



☞ “There was a connection back there.”

—B. WARNECKE, SEPTEMBER 5, 2008

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ONE



Looking for Stars

My brother was already in school by the time I was born, and my earliest memory is of Jimmy going to school every day, leaving me to think of the future when I could go to “big school” myself. In the afternoons I would press my nose against the picture window in the den, watching for the big yellow school bus and listening for the screech of air brakes as the bus stopped at the top of the hill to deliver Jimmy home.

Finally, in August 1963, the time came for me to start school. I felt so grown up when my mother took me to Pic ’n Pay to buy school shoes. Back then girls were required to wear dresses, and to go with them, Mama purchased saddle oxfords that I hated and shiny black patent leather shoes that I loved. I called them Sunday School shoes. For

years, whenever I would hear the clip-clop of shoes on hardwood, I would think *Sunday School shoes*. My mother, a talented seamstress, made many of my dresses for me. She could do amazing things with rickrack and smocking. Plaid jumpers and skirts were the style of the first grade that year, and Mama made sure I went to school with the best-pressed version she could afford.

At the time, in Durham, North Carolina, where I grew up, there was no public kindergarten, so my first year of school was first grade. My birthday is in September, so I was usually the youngest in my class, and often began the school year feeling behind. But first grade was different. I didn't know I was the youngest; I was just giddy with excitement. I'd never been a quiet child at home, and I'm sure my parents were just as ready for me to be in school as I was to go—surely some of my energy would be consumed there.



There was one problem that kept me from being a carefree little first grader: the teacher hated me.

When I arrived at Bragtown Elementary, though, my heart was broken. School was nothing like what I had hoped it would be, even though we were learning to read, something all first graders look forward to doing. I was placed

in the redbird group, and even as a five-year-old I knew that the redbirds could read better than the bluebirds or the blackbirds. But there was one problem that kept me from being a carefree little first grader: the teacher hated me.

Mrs. Riley looked to me as if she was at least ninety years old, with a lopsided bun atop her head and menacing granny glasses perched on her nose. I don't remember her ever smiling unless she was talking to one particular student: Sheila.

Sheila was beautiful, a blue-eyed, blonde-haired cherub. She looked like a doll, and everyone in class worked hard to befriend her. I remember the day she told me where she lived—“It’s right behind the candy store,” she said. Then I knew she really *was* enchanted.

My mother and Sheila’s mother were the grade mother chairs—they worked together to arrange all the class parties and to ensure that cupcakes were brought to every school event. When they met to plan, I got to visit Sheila’s house behind the candy store. It was a wonderland of toys, including Barbie and all her accessories. Sheila had a section of the den reserved just for her Barbie stuff—the Barbie house, the Barbie Corvette, the Barbie pool . . . all things Barbie.

At home, I pulled leaves off of trees, stirred them in a pot to play house, and dressed up my cat (who was much less accommodating than Barbie). My sister and I played in the lot behind our house, a dumping ground for old pipes, pieces of concrete, and slabs of wood. We literally yelled out to Mama, “We’re going to play in the junkyard” as we ran off to our version of a playground. So the world Sheila lived in was a different one, and I knew it right away—but felt no envy, as small children are innocent about such things. She was my friend, and I loved her.

Mrs. Riley adored her too, and didn’t try to hide that fact from the rest of the class. When it became obvious that the teacher had an errand to be run, I would slide to the edge of my desk and raise my hand as high as I could. But it was always Sheila who went and Sheila who collected the ice cream and milk money and distributed the ice cream and milk. Later on, in fifth grade, she would be the beautiful witch Glinda in the Bragtown School production of *The Wizard of Oz*.



In first grade I could barely muster a smile.


