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Queen Anne's Lace

Patricia Z. Cowden

This paper, an assignment for Chris Madden's Writing 105 Class, asked us to write about a time or event which caused us to change our minds about something important to us. I thought that there couldn't be a better change for me to write about than the one that seemed to be culminating at that moment. We were asked to explain and contextualize our original belief, identify how our ideas had changed, and account for the process of re-thinking. Writing Queen Anne’s Lace was quite a release, and the experience has left me fascinated with the power of writing to effect the writer as well as the reader.

You are Queen Anne's Lace--both delicate and hardy, with a visible heart--You don't need a garden to bloom, and you change color depending on how you are nurtured. --Eileen Sorrentino

Ah, yes! If I'm to be a flower, please, no hothouse variety here, no shrinking violet that can only survive when pampered. I would want to be beautiful, healthy, and delicate everywhere; in a field, by a road, in a vase, in a wreath in a child's hair. I would definitely want to be the type of flower that children pick when they wish to bestow on some lucky person the inestimable honor of their love.

My sister Eileen, the poet lawyer, passes the time, when she's running, assigning flowers to family members according to their personalities and how they "blossom." Then she makes up little poems about them.

I knew mine would have to be a wild flower (it is not politically correct to call us weeds) but what a surprise it was to be named for the very flower for which I had gotten into so much trouble when I was a child. I had just been sitting by the side of a field studying the intricacies of their lace. . .so pretty. Where had the time gone? As I remember it, I was old enough to tell time and to know I was in trouble, and I was right. My poor mother's eyes would get so clouded when I would tell her after such an incident just what I had been doing. "I was just watching the ants parade." "I was building dams and canals in the mud puddles." "I was tracing the beautiful patterns of the "Queen Anne's Lace." These would always be followed by. . .and I lost track of the time." I was lucky enough to have a mother who knew her child well and she knew that I wasn't lying. She was unlucky enough to have a child whom she knew well but found utterly baffling.

Childhood--a rich garden full of the promise of bloomings to come. . .Get real.

With the curious mind I had and fortunately haven't lost to adulthood, my childhood should have been just that. I wonder how I would have bloomed if it had been. However, school brought me into the care of the Brides of Christ, an unfortunate group of women, who when they were young girls and got caught up in the romance of marrying Christ, were not made aware of the fact that on their tired shoulders would fall the care of all Christ's children and much of His property as well. Many of them just didn't like children but they had no choice about teaching us and maintaining discipline in our classrooms.

On the first day of school in the first grade, I asked for homework. I just couldn't wait to start learning and I wanted to be like my older sister. Sister Mary Magdalene probably was trying to teach me what was going to be expected of me in school, not to overstep my boundaries. She gave me so much to do that I never asked again no matter how much I wanted to know about a topic my class was studying.

In second grade I had learned to memorize our reading assignments. In Sister Charlotte's class, if you lost your place during reading, you had to hold a spoonful of hot peppers in your mouth. I memorized the assignments so that I could and did recite the piece if I lost my place. The other children told her what I was doing, but she didn't believe it was possible. I had developed a damned good memory, but I lost my interest in books. My reading began to be slower than that of the other children.

In fourth grade Sister Michelle asked for a volunteer to print his or her name on the board on the first day of school. I proudly went up and printed with great care "Patty Ziobro," the name I had always used. Sister Michelle stood me in front of the class as "...the child who is so stupid she doesn't even know her own name." "Patty" is not a saint's name; I was supposed to have used "Patricia." I didn't volunteer another thing in a class for thirty-eight years.

By eighth grade my reading really was beginning to be a problem. It was clear that I was bright, but I worked so slowly that being bright wasn't enough. We were preparing to take entrance tests for Catholic high schools and I was not doing as well as was necessary in order to get into my school of choice. The Bride of the Year, Sister Agnes Gabriel, regularly locked me in a closet for passing notes. I continued to pass notes so that she would lock me in the closet and I could get out of the class that I had learned to hate. After a few months she caught on to
what I was doing and thought of a way to take care of two of her problems at once. She had been asked to try out and evaluate the Science Reading Lab program for students having difficulty in reading. However, she had only one Science Reading Lab to work with and twenty seven children in the class. Her other problem was what to do with me. A perfect match! She stopped locking the door and let me go into the closet will ingly to work on the lab. It was a wonderful program that got me back to appreciating reading and really did improve my reading skills considerably. She had found a clever solution, but if she had ever been a good teacher, too many children and too many years had made her bitter and burnt out.

