Mary J. Rouse Award Acceptance Speech

Christine Thompson

Ten years ago, at another NAEA conference in another Texas city, I accepted a faculty position at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was a position for which I had applied with great reluctance and trepidation, and only, finally, in response to almost daily phone calls from George Hardiman, assuring me that (a) this *was* the best job in the country, if not the civilized universe, that we were talking about; and (b) that, despite the fact that I was known to practice phenomenology, I would be welcome in that last bastion of empiricism. He was right, on both counts.

In the almost-ten-years I have been at Illinois, there have been tremendous changes in that program, in our field, and in my life. I've almost come to accept the melancholy proposition that constant change—comings and goings, triumphs and losses in unceasing alteration—propels life onward. This summer, George Hardiman will retire. An era will end. But the more immediate and more personal loss will come to those of us who work with George and will resonate in the silence that he leaves behind.

George's impending departure, following so closely the death of my mentor and our mutual friend, Marilyn Zurmuehlen, has made us both more sentimental than usual. Not long ago, as he sifted through 26 years of debris retrieved from closets and file drawers, George discovered a black and white slide, thirty years old, an image dating from his graduate school days at Penn State. He called me into his office to see it. "I know you'll recognize the guy on the right," he said, "but do you know who that is with me?" Though her back is turned to the camera, and the vintage 1966 babushka was banished from her wardrobe long before we met, the woman beside George is, quite unmistakably, Marilyn.

I love this image of two very young people, working together to construct something enduring and useful, moving toward a new phase of their professional lives, unable to imagine the influence they would have on people they had yet to meet in all the years to come. This image contains multitudes: These colleagues and friends, oblivious at this moment to anything beyond the weight of the structure balanced in their hands, eventually became teachers to me and to many others who are my colleagues and friends. Through us, and through our students, their influence will long endure. I thought it appropriate to share this slide with you, and to reflect, for a moment or two, upon the remarkable good fortune that brings people together in combinations and circumstances that nurture professional life.

Marilyn liked the term "mentor" and the concept of "mentoring." I must admit that I'm wary of these terms: They remind me of a high school social studies teacher who signed his marginal notes, "Your

friendly mentor," and seemed to me, even then, to presume too much. But I think that Marilyn embraced the concept of mentoring both as an acknowledgment of the transformation that *should* occur with a student's graduation, and as an assurance that relationships that meant much to her would continue. Perhaps, too, a term is needed to emphasize the mutual choice involved in the decision to continue a teaching relationship beyond the end prescribed by semester hours accumulated and academic rituals completed. To be chosen in this way is a great gift and an affirmation, an art of pure generosity and faith.

Marilyn was an extraordinary post-graduate mentor. She gave me tremendous, unfailing support and respect. At the same time, she gave me independence, and the sanction to diverge from the path upon which I had embarked. She believed, after all, that the circumstances of our lives present certain questions as most urgent, and that research should reflect the immediacy of our everyday involvements. She recognized continuity underlying change. She continued to teach me as she always had, sharing her stories and her sources, intermittently, across distance. Many times since Marilyn's death, my husband has posed the question—"What would Marilyn do?"—in response to the academic crisis of that day. It is a measure upon which I will continue to rely.

When Marilyn accepted the June King McFee Award in Kansas City in 1990, I was a bit startled when, in the course of sharing a story about George Hardiman, she referred to him as my mentor. At the time, I think I considered mentoring a monogamous relationship. But it is certainly true that George has imparted survival skills that I draw upon daily. He has admitted me to a perspective on the world that coincides only partially with my own, and thus reveals aspects of reality which I would not have seen without his help. He has encouraged me, by his example and his involvement, to recognize that the complexity and the brevity of life demand that we keep our attention tightly focused on things that matter. He has cleared paths for me, and allowed me to forge my own. Long after he has retreated to the Wisconsin woods, I will continue to learn from him.