With my brown eyes and unruly black hair, I was the Wicked Witch of the West to Sheila's Glinda. And I was skinny—no matter how much I ate, my weight never seemed to catch up to my height. I was sure that if I were prettier or blonder, or had a houseful of

Barbies, Mrs. Riley would like me more. But the more I tried to please her, the more annoyed she seemed. I can remember her impatience as we read. A mispronounced word could easily bring a frown or a grimace. (Of course, I wasn't the only one on the receiving end of these looks; my friend in the bluebird group finally refused to read, too intimidated by Mrs. Riley's fearsome expressions.) First grade was proving to be a grave disappointment for an eager student.

Down to the Basement, out of the Darkness

A month into the school year, the principal came to the classroom door and told us that our class had too many students. I immediately grew excited about first grade all over again at the thought of a new teacher. The principal proceeded to divide us into two classes. When he called my name, I was thrilled at being selected to move to a new room.

Later, as a teacher, I realized that the selection process most likely consisted of old Mrs. Riley looking at her class roster and murmuring *I don't want her, I don't want him, I don't want her . . . as she*

 *I realized that the selection process most likely consisted of old Mrs. Riley looking at her class roster and murmuring I don't want her, I don't want him, I don't want her . . . as she checked our names off her list. But it turns out that rejection can be a positive thing.*

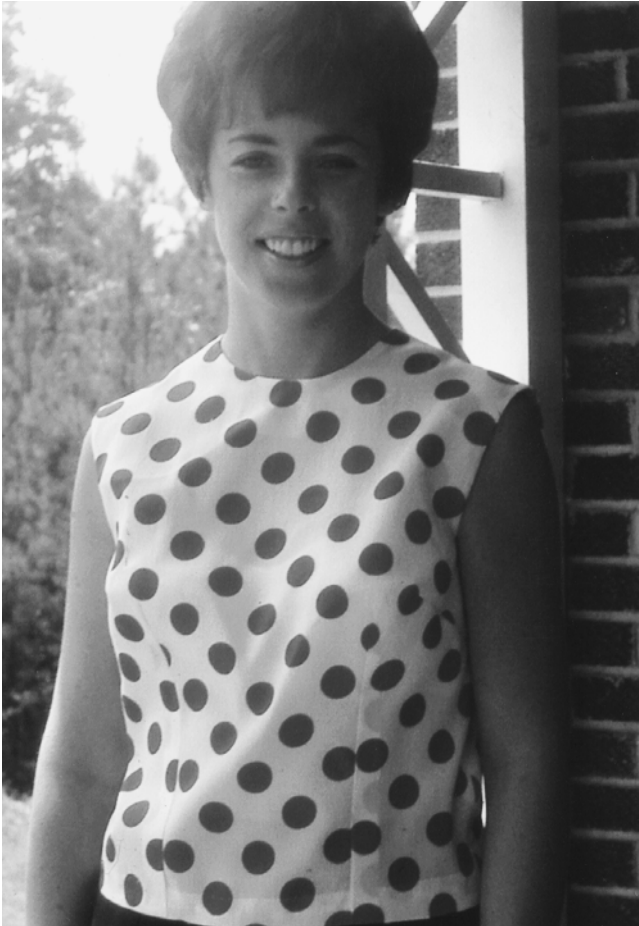
checked our names off her list. But it turns out that rejection can be a positive thing. What would happen in the next few months would affect my confidence and self-esteem, and eventually my career choice and teaching philosophy. And all of that can be attributed to one person: a twenty-three-year-old teacher named Barbara Warnecke.

I remember it like this: the principal lined us up in Mrs. Riley's classroom and led us down the hall, clip-clopping in our hard-soled shoes on wooden floors with forty years' worth of wax on them, and out the back door—the door that led to the gymnasium. The only time I had ever been in the musty, high-ceilinged gym, I'd learned the hokey pokey and I shook it all about. I remember how dusty it was in there—I could hardly breathe—and I was horrified at the thought that our new class might be held in there. So I was relieved when the principal turned left at the gym door and continued on down the concrete path. But then he abruptly turned left again, which made no sense. There was no classroom there—just the basement at the bottom of some stairs.

