It Takes Two

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"It Takes Two, Baby, It Takes Two Baby, Me and You"

Do you remember that well known song lyric made popular by Marvin Gaye and Kim Weston, topping out at #14 in 1967 on the Billboard Charts, "It Takes Two"? Did it stick to you like it did to me after hearing it many, many times from then until now? I heard it plenty in my youth, on the radio and record player, and when it pops up here and there in a commercial or on the radio today, I can't get it out of my head for days. Songs that keep reappearing in popular culture and media and become pervasive—crossing generational lines and other boundaries, like "It Takes Two" has for me and many others—have a nearly inexplicable "staying power."

The lyric from this pop song seems to be merely about young lovers. But it caused me recently to think more deeply about the profound relationality at the center of the art of becoming known and knowing that resides, for me, at the heart of teaching and perhaps at the center of loving in education as well. Here, in conjunction with my fledgling notions regarding teachers and teaching and the curriculum of knowing, I want to reframe some ideas about the knower and knowing and being known that have had "staying power" for me in my life of learning and teaching by sketching a fragment about a teacher who profoundly influenced me.

At root are my assumptions that teachers help us learn and know things as part of their work with us. Sometimes that learning and knowing comes from the process of pulling out what we may have already had an inkling about, when a teacher on the way with us took due care, providing activities and practice around the idea or concept or content to help us learn, and retain, and use, and adapt the knowledge at hand for our purposes in the world of endeavor. And sometimes teachers introduce us to entirely new things that we hadn't thought about or considered or even valued at the start of the learning and educative journey. We learn things that we didn't know were inside us already, or never germinated. And here and there in our lives, and this is much harder to sort through, we might learn valuable things that we retain and that guide us after experiencing duress/stress during the learning process, even when faced with nearly impossible choices and almost all negative outcomes and perhaps even while a possibly worsening relationship with a teacher takes shape. It may not all make sense to us immediately but over time may soak us with deeper understanding.

Following the general format of my previous pieces focusing on the notion of life processes as curriculum and the *currere* journey of charting that course in this journal over several years (Poetter, 2017, 2018, 2019a, 2019b, 2020)—I frame a "regressive bit" (Poetter & Googins, 2015), or a short narrative take, about a teacher from my past who helped me to understand myself and life and the world and my journey through it. In the past, I have written extensively about my understanding of relationality in education in the classroom by focusing on my perceptions of students (Poetter, 2006, 2012), but here I want to spend time on an influential teacher who shaped me. Then I will try to interpret these bits, offering some analysis and maybe a dash of insight and hope for the future.

Mrs. Kemp

In the past, I have told stories about my elementary teachers and their profound influence on me in our small-town school with one class for each grade, K-6, Bunker

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Hill Elementary (Poetter, 1994, 2014, 2015). Over the years, people who have read my work have wanted to know how I could remember in such detail these stories from way back, some of the memories living in me for over 50 years now. I realize that this isn't always the norm. Some people I have spoken to with interest over the years about this phenomenon say that they can't remember anything about their school days, from classmates'/teachers' names to subject knowledge. Nothing. Zero. As Jackson (1968/1990) said so long ago, school can be boring, seemingly inconsequential, at least on the surface of things.

I have stated that I don't really know why I can remember so many of these things about school days and teachers, but they certainly don't rise to the detail of someone with hyperthymesia, or highly superior autobiographical memory (H-SAM) (Morales-Brown, 2020). I can't remember details from days long past unless there are significant links to experiences, emotions, connections made through significant and sometimes traumatic events that have stuck with me. It is the case, though, that my memories of my school days have remained vivid. I also realize that these memories are constantly reconfigured as I age, and as time passes, there is no doubt that they have become much less rigorously accurate and, I daresay, at least to a degree, fictionalized (Poetter, 2012).

Mrs. Kemp is one of the teachers I have known well and about whom I have a lot to say.

For starters, Mrs. Kemp lived in our neighborhood and was a friend to children. I knew her son and daughter well, though they were both at least 5 years older. No matter, her son and I constantly played sports and other games together in the neighborhood. So, I was in her home periodically and even accompanied her family on car trips to ballgames long before she was my classroom teacher. And I knew her from church, too, her husband and family prominent, longtime members of the congregation my dad pastored.

There are times in the course of a life in school for me when time froze; I can still picture and hear the moment as if it were merely a second ago. This happened a few times in Mrs. Kemp's fifth grade class at Bunker Hill School, in 1973-1974. One day in late fall, she called me up to her desk during a short, quiet period in class and said, "Tommy, you are going to be working with a small group of students who are advanced in math and language. And I'm sending you to the basement workroom to do these activities together." She handed me the single page with writing on it. "I'm expecting some leadership from you, helping the others get started, Tom. These exercises won't be easy. Bring the sheet back to me after I send for you."

And then she winked at me, a sort of other-assuring, "you got this" gesture that she performed periodically, with me and other students, too. I had my orders.

She then said out loud to all in her booming teacher voice, "Troy, Marie, Jack, Diane … Please follow Tommy down to the basement assembly room for a special learning exercise. Come back up when I send Mortie down for you, not a minute sooner."