I did get into a Catholic high school and eventu ally transferred into the one that I originally wanted to attend, but I was placed in the C sectionthe lowest academically. This affected how we were taught, the extracurricular activities we were admit ted to, even our social standing.

Being a third-rate member of my high school destroyed any confidence I had remaining. I was constantly frightened of the humiliating and brutal discipline. I had learned to expect to be disapproved of and I withered in that type of environmentstill do. As a defense I had developed a most remarkable ability to go unnoticed. . . to sort of disappear into the walls. It's a handy skill that I can still call upon to get through loosely organized security blocks, though I rarely use it because it isn't as easy to drop it as it is to adopt.

The quieter, less dramatic plants need to be supported and have attention drawn to them by other. . .
elements. Viki Ferreniea, Wildflowers in Your Garden

It was essential to my survival to find a means of building a positive self-image, and I was blessed to find it outside of the school setting, and in a non -academic environment I was very successful. Mrs. Bartels was the source of inspiration for an entire class of highschool girlseven the "in" crowdwho re mained active in Girl Scouting throughout their high -school careers. She simply introduced the idea of service. She believed, and said right out loud, that at this age kids want to start giving back. She mentored our troop while we worked in an orphanage, a cerebral palsy school, ran a county wide lending library of camping equipment, and led troops of little girl scouts. She made sure we did it all ourselves and regularly let us know how important we were, how much we were needed, how responsible our service jobs were. I blos somed as I met every expectation she had of me and have never lost the feeling that I was meant for great things and was capable of anything.

Ah, but there was still school. As a senior in high school I gave up my dream of a college degree. . . for the first time. Sister Bernadette, the Bride who served as guidance counselor, met with me once during my entire high school career. She told me what my IQ wasa big "no, no" in psychology circlesand said there was no reason I should be having so much trouble keeping my grades up. "You just aren't trying. You have to work for good grades. You'll never make it in college." I had been studying five hours every night, give or take an hour. I thought she was probably right about college, so I needed to learn a marketable skill. And I wanted one that would keep me mobile so I could go everywhere. I went to business school.

At my school, Katharine Gibbs, in 1964 academic achievement was not considered important for women. I was taking a liberal arts course, but that was not the emphasis. In business school one spent a lot of time and energy learning to work fast. I did all right in my college level courses. I did quite well in accuracy. But I failed in speed, and speed counted for a lot. How ever, Gibbs deserves its reputation as an excellent school, and for the first time I saw the difference between blind exercise of power and purposeful regu lations.

The experience went a long way toward getting me past indiscriminate resentment of authority. I planned to get a degree after I started working since I could see quite early on that a career that relied heavily on fast typing was not the career for me.

A weed is a plant out of place.
Carlton B. Lees & Lady Bird Johnson, Wild flowers Across America

I stumbled into a job working with emotionally disturbed children that I thought I'd try for a year before I got a "real" job. Most of the service work I had done in high school had been with children and I found their ready affection and unrestrained minds addictive. I stayed at that job for sixteen years. I was good at it and felt it was important. Promotions came until I couldn't be promoted any more and still work with the children. If I was going to stay in the field I needed a degree. . . a Masters. During that time there were several attempts to start working on my college degree. None of them ever got me past one night in the dreaded classroom, and I started evaluating why I had such a hard time with school.

At work I was learning about mental disorders, neurological problems and learning disabilities. I read articles, attended workshops, watched TV shows, did everythingexcept take courses to find out about the academic difficulties of the children I was working with and about my own. As people with learning disabilities described their
school experiences, it sounded like they were talking about my life: the teachers' accusing laziness, not believing how hard they were working; the use of memory to get by; letter reversals; lines of type moving on the page. I had it! I was learning disabled.

After these many years of working in a school for emotionally disturbed children, I went to work in a wonderful day care center. The children were beautiful, bright, well-cared-for, delightful; and I miss them still. Again promotions came until I was both the assistant director and a teacher.

However, after ten mostly happy years there, the school's financial problems made administrative decisions necessary that I could not support. I gave up being assistant director and thought I could go back to being only a teacher. It just doesn't work that way, and it became necessary for me to look for another place to work. In day care, when a teacher changes centers, she is hired as a completely new employee. After twenty-six years of experience, I would have been hired at under $5 an hour as an inexperienced teacher. This was impossible for me both financially and personally.

There had been several additional attempts to attend college during this time...I stopped counting at ten...but finally I had accepted the idea that a learning disability would prevent me from ever receiving a degree. It was actually a comfortable idea, and at least it explained the ever present question of why school had been such a disaster.