In her book, *Composing a Life,* (198), Mary Catherine Bateson observed that "We grow in dialogue, not only through the rare intensity of passionate collaboration, but through a multiplicity of forms of friendship and collegiality. . . When we are fortunate, of course, we have many friends, men and women, and work alongside many different kinds of people, learning and teaching in complex complementarities. But a few relationships become so central that they structure the sense of the whole" (pp. 74-75).

The professional community to which everyone in this room belongs, which extends far beyond this circle, is an exceptionally intimate and welcoming one. We are, after all, united by our interest in two of the most enduring and complicated of human activities, art and education. There are so many ways of approaching this common ground, of exploring this terrain, of living within its fluid ecology. There are, inevitably, conflicts, border disputes, territorial imperatives asserted and denied. And yet there is among us a strong and productive vein of commitment and conviction. Perhaps because we are often called upon to explain and defend what we believe and what we do, we tend to be pretty sure of ourselves, articulate, and sensitive to implication. Perhaps

because any marginal form of existence can tax the mind and the spirit so severely, we appreciate those who refresh our spirits and elevate our minds. I've encountered many such people, traveling about this field—people I know only indirectly through their words and their work, and many others with whom I've been lucky enough to share some time en route. These relationships, with teachers and mentors, with good friends and colleagues and students are infinite in form, but always expansive in their influence.

Among my favorite passages in Martin Buber's (1965) writings on education—and the grounding of much of my thinking about the enterprise in which we are engaged—is his meditation on the condition Alfred Schutz termed "wide-awakeness" (1967, 1970). As Buber explained:

> In spite of all similarities every living situation has, like a new-born child, a new face that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction which cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you (p. 114).

Buber himself admitted how incredibly difficult it is to respond consistently to these requirements. But even occasional, intermittent, imperfect efforts to do so are amply rewarded. When we manage this shift of attention, when we become attuned to the situations in which we live, we discover unsuspected texture and intricacy in the weave of daily life. When we "reflect on the ordinary," as Marilyn Zurmuehlen advised, we recognize the questions that appear and persist to define the direction of our professional life, the emergent contribution that we alone can make. If we cultivate attentiveness to all aspects of our experience, we may find also that our personal and professional lives intertwine in unexpectedly harmonious patterns.

During the last five years of my graduate study at The University of Iowa, I supervised beginning teachers as they taught children in Saturday art classes. I was enthralled by the transformative power of this experience, by the almost miraculous changes that I witnessed, each semester, as students began to think of themselves as teachers. My dissertation topic was simply an extension of my teaching, a deeper and more sustained examination of a process which I had "hitherto simply lived."

My initial teaching assignments at Illinois involved very different groups of students, at different moments in their preparation for teaching, in courses devoted to methods and theory, a step or two removed from the immediacy of teaching. It took some time to establish new bearings, in a situation in which the questions I brought with me seemed impossible to pursue. It took some time, too, to rebound from the predictable bout of postpartum depression that followed expulsion from the garden that graduate school at Iowa had been, to adjust to the sudden distance from family and friends, to establish new routines and relationships.

Among the most grueling adjustments we faced was the necessity of enrolling our son, not quite three at the time, in day care, so that both of his parents could work at approximately the same time. The day care center we found was close to home, clean, well-appointed, sensibly organized, and staffed by intelligent and caring people who appreciated Paul and truly nurtured his growth. It was such a good environment in so many ways, in

fact, that I *almost* didn't mind that the children seldom seemed to draw, rarely painted, and dutifully returned their aggregates of playdough to a sealed container at the end of playtime. Paul's experience in this very good early childhood setting alerted me to a problem which, I soon learned, was widespread and virulent: Quite simply, very few provisions were made for art in many preschool settings. Despite all the descriptions of development and prescriptions for classroom practice that art educators and psychologists and early childhood educators had offered, teachers of young children didn't seem to see the point of art activities. The end of creative expression didn't seem to justify the sorely trying means of a roomful of tempera-wielding toddlers. Much of the advice available was designed to caution parents against interfering with the delicately-calibrated process of "spontaneous self-instruction" (Kellogg, 1970) that seems to produce such spectacular results. Art was not considered an educational issue where preschoolers were concerned; it was a developmental phenomenon to be preserved and protected.