We had never given that damp place a thought as we ran by it on the way to the playground, but down the stairs the principal went, and we followed right behind him, like little ducklings. At the bottom was a room that in many ways did look like a classroom. There were clunky wooden desks and a black chalkboard. But behind a closet door that someone jerked open were beady little eyes that stared back at us. John, the cutest boy in the first grade, grinned and told us that those eyes belonged to rats, and for the rest of the year the biggest boys in the classroom would torment the rest of us by threatening to open that door. All of us, bullies and victims alike, hung our coats on hooks on the back wall that year.

Then we sat in those big desks and waited. I traced my finger over initials that some former student had carved long ago. For a

moment I thought we would soon be escorted back upstairs, back to Mrs. Riley and Sheila. But then in walked Mrs. Warnecke, a pretty young teacher with a teased bob hairstyle and a smile that filled the entire classroom. She looked happy to be with us—with *me*—and she didn't even seem too scared of the closet. The principal



My Mrs. Teacher.

introduced her, pronouncing her name with care (WAR-*nek-ee*), but we still couldn't say it. For months she would be "Mrs. Teacher." She passed out *Dick and Jane* books, and we got right to work.

I remember being distracted that first day in Mrs. Warnecke's class. I kept wondering how we would get to the bathroom in time. Our classroom was *outside*, for goodness' sake. We were first graders! The next day I decided to research the issue. I asked Mrs. Teacher if I could "be excused," just the way my Mama had taught me. I walked up the basement steps, around between the gym and the back of the first-grade hall, up the stairs and into the building. The minute I opened the door to the hallway, I regretted it. I saw a sixth-grade boy coming toward me, and I was embarrassed—of all days for me to be wearing those clumsy saddle oxfords! I hung my head and tried to slip past him, but he stopped right in front of me.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Cindy," I answered, not looking up.

"I like those shoes," he said as he walked around me to continue down the hall.

I skipped on to the bathroom and then back to the basement, and that was the end of my concern about the number of steps to the bathroom—and about my shoes. I still hung my head at the sight of sixth-grade boys, though.

More Discoveries

Not all of my problems were solved by my new teacher, of course. I wrestled with my self-confidence, which my mother attributes to my little sister, Lisa, coming along when I was only fourteen months

old. Mama remembers me in the grocery store, just barely walking, standing to the side and looking confused as shoppers stopped to admire the new baby and totally ignored me. But even though I may have been sad at the sudden shift in everyone's attention, I adored my sister as soon as she was born.

I was glad not to have to share my first-grade class with her, though. School was mine that year, and everything that happened in there was my own magical



School was mine that year, and everything that happened in there was my own magical world.

world. I had a loving teacher who turned a dark classroom into a warm place to be, and the experience was finally turning out to be everything I had wished for.

One day Mrs. Warnecke surprised us during ice cream time. Every day we would bring our ice cream money and then tell Mrs. Teacher which kind we wanted—ice cream sandwich, fudgesicle, or vanilla cup. One afternoon after we turned in our money and placed our usual orders, Mrs. Warnecke said, “I have a surprise for you. I didn’t get your regular ice cream today.” Instead she pulled out vanilla popsicles covered with a hard chocolate coating. This may not sound like much, but to a room full of first graders, it was like Christmas morning! We squealed and bit into the hard coating while commenting on each bite. For years I thought she had planned the whole thing. I really believed that those same popsicles had been available all year, and that she had withheld them from us so that we could be surprised later. Of course, most likely that particular type of ice cream became available only that very day. But that ice cream adventure made us feel special and loved.

And that was the disposition of our classroom during that entire year.

When caterpillars would climb on the damp basement walls, Mrs. Teacher would merely pluck them off and talk to us about them—seizing the opportunity to have a science lesson whenever the opportunity presented itself. I remember that we had to rest on blue and red mats daily after lunch. I was somewhat anxious at the thought of lying on that basement floor; I had visions of all kinds of critters crawling on me when I was asleep. But every day Mrs. Warnecke would direct us to our mats, then walk around and gently touch each of us on the shoulder, one at a time. We were a quilt of six-year-olds on that wooden floor, all calmed and soothed by the caring demeanor of our new teacher.



