
September 2016

The Unwanted Student

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Recommended Citation

David, Hannah (2016) "The Unwanted Student," *The Idea of an Essay*: Vol. 3 , Article 8.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol3/iss1/8

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The Unwanted Student

By Hannah David

Hannah David is a college senior with a double major in Journalism and Political Science. She is the honored mother of seven-year-old Bella. Hannah is a classically trained dancer. She dedicated over a decade to the performing arts as a professional actress and ballerina before leaving her home state of Hawaii to attend college. Hannah has always valued writing, and she enjoys using her life experiences as the foundation of her literary craft.

I wouldn't say that I'm the best wordsmith, but I know that I can manage pretty well. I have always loved words and their meanings, so being able to spell and pronounce words correctly has great significance to me.

I attended a private school from kindergarten to the tenth grade. I truly resented going to school, and I felt like my teachers took for granted my need to trust them with my vulnerable yet teachable mind. Though I longed to be, I wasn't a particularly academic child. I did, however, enjoy words and spelling. Perhaps I gauged my intellect by my ability to spell better than most of the older kids that I knew in school. Perhaps I wanted to be recognized as a bright and valuable child with limitless potential, not as a hopeless one. Or, perhaps I just never wanted to experience the embarrassing humiliation and sadness that I consistently experienced in first grade under the direction of Miss Radin, my school teacher.

Quite the Southern Bell, Miss Radin; a petite, young, and very single, fire-cracker, frizzy haired, overly modest, but not too bad looking, busy-bodied, elementary school teacher, recently transplanted from Greenville, South Carolina's bachelor ridden Bob Jones' University to "educate and save" the heathen children of Kauai's North Shore. You're thinking right about now that the only thing this little woman is missing is her broomstick. Well, I'm sure she had one of those too. At this academy administrators and educators were still permitted to strike their pupils dare we

ever so much as step out of line or laugh without permission. If you catch my drift, I hated school and I certainly wasn't fond of Miss Radin. To be perfectly clear, I wasn't an unruly child who constantly needed to be reminded of my place, and I was not outspoken, or an eager to disrupt the class with pranks and laughter "class clown" type. No. I was quiet and respectful, but that was completely out of fear. The trust I should have had in Miss Radin was overtaken by shame, which resulted in a bitterness for teachers and the classroom. I felt utterly stupid every time I made a mistake or failed to understand her.

For such a lovely little classroom decorated with sixteen name-bearing desks stacked neatly side-by-side, Lincoln logs and toy train sets, colorful cubby bins and Legos lining the alphabet-pictured walls, a beautiful blackboard with white chalk marks waiting to be erased and the classic pencil cup, apple-bearing teacher's desk in the far right-hand corner of the room with aromatic plumeria trees among the lush green landscape just beyond the windows, this room felt like a cold, dark prison.

One warm Hawaiian morning right before recess Miss Radin verbally administered a spelling test to her class of sixteen, five and six year old, tanned, flip-flop wearing girls and boys. The test had a total of twelve words; a hefty load for us first graders. This was a real, bona-fide test, but I was ready for it. Immediately following the test Miss Radin graded the papers to discover that I was the only student to have spelled every word correctly, and Ace the test. Instead of graciously congratulating me on my spelling and very legible penmanship, and posting my exceptional work on the board for the class to admire (as she had made habit of with perfectly scored papers by various other students), she slowly lowered all four feet and ten inches of herself to my small, six-year-old frame sitting humbly at my desk, to look me square in my eyes.

"Hannah, how did you cheat on your spelling test?" she demanded in her shrill, snappy voice.

This was not a question of whether or not I cheated. She was certain of her accusation. In her mind, I was guilty as sin.

"I didn't cheat Miss Radin. I know all the words. I practiced them with my mom last night before bed and on our way to school

today. I didn't cheat Miss Radin. I promise." I pleaded as my lower lip quivered and my eyes moistened under her sharp, accusing gaze.

I was humiliated, embarrassed, scared and nervous. But why? I knew the material. I loved to spell. The ability to write and discover words was incredible to me. I always admired how my mother wrote so beautifully and swiftly. It was a big deal to me that actual words would connect and form sentences and stories from a pencil in my own hand. I was deservedly very proud of myself to be able to perform such a fascinating and lovely task.

