



# Why I Entered Teaching, Why I Stay

*They were questions that intimidated several confident, capable, college-educated teachers. They were questions that probed the heart.*

JUDITH SHIVELY

Questions that probe my heart are hard to answer. Not because I don't have an answer, but because I'm not sure I have the right words. I'd rather not say anything than be misunderstood. Such a question came to me recently: "Why did I enter teaching?"

Our assistant superintendent one morning requested this information in writing. Sleepy colleagues awoke quickly as they read the memo, and the tension around the office mailboxes was suffocating.

Marilyn, who always does the proper thing, was filling hers out. She was interrupted by John, peering over her shoulder.

"Let me see what you wrote. I've

always wondered why you teach."

"Oh, god. I'm not answering that," mumbled Sue, throwing her memo away. "Why does she want to know anyway? I'm here because I need the paycheck."

"When I entered college, women could become teachers or nurses. I had little choice," mused Sally.

"My mother chose for me. She said, 'Tim, you'd make a wonderful teacher. It's a wonderful life to be a teacher. Be a teacher.' Being a good son, here I am. Sometimes mothers can be wrong."

"Well, I couldn't get into law school," laughed Joe.

The questions had become a joke. People were embarrassed. It was too difficult to answer. They laughed

instead. Later, in the teacher's lounge, I heard teachers contriving responses.

"Hey, Jane, you could say you're a teacher because you weren't accepted into the Foreign Legion," joked Sally.

Jane snapped back, "Tell her you're a manic-depressive and this is the most depressing job you could find."

Joe spoke as he wrote, "I'm here because all the positions for company presidents were filled."

Janet stormed in, "After the morning I had, I'm going to say it's the next best thing to living in an insane asylum."

Some of these responses were sent along to central office on the anonymous response forms. The superintendent then created a newsletter to give us a "boost of pride." All of the published

comments were serious and appropriate, for example, "I love children," "I like to believe I was one of those born to teach," "I greatly admired my 5th grade teacher." Pretty answers. None of the funny ones were used. But they may have held some truth.

How is it that we make decisions? Do we know? Do we choose to be teachers, accountants, nurses, doctors, insurance salesmen, coaches, or administrators, or do these professions choose us?

So many things occur in our lives that affect decision-making.

This, I think, is why the question of "Why did you enter teaching?" became a joke. For some, it was uncomfortable to admit teaching wasn't a lifelong dream. Maybe because of parental pressure, money, or other constraining factors, it was the best choice of the choices available. Perhaps for some, it was depressing to recognize they were in a job they hadn't chosen. Or perhaps because the question had not been consciously addressed before, it was threatening. I don't know, of course, but I do know the question intimidated several confident, capable, college-educated folks.

I've thought of it often. Why did I become a teacher? One sentence answers it simply. It was a gift. A gift given to me by my high school principal, Edwin Jones. During my senior year I worked in the office as a girl Friday. One day he asked about my plans for college; I explained that I had none but wished I did. He felt I would qualify for a scholarship and offered to take me for an interview at George Peabody College. He and Dr. Farley, the superintendent, were going to Nashville the following week and would take me along if my parents agreed. I was thrilled. I was scared.

Very early one morning in March 1957, we left for Nashville. Me in the backseat, Mr. Jones driving, and Dr. Farley up front. I prayed I wouldn't get carsick. They talked and talked and I sat quietly in the backseat wondering

**The first day of school never gets easier. I awake early, my stomach feels tight, and I re-experience the feelings of my childhood. Will I be good enough? Can I do it? I am again in the backseat of a car.**

what was to come and hoping I wouldn't embarrass myself. Hoping I'd be good enough. It turned out to be the most important car ride of my life.

I survived the interview and the exams. Made it through lunch and the fried seafood platter, recommended by my friends. I'd never eaten fried seafood in my life. I would have chosen the hamburg platter. Maybe they felt it was the beginning of my education.

A few weeks later I received a letter announcing that I was awarded a scholarship. I was thrilled, my parents were proud, and college was to be a part of my life. George Peabody College was and is dedicated to educating teachers. Therefore, I was on my way to my career as a teacher. Not because of a drive on my part to be a teacher but because of a desire to go to college, to make my world bigger than my hometown, and to "do better." I was on my way because one man believed I could and his believing it helped me believe it, too.

So, why did I enter teaching? It was the best I could do.

### **Why Do I Stay?**

The better question may be, "Why do I stay?" This profession has many critics. While teachers must be certified and meet high educational standards, we are under the jurisdiction of an elected

school board. Every parent, every citizen feels in a position to evaluate teachers because they were once students. Teachers themselves seldom feel satisfied with their abilities. We participate in workshops, attend conferences, go to summer school, striving to find keys to unlock all the problem learners who come into our lives. We struggle to validate our philosophies as educators and find better ways to teach. Our days interacting with active young people are stressful and demanding. Hours of at-home planning, kids to agonize over, little credit. Who needs it?

I do.

I love my job although I know many people who, truthfully, can't make that statement. Each year as school begins I am nervous. That first day of school never gets easier. I awake early, my stomach feels tight, and I re-experience the feelings of my childhood. Will I be good enough? Can I do it? I am again in the backseat of the car.

