *Dallas Times Herald*, and tried to keep up with research in my field, especially the teaching of composition to maintain my interest in the proper usage of English, and I was beginning to learn about the teaching of English as a second language.

I rediscovered the fascination of the development of language skills as the boys grew. From the time they began trying out the sounds of language, each in his own way set about first to mimic what he heard and then to use the words in meaningful sequences. Years before in Chapel Hill, Chuck, Paul's godson, had shown me that I couldn't correct his two-year-old speech the way I had corrected college students. When Chuck said, "Me can jump off this rock," I had reminded him, "No, Chuck, *I* can jump off this rock." His quick response was, "*Jou* can jump off this rock?"

Long before George and then Roland were ready to start to school, like all children they had a good working vocabulary and knew a great deal about making sentences that made sense. I recalled my difficulty and finally my failure to learn Russian in Chapel Hill when several of us persuaded Mrs. Hoeffding to teach us beginning Russian. She had taught first grade before she came to live with her son in the United States, and that was how she went about trying to teach us - as though we were five- or six-year-olds in the Soviet Union. I obviously didn't have the rich background in Russian vocabulary and syntax that her former students had. I concluded that I was hopelessly stupid, and she became discouraged with us, too. Later, as George and Roland added words and proper structure to their speaking abilities, I began to see that Mrs. Hoeffding and I had had a greater chasm to bridge than either of us realized. The boys didn't know yet about nouns and verbs, but they learned to put them together so that the words fit the patterns they heard. Like all children they made occasional mistakes in forming past tenses and plurals, but by the time they started to school they mostly sounded like the English-speaking children they were.

I was delighted with the language skills my children had and was mostly able to keep the promise I'd made to myself not to bully them with needless corrections of their syntax. However, by the time they were in school and getting phone calls from their classmates, I would hear one or the other of them say when he answered the phone, "This is him." After the conversation was over, I would suggest that "This is he" is the preferred response. I was even known to repeat *he* instead of their preferred *him* during their conversation. I must have been more insistent than they were able to abide, for soon I would hear these responses: "This is George," or "This is Roland." I was happy that they had discovered a way to placate their mother and yet not appear too prissy before their peers, and I tried to be less obtrusive in policing their language. Parenthetically, I realize today, however, that their peers prevailed with the verb *lie*, which has become almost universally *lay*.

I wasn't aware what my general status was with the two boys, although I did observe that the occasional help in school work for which they asked me was of a very generalized sort whereas they asked Paul for specific help in their arithmetic problems. The fact is that they didn't want either of us to help. My status suddenly changed when Roland was in the second grade. The SMU English Department called me one Sunday evening and asked me to teach several freshman English classes for them, beginning the next morning, because of the sudden serious illness of one of the professors. I could meet my classes while the boys were in school and not have to make any drastic changes in our way of living, I thought, so I happily went back to teaching. I immediately observed a change in the boys' attitude toward me. I had instant validation as a Person, different from the mother who formerly had made meals, given permission for field trips, and run car pools. They seemed to be proud of my occupation and found that I could help them occasionally when they had compositions to write in school - so long as I didn't insist on giving too much help.

Some funny things happened, one because of my regular travel to SMU to teach. Hotchkiss School was just three and a half blocks away, but two of those blocks were along a moderately busy street. Roland had been campaigning to ride his bike to school. We finally compromised that he might ride his bicycle *if* he walked it along busy Larmanda Street. One morning I left home for my classes just minutes after Roland had left on his bicycle. I found him *riding* merrily along Larmanda. I honked, he turned around, got off his bike, wheeled it to the back of the station wagon, and still without a word helped me put it into the car, asking meekly, "Will you take me to school?" A week later, he regained permission to ride his bicycle to school, safely I presume, having learned that mothers were probably omniscient.

Paul, the boys, and I all four soon learned, however, that the inevitable consequence of teaching composition classes is that there are many papers to be marked. Although I was home when the boys were, and fulfilled a creditable number of my routine chores, I was not entirely present a good part of the time because of having to concentrate on paper evaluations. They missed some of my former activities with them, and so did I. We all were relieved when my teaching career ended the next year with the return of the ill professor. But all three of us, George, Roland, and I, now knew that I was a real teacher, not just a nosy mother who corrected occasional slips of tongue.