Seven years ago, when Paul was old enough, we enrolled him in Saturday art classes sponsored by our program and taught by our students. I began to spend my Saturday mornings in the company of young children. For a while, I just watched and learned, constantly amazed at how much we had missed by focusing exclusively on single children and isolated creative acts. Sandy Bales, who welcomed me into these classes which she supervised, soon joined me in a study of the conversations that occur when preschool and kindergarten children draw together. Along the way, I found many remarkable people who believe that children's initial encounters with art in educational settings can be far more engaging and authentic and significant than they typically are.

Eventually, I proposed a course which allows me to work directly with prospective early childhood teachers as they teach art to preschool and kindergarten children on Saturday mornings. This course is a gift to me, a remarkable fusion of my interests in beginnings and transitions, in teacher education and early childhood art. I do less formal research during semesters when I'm involved in this teaching, but I learn so much more—about children's abilities and interests and the workings of their minds, and about the quality of preparation that can be provided for teachers of young children, when the role of art in early childhood learning is more clearly understood.

My life, at its best, is quite ordinary and uneventful, always busy but often tranquil enough to permit long phone calls to good friends in Montana, and North Carolina, and points in between, to schedule video nights and evening walks with my husband and son and one dinner a week with friends from the School of Art and Design, to stay close to my large and wonderfully complicated family. My husband and son, who live graciously among stacks of books, papers, notes, amid intermittent bursts of chaos, are remarkable people. I treasure the everydayness we've created together.

Stephen Strasser (1966) offered a memorable tribute to our essential interdependence: "If I wish to expand my limited existence, I must direct myself toward other beings. For they are what I am not; they possess what I lack; they know what I don't know" (p.53). I am honored to receive the Mary J. Rouse Award, honored

by the letters written in my behalf by several people who "expand my limited existence" (Strasser, 1969, p. 53) in innumerable ways. My very special thanks to my friend and colleague, Betsy Delacruz, who stole time from her own work—at a crucial moment in its development—to prepare lengthy and impassioned nomination papers. I am touched by the support of Laura Chapman, Elizabeth Sacca, and Elizabeth Cole, who wrote so beautifully and generously in my behalf. These are people who inspire and instruct through their lives and their work; I am most fortunate to know them all. Finally, I extend my deep gratitude to Elizabeth Garber and to all members of the Women's Caucus for all that you do to enhance the lives and work of every member of this profession.

Christine Thompson and Elizabeth Delacruz

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS
MARY J. ROUSE AWARD

In recognition of the contributions of an early professional in the field of art education.

The Women's Caucus of the National Art Education Association invites nominations for the annual Mary J. Rouse Award given in honor of Mary J. Rouse, a highly respected and professionally active art educator, whose untimely death in 1976 deeply affected the art education profession. The Rouse Award is given to honor an early professional who has evidenced potential to make a significant contribution to the art education profession.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA:

The nominee should be a young or early professional, female or male, at any level, who has demonstrated outstanding performance in scholarship, leadership, and teaching. Current members of the Executive Board of the NAEA Women's Caucus may not be nominated.

NOMINATION PROCESS:

1. Nominations may be submitted by a mentor or any NAEA member.
2. The nomination announcement will appear in the NAEA News and the Women's Caucus REPORT.

APPLICATION REQUIREMENTS:

1. Current membership of nominee in NAEA.
2. Current vita of the nominee for the award.
3. Cover letter from the person nominating the candidate.
4. Brief statement, one double-spaced typewritten page, by the nominee about her/his work.
5. Supplementary letters of recommendations from three other art educators. Extra letters sent to the Chair of the Selection Committee will be returned to the nominator.
6. Vita, cover letter, statement by the nominee,