And it happens again: "Hello, Mrs. Shively," spoken with the warm smile and sparkling eyes of a child. A gift. It is those first smiles, those greetings, those hugs and clasped hands from peers and children that magically make me a believer in myself and what I'm about. We share a secret. We know that we are involved in serious business.

The year unfolds with the diversity and sameness that life gives to all things. I read stories to students, they in turn read to me. We write together, share our pieces, struggle to make them better. We read and discuss novels, tell stories, learn about authors, work on research projects, laugh, argue, and create the magic of learning together.

After sharing some rainbow stories one week in first grade, Matthew, a boy who seldom spoke and looked at me from behind half-closed eyes, ran into my office shouting, "Mrs. Shively, there's a rainbow out front, come see!" We arrived in time to hold hands and watch it melt from the sky.

This year Rachel and Becky

approached me with big smiles and books in their arms. "We like to check out the same library book now. We decide which pages to read so we can discuss the story as we go along. It's fun." Not an unusual story except that Rachel is in the talented and gifted program; Becky is labeled "slow learner." The girls have become friends because Becky is no longer pulled out of the classroom. Friendship has made Rachel into a peer tutor. She reads challenging material on her own, but on this day the book selected was one that Becky could read, too. How rewarding to know that your example of shared book experience has led third graders to discover this specialness about reading.

The gifts continue to come. Three years ago I began a presentation to kindergarten teachers by saying, "The first responsibility we have in kindergarten is to help kids believe in themselves as readers and writers." Their gasps, quickly followed by folded arms, told me these teachers disagreed. "These kids can't read or write. We have a readiness program," they told me. "Can we talk about this?" I asked. That old backseat feeling hit me again. Teachers become comfortable with what they are doing and don't readily welcome questions or suggestions.

Lucretia, however, a fine teacher, began to question what was happening in her classroom. After much exploration and study, she, too, has embraced the whole language/natural learning philosophy. Our interpretations aren't always the same, fortunately, but we now share a common vision. She has become excited about a job that had become routine. She says, "I'm a new person."

When Nick read his dinosaur story to me, it was a celebration of the growth and development of Nick and Lucretia. "Nick, tell how you wrote this story?" "Okay," replied Nick. "It's about a dinosaur coming to dinner. I told what we did before dinner, what we ate, and what we did after dinner. You know what I did to spell my dinosaur's name?"

**There was Tommy, with long hair, blue jeans, blue jean jacket, and work boots, stretched out reading. Suddenly he turned to me and blurted, "Is this dog going to die? I don't want this dog to die."**

I went to my dinosaur book and looked for the word under the picture and wrote it the same way." "Wonderful," I responded. "That's just the way adults spell long words correctly. They check them out in a book."

Perhaps more important is Tommy's story. He was in an 8th grade remedial reading class with 11 boys and 3 girls. School had never been fun for any of them. The first day we met, Tommy announced, "Ain't nobody made me read books and you won't neither." At 15, Tommy stood taller already than my five feet, five inches. I smiled and said, "Welcome to room 208. Find a seat you'd like."

We made an agreement. I believe a student has the right to choose to fail if that's what he wants and I explained this to Tommy. He liked the idea. For a while.

We began reading and discussing our readings. Tommy listened and attempted to join in. I quietly gave him a brief "shh" sign to remind him of our agreement. After a few weeks of boredom, a request. "Give me one of them notebooks. Maybe I'll read this book." The book was *Stonefox* by John Reynolds Gardiner.

Each class began with 15 minutes of sustained silent reading. And there was Tommy with long hair, blue jeans, blue jean jacket, heavy work boots, stretched out reading. Suddenly, he turned toward me and blurted out, "Is this dog going to die? I don't want this dog to die."

"Shh," again from me. "Just read on, Tommy." I glanced at the clock. Reading time was almost up. My pulse raced. Would the kids notice? I couldn't ruin this moment for Tommy. His lips were occasionally moving as he read, but his body was rigid. I knew he was reaching the climax of the story and the dog was going to die. Often kids cry because it is that powerful. What would he do?

I peeked at the class while pretending to read, hoping the restless ones wouldn't announce "time's up." I couldn't read a word. Ten more minutes passed. Slowly Tommy closed the book and sat staring down at his lap. I could hardly breathe; Tommy wasn't big on sensitivity. His dialogue mostly expressed how tough he was: "I could do that," "I could live on my own," "Nobody tells me what to do." But *Stonefox* had made him quiet.

Books started closing. Kids coughed. Pencils dropped. Yet, I continued to read. Tommy needed a gift of time. He stood up. Still, I read. He sauntered toward my reading chair, stopped at my desk, and dropped the book there. I looked up. "I want another book just like that one."

Why did I enter teaching? It was a gift from my high school principal. Why do I stay? Because of the magic, the joy, and the celebrations. Because the growth and development of the kids is the growth and development of me. Like *Miss Rumphius* in Barbara Coony's book, it is my way to make the world more beautiful. □

## References

- Coony, B. (1982). *Miss Rumphius*. New York: Viking Penguin Press.  
Gardiner, J. R. (1980). *Stonefox*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers.

**Judith Shively** is a reading/language arts consultant. She can be reached at 155 Woodchuck Lane, Harwinton, CT 06791.