I had been able to avoid the worst of the consequences of my lack of an education. True, I had never had a good paying job nor one that carried any status, but I had been able to get by. Now, however, things had reached a climax. I couldn't stay in day care and there was nothing else I could do. Mingled with incredible desperation was the sense of failing myself, I remembered Mrs. Bartels. I was supposed to have been destined for great things. I should have been able to do anything, yet here I was with absolutely no options. My thinking was paralyzed except for repeating the question that had been asked about me so often in school, "What is wrong with me?"

One man's weed is another man's orchid.
Carlton B. Lees & Lady Bird Johnson, Wild flower Across America

I went to the Regional Learning Service in a sorry state and thus began a year of change in which I would turn myself absolutely inside-out. I cried my way through my first interview fully expecting to be told that I needed to compose myself if I was going to be able to find a job. Instead I was met by the encouragement and studied positive attitude of Sandra Clarke. I knew the drill. "Keep telling them that they can do it. Don't accept negative statements." How ever, I also knew a phony attitude by then, and that's not what I was seeing when I looked at Sandra. She gave me all the aptitude and interest tests and came up with the fact that the jobs I would be most successful in: happy and at, in fact, the only jobs I showed any interest in at all, required a degree...maybe two. "But I can't get a degree. I have never succeeded in school. I think I have a learning disability." Sandra didn't dispute my conclusions, but she did convince me to get tested.

The doctor was quite clear on learning disability but a classic case of testing anxiety, sort of a school phobia, enough even to be the lines of moving type. Odd that my reaction should not have been one of pure elation. But now I was back to facing the impossible challenge of school. I didn't think I could go back to that (and I was right), but I didn't have any idea of what to do. The doctor recommended that I see a therapist specifically to address the issue of my panic in school. I didn't like that idea at all, but while I had given up my dream of getting a degree, I never did lose my desire to have one. And, after all, I really had no choice.

Off I went in the middle of January to see Dr. Sprafkin, oozing wariness from every pore. What an office! They still had their Christmas decorations up. These were people after my own heart. There was a hole in the receptionist's counter at floor level. It wasn't particularly noticeable until one of the office cats came strolling out for its tithe of head scratches. I was in the office I always had wanted to work in. It made sense. How could I feel wary in a place like this?

Dr. Sprafkin was slightly built and a little too neat. In a reserved way, he exuded competence; I liked him. But he related to me in a rather remote way and was a little shy and upright. He hardly seemed the type to be able to really get into my soul. Why should it have come as such a surprise that he wasn't all that interested in my soul? He was there simply to teach me the tools I needed to address a particular problem and that was just what he began to do. I had signed up for an Anthropology course and right away we started learning what to do when panic begins to rear its ugly head...what to do when I see a blue book. He taught me to relax and to see myself succeeding. It was one of the hardest years of my life. I shook, I cried, I worried, I did relaxation exercises incessantly, I got an A. But that A wasn't what made me decide I could back to school. There were two other things that happened that sealed my decision. One was simply the way I reacted when my Anthropology class was over. I expected the usual end-of-the-school-year reaction of relief coupled with a strong desire to throw my books into the nearest river. I was astonished to find myself at a bit of a loss and to feel that I couldn't wait to do it again. I had slain the dragon. That feeling answered many of my doubts about spending so much time taking classes and would not have been there without Dr. Sprafkin and Sandra Clarke. The other incident was not so positive.
Shortly after I finished my anthropology class, I went to see a college admissions counselor to see just how many credits I still needed to receive my degree. When he heard of the courses I had taken at Katharine Gibbs, he told me that I should have sixty credits. I was delighted. I really could do this. It wasn't going to take all that long to finish just my junior and senior year. Two weeks later I was told that none of my college level courses could be counted. I had no credits at all. My first reaction was, "That's it. I really can't do this." My next reaction was, "I've gone too far and worked too hard. I can't not do this." The dye was cast.

I hired someone to teach me WordPerfect and fell in love with computers. I quit my job with no where else to go, but with a plan to gain experience in temporary jobs, then to apply for work at S.U. so I could go to college.

Wildflowers represent nature's most successful marriage of beauty and resilience, strength and delicacy. Viki Ferreniea, Wildflowers in Your Garden

So here I am a second semester freshman. I know that I can succeed in school. I'm too old for a Freshman and that tickles me, even though much of the rest of my life will be spent in school. No longer do I just want the degree. I want to learn about almost everything. Sometimes it feels like I'm building dams and canals in puddles or tracing the intricacies of Queen Anne's Lace. My story is hardly told. I'm a long way from my degree, but if the question is, "When will that old Freshman ever realize her dream?" The answer is, "I already am."