No one really knew what to do when we got together; the exercise was like a group brain teaser. None of us had ever been called "advanced" before or had been knowingly separated from the rest of the class. But we had been working in groups in school even way back then for years already, so we weren't surprised.

When we got downstairs, Troy said, "Free time. I love it. Let's just mess around."

"No, Mrs. Kemp left me in charge, and we need to work on this and have an answer for her when Mortie comes down," I said.

Marie said, "I agree with Troy. What's the big deal? You can do the paper, Tommy."

Those two were lost as they began running around the room.

"How about you two?" I turned to Jack and Diane, the remaining three of us still seated at the big work table in that space. "Are you abandoning ship, too?"

Diane said, "What does the sheet say?" An opening. The three of us scooched closer together while Troy and Marie spent the next 30 minutes playing tag in the basement assembly room and banging on the music teacher's old piano (you couldn't hear anything upstairs that came out of that room because it was soundproofed for music classes). In the meantime, Diane and Jack and I tried to solve the puzzle.

When Mortie came down to get us, we trudged up the stairs; Troy and Marie had taxed themselves physically with free play for 30 minutes, and the remaining three of us felt spent mentally from trying to solve the unsolvable puzzle. We would have gotten a better answer with five brains on task, no doubt.

When we returned to the classroom, I handed the sheet to Mrs. Kemp, still at her desk, and took my seat. She set the paper aside very casually without even glancing at it and started in on a social studies lesson. She never said one word to me or any of us about the work we did or didn't do that day or at any other time. On occasion for the rest of the year, the five of us were dismissed from class to the basement for an advanced exercise, and the room never got more comfortable for Jack and Diane or me. But Troy and Marie had a blast!

By mid-Winter, my world had shifted dramatically. My dad suffered his first heart attack, which landed him in the local hospital for several days. We weren't allowed to visit him, so we waited for more info for three long days. At last we were allowed to see him on a late afternoon after school, and he came home the next day. Those three days were terrifying, along with all of the intervening days following that first heart attack. I never stopped worrying about him. My fear was that another heart attack would take him permanently from us. Of course, it did, just two years later.

One day at school a few weeks after dad came home from the hospital and was taking it easy while trying an exercise routine, cutting out smoking, and eating better (that was the treatment then, with routine surgery to fix the problem a few short years away), Mrs. Kemp called me up to her desk and said to me so only I could hear her, "Tommy, I know your dad is feeling better, but I was hoping to take you to lunch on Monday just to talk a little and take your mind off of all of it. We can go to Snack Time for burgers at lunch break. Okay?" And she smiled at me and nodded me back to my seat. She didn't wait for a reply accepting the invitation or not. I was going. I was around strong adults constantly during my young life, and I knew the difference between a question that required an answer and a question that was a directive.

I returned to my desk, and when the next Monday came, I accompanied Mrs. Kemp in her car to my favorite "fast food" restaurant, Snack Time, a super retro, first generation-style drive-in burger joint/diner that local families visited often and that also had the drive-up spaces for service, like the larger modern-day Sonic chain.

We sat inside at a table.

After we ordered, Mrs. Kemp said, "So how are you doing, Tommy, at home and all?"

I felt uncomfortable opening up to her, and I answered that question and all the rest of them during lunch in a very guarded, "this nut won't crack" kind of way.

"Well, okay, I guess. Dad is less busy, home more, not smoking," I responded haltingly.

I liked her a lot, but didn't have a sense of her as a parent, or as a counselor, or as a friend at that point. I wish I had more confidence in letting my real emotions out, maybe

that would have helped, but I just didn't have it in me. It wasn't her fault, and I have come to terms with the fact that it wasn't my fault, either. The distance I attempted to generate between us didn't keep her from knowing what I needed or how I was doing.

"Well, you know, anything you need, anytime, just let me know, and I'll help any way I can."

I believed her, but this was also what nearly everyone said to me at the funeral home two years later, and I know they didn't all mean it. I couldn't say in response to her question the truth that I felt needed to burst out of me but that couldn't escape in any communicative, legitimate, helpful way without me losing it, which I really didn't want to do in Snack Time with crinkle fries coming in a hot minute. I couldn't say out loud:

- that I was devastated;
- that my fears of losing my father to heart disease terrified me;
- that I was having a hard time sleeping;
- that I couldn't concentrate;
- that I felt guarded and afraid and upset every second;
- that the only time I could reasonably take out my aggression and fear came while playing sports and that if someone got in my way on the playground it was always hell to pay all around;
- that I felt no real joy at any turn, just simmering anger and despair and fear all balled up in an 11 year-old body taking shape quickly, a recipe for disaster that I knew even in that moment could wound me at any time, which it did on occasion over many years to come, mostly without relief.

On the way back to school in her car, just a short drive, we had a few light moments, with a conversation about what we each thought the Cincinnati Reds might do in 1974 along with the exciting fact that the Reds would be hosting the Atlanta Braves and Henry Aaron in April 1974 on opening day, with the chance that Hammerin' Hank could tie or surpass Babe Ruth's longstanding home run record during the school day. Aaron stood on career home run #713, and opening day in April was only a stone's throw away. One more home run to tie the Babe and two to surpass him, the most revered figure in American sports with the most prestigious, longstanding record.