Why, being my main educator in reading, writing and arithmetic, did Miss Radin doubt my abilities? I felt the fire and brimstone burning even deeper than that though. She doubted my intellect. She doubted my competency. She doubted me, and I certainly felt stupid.

Slowly rising from her hulking position over me, Miss Radin summoned a fellow teacher to accompany our class to recess. I sheepishly began to come around from behind my desk to join my classmates outside for the brief, fifteen minute reprieve from our military-like class time, when I was ordered to sit back down.

"You do not have the privilege of participating in recess today Hannah David. Sit down. Take out your pencil and a blank sheet of paper. Be sure there are absolutely no words on your paper. You will retake the spelling test and you are not to have any help. Am I understood?" Miss Radin barked.

"Yes Miss Radin." My tiny frightened voice managed to squeak.

I sat down and obeyed my orders all the while imagining the fresh air and exciting hula-hoop competitions I was missing. Playing and laughing with my friends in the moist grass and hot Kauai sun was the best part of the day. I always counted down the minutes to recess, but today my excitement was in vain. Miss Radin, once again, verbally administered the twelve word spelling test to the only student she should have been proud of.

I was nervous. I tried to focus as doubt and shame coursed through my body. My mind was racing.

"Did I cheat? I don't think I cheated. I did my very best. Why am I in trouble? What did I do wrong? Why is she so mean and angry with me all the time? I wish I were her favorite like Jordan or Kelsey. She's so nice to them even when they miss words or

talk before they're called upon. Maybe if I show her how smart I am then she'll pick me to be Peter Rabbit in the school play. I really, really hope so."

Racing at a million miles a minute my mind entertained every possibility, good and bad. If I messed up I knew I'd be in major trouble, but if I proved to her that I knew the words and got them all right, again, then maybe I would become her favorite or get to be someone special in the school play. Or, maybe she wouldn't treat me like a degenerate, unwanted heathen child anymore. This was all wasteful, wishful thinking.

Once again, I spelled all twelve words perfectly regardless of her naming them in a different order- her futile, ill willed attempt to confuse me. No one helped me the first time or the second time. I was not assisted in any way. I did not cheat. I just simply knew my material because my loving and gracious mother spent time with me perfecting my personally celebrated literary craft. I was certainly proud of myself, but that was short-lived as was every other private victory I had in that classroom, year after year.

Miss Radin not only did not post my A+ paper on the board for students and parents to admire, she certainly did not congratulate me for my hard work. She did not acknowledge my honesty or apologize for her accusations. Miss Radin did not put me in the ensemble of the production of Peter Rabbit, or even slightly begin to value me as her student. I'm sure she would have held me back a grade if she had merit to do so, but she didn't. Nothing I accomplished mattered to her regardless of it being a positive reflection on her instruction.

Miss Radin's actions and attitude that day, and every day, had deep, long lasting effects on me. She planted a seed of bitterness and distrust for instructors in my heart. I learned that day that my best didn't matter.

I, and many others, have always been completely perplexed as to why a young woman with all of her righteous indignation and intolerance, who absolutely loved the South, who still believed in racial segregation, who had very little patience for children and completely disagreed with our laid back, bikini-clad, barefoot, beach going, liberal Hawaiian-style way of life, would come to the tropics and attempt to convert such pagans. She came with the absolute wrong attitude and intentions, and damaged a lot of young hearts and minds in the process.

Because of experiences like this, and many other horrible memories, I gave up in grade school. It took me a decade after my mandatory high school servitude to consider attending college and to trust instructors with my mind, heart and potential in a classroom setting. I had to retrain my brain to be receptive to knowledge, and my heart to be humble and teachable. I have no doubt that I am not stupid. I know that am able, I am competent, and I have endless intellect. But, these seemingly innate identifications had to be relearned. It has not been easy, but searching for and reclaiming my self-worth through education has turned unpleasant memories, such as this, from stumbling blocks to stepping-stones.

I realize now that doing my best matters tremendously no matter who is keeping score. I can't do anyone else's best but my own. The only person my very best effort needs to matter to is me. If others recognize my efforts, what a bonus!