Mrs. Warnecke plays with us on the Bragtown School playground.

Science was OK, but my love was reading. I loved words even then. Being able to look at a book and know it said “See Puff run” was amazing to me. So once I was able to write words myself, on inch-high lines with a fat first-grade pencil, I tried my hand at my first poem. It was titled “Stars.”



Stars, stars

I'll find out where they are.

They shine at night

Til morning bright.

No one can tell

Where they have fell.

Stars, stars.

In time I would grow up to be an English major and learn the job of a past participle, but in first grade I just wanted to rhyme. I shyly took my creation up to Mrs. Warnecke's desk and looked down at the scratched wooden basement floor while she read. When she was finished, she grabbed me, hugged me, and said, “This is beautiful. I want you to write many, many more of these.”

I took her at her word. I continued to write little poems every year. In second grade I wrote a little ditty about the seasons. And then I trotted my skinny second-grade legs down to Mrs. Warnecke's room so that she could read it. And even though she had another class by then, a roomful of children she had to teach, whenever I would visit her, she treated me as if I were the only child in the room. I hope that the poem I wrote about teachers was a partial repayment:



*Teachers are quite nice, I think
but that is only me.*

*Other people just don't know
How nice a teacher can be.*

A few years later, our school newspaper, the *Bragtown Bugle*, accepted a couple of my poems for publication. I was proud, my mother was proud, and Mrs. Warnecke was proud. But my pride was mixed with sadness—Mrs. Warnecke was moving away. She gave me a gift when she left. It was, of course, a book of poems: *You Read to Me, I'll Read to You*, by John Ciardi. She inscribed it “May each of us think of the other whenever a poem is read. Barbara Warnecke, June, 1967.”



Mrs. Parrish

What makes a shy young girl decide at the ripe old age of ten that she wants to be a teacher? Only the inspiration of a great teacher would guide a student to make this life-changing decision.

My life was influenced by my fifth-grade teacher at Wiley Elementary School in Salisbury, NC. Mrs. Ollie Mae Parrish, a petite red-haired lady who commanded respect from her students, was the teacher who changed my life. By the end of the fifth grade, I knew that I wanted to be a teacher just like Mrs. Parrish.

Elementary school was quite different during my days. We were well behaved; we sat in rows and spoke only when we were allowed. We walked in straight lines down the hall.

Girls wore dresses to school, and we carried metal lunch boxes. But Mrs. Parrish was the teacher who allowed us to be individuals in her room. She talked about her husband, Harry, like he was our friend. She stood up for us when the PE teacher was mean to our class. She was angry when we had to go to school on a Saturday to make up a snow day; she made that day fun! Mrs. Parrish was that teacher who actually talked to her students.

My most vivid memory from Mrs. Parrish's class was our study of the United States. She divided us into groups, something unheard of during those days, and gave us a section of the country to study. We had to create a bulletin board section of the classroom that represented our region and share what we learned with the class. *We* were the teachers! No one in my elementary career had ever allowed me to create a lesson for my class. Mrs. Parrish was ahead of her time.

Mrs. Parrish took this very shy girl, smaller and younger than the others, and made me a stronger student. I was too nervous to read aloud, but she saw an opportunity to give me courage to stand in front of others and share what I had learned.

I never forgot Mrs. Parrish as I continued to work to become a teacher. While I was in college, I visited her classroom to observe her magic at work. I also worked hard to keep in touch with her as I started my teaching career.

My shining moment with Mrs. Parrish came quite a few years later. Some of my students were presenting their projects

to parents and friends on the latest technology using our new Apple computers. It was an evening performance, and the room was full. As I stood to introduce my students and share background information on what we had done, I saw a smiling face that was very familiar to me. In the audience was Mrs. Parrish—so proud of that shy little fifth grader she had taught so many years before.

Mrs. Parrish is teaching in heaven now, and I am sure she has it quite organized! I am currently in my thirty-third year of teaching in North Carolina. My one wish in my life as a teacher is that I will one day have a student say that I made a lasting influence on his or her life.

—Janice Raper, Academically/Intellectually Gifted teacher, Hurley Elementary School, Salisbury, North Carolina, 2008–2009 North Carolina Northwest Regional Teacher of the Year

Years of Change

So, four years after rescuing me, Mrs. Warnecke and her husband, who had just graduated from Duke University, returned to their home in Buffalo, New York. To a child, it seemed a world away, but it was OK.

By then I was ten years old. Soon I would enter junior high and grapple with the distractions of those tumultuous teen years. And there were other distractions in the South in the late 1960s. Bragtown School was an all-white elementary school until desegregation was mandated in 1969. My neighborhood was an

inner-city mixture of black and white. So all through my elementary years, I got on my bus and rode to Bragtown while my black neighbors headed to their bus stops to be taken to Lakeview Elementary.

The next year, as a seventh grader, I attended school with black students for the first time. Three girls approached me in the bathroom on the first day of school and asked me how it felt to be white. One day a white boy stood in the front of my school bus, just as it stopped to let him off. He drew attention to himself by singing a few lines of “Dixie,” then jumped out the door. Ten black boys jumped from seats all around me and chased after him down the street.

As alarming as that incident was, I think I was most nervous about the need for police escorts to and from school. White adults protesting desegregation lined the streets from my neighborhood to my school and threw rocks at the buses. The happy memories of my elementary years sometimes dimmed in those difficult days.

But still I felt special when I got home from school to see that Mrs. Warnecke had sent me a letter. I received the last one in 1970, when I was thirteen. By then I was sporting a mouth full of metal braces and had changed the spelling of my name to Cindi, with an *i* at the end. There were three other Cindys in my classes, and I wanted to be unique and interesting . . . interesting enough to be invited to the Cougar Club party, a Christmas ball attended by my school’s student athletes and their dates. I was never asked to go.

I became a cheerleader, and adopted a corresponding personality that was useful for obscuring my continuing low self-esteem. My looks were, as always, the big issue for me, but other factors

played a part. I was constantly aware that I was growing up in modest surroundings, that in the circles of the “haves” and the “have nots” my family would be considered “having just enough.” We weren’t hungry by any means, but there were few extras like family vacations, color televisions, and nice cars. My grandmother didn’t have a functioning bathroom in her house until after I was grown and married. (I do believe that Granny’s outhouse was character building, though.)

Like most adolescents, I felt my way through my teen years. And though I gradually thought less and less about Mrs. Warnecke, her spirit was in me. I kept the book she had given me long after other childhood books had been discarded, and from time to time I would leaf through it. Still, it would be years before I would seriously think about seeing her again.

After high school, I headed to college with the love of literacy Mrs. Warnecke had nurtured in me years before. I remember thinking at some point in my junior year, around the time I declared my major in education, that I would like Mrs. Warnecke to know that I had made the decision to become a teacher. I don’t think I was aware then of the impact she had made on my choice of a career, and I could not have known how her teaching practices would affect me as a teacher. But, at some level, I just wanted her to *know* that I would be following her path. At the time, though, it seemed impossible. We had lost touch, and the Internet would not come about for twenty years. So I continued to think fondly of my teacher from the elementary school basement, never dreaming that I would see her again someday.

Just as the words and the poetry that I came to love under Mrs. Warnecke’s direction became a constant in my life, the unconditional

affection and affirmation she had given me—without regard for my looks or lack of social status—molded and shaped me as a teacher. I would teach for twenty years before I fully understood her effect on me. And once I realized it, I hoped that someday she would know, if only I could find her. But finding her would be like that first poem; it would be like finding stars.