"Tommy, I think I'll put the opening day game on the radio in class in April so we can listen to it live. Maybe Henry Aaron will tie or beat the record while we listen. What do you think?" She kept her eyes straight ahead driving while I looked over at her, taking her in.

"Yes, that would be great. Cool."

And we both smiled. And she added a wink on a quick glance to her right at me as we pulled up to the school.

Over the intervening months, our "advanced" group met a few more times, all with the same result and no feedback. None of our parents knew about the exercises, no one ever mentioned it either way, and the five of us students never discussed it outside of those awkward half hour periods we spent together in the basement working on puzzles or not, and Mrs. Kemp never gave us any feedback about it on any level. We got an exercise to work on and one sheet of paper to hand back to her. She dismissed us to work on our own recognizance. Then we went back to the class and the work at hand with the rest of the students as if nothing at all happened whatsoever.

But when opening day came that Thursday, April 4th, 1974, Mrs. Kemp put the game on the radio in the late mid-afternoon of the school day without a reminder from me, and as we worked quietly at our desks on math problems, we listened to the Reds play the beginning of the season's first game. And in the first inning, we heard the great Reds pitcher and future world series champion Jack Billingham serve up home run #714 in Hank's first at-bat of the season, a 3-run, record tying shot in the very first half inning of hall of fame broadcaster Marty Brenneman's storied announcing career. To this day after all that I have seen and witnessed on fields of play as a participant and fan, it was the most exciting moment I have ever felt in sports. Absolutely electric. And it was more than about baseball, as I already knew as I grew and followed the sport and as Mrs. Kemp reiterated to all of us on the lead up to turning the game on. One of the all-time greats in baseball, a Black man, would be surpassing in our lifetimes, maybe even on that day, the most revered white, male icon of sports in the U.S., ever.

When Mrs. Kemp saw me smiling in the back of the room near the window following the homerun—after the class exploded in cheers and was just beginning to settle down, feeling not the least bit upset that the Braves held a tenuous 3-0 lead over my beloved Reds (which the Reds would expunge in an 11 inning 7-6 win in the season's first game)—she winked at me.

Curriculum Analysis

I have thought about Mrs. Kemp and her role in my life over the years, how big an impact she had on me even though I have written about other teachers in ways that may seem more poignant, personal, and productive in terms of my educational journey, my learning, my knowing. But I intended for the fragment to reveal something deeper and to reveal how the circumstances of her role in my life loom more deeply and are more relational and more important than I ever thought, even over time and after a long passage of time, now in my present. And I hope to explore how her connection with me reveals a way of being in relation with students that I hope teachers/curricularists might consider as a disposition to consider in their own work.

My fifth-grade year was exceptional. Despite the seeming missed opportunities with the advanced group and my dad's failing health, I felt connected and safe with Mrs. Kemp. She had a certain flair, a control of the setting—a handle on the situation in each moment—that translated well to 11-year-olds in school. She had a booming voice, and a quick wit, and a kind heart. She could also turn on you in a heartbeat for misbehaving or taking anything a bit too far. We learned those limits from her and tried to stay out of her crosshairs all the while knowing that she meant well and that she was smart, a fine veteran teacher with years of know-how. In a word, we had respect for her that lasted through each day and now through a half century for me.

And I jumped too quickly then at the conclusion that the group activities I got to participate in were a waste of time way back when, and I wanted that to come through in my rendering, so I could set the record straight. It only took me 50 years to figure it out. To clarify, I grew up in an era when public school teachers—top notch in every way and committed to their schools, and students, and parents, like those in our small school in my hometown—trusted students to work on their own. The school was safe, not under attack at any point and never would be, so students could move about and exist and work and learn in unsupervised ways without the threat of a lawsuit, tragedy, and/or mayhem of any kind. Yes, the regular classroom time remained mostly traditional, with pedagogy occurring for the most part in a didactic way, but opportunities like the ones my fab five had to work on brain teasers came along for many, many students all the time. And we

were encouraged to be creative, expressive, and to try new things. Mrs. Kemp simply followed her instincts and plan and gave us work to do. And the learning ensued, perhaps not necessarily with the content of the experience on that one thin piece of paper, but in the content of our experience as we worked, or not, together. So, for instance, I learned that I couldn't make Troy and Marie do the accelerated work that wasn't even for extra credit! They were smart in their own right and entrenched in their positions about school. It made sense to Troy and Marie that, if they could, they would do what they wanted to do, not what the teacher wanted them to do, especially when they were out of the teacher's sightline. They knew that the rest of us wouldn't rat them out, and we never did. Besides, I'm convinced now more than ever that Mrs. Kemp already knew it anyway and left the situation in place over time no doubt as a challenge for the rest of us. What do you do when faced with tasks in the presence of an incomplete team? I'm still dealing with that question every day of my work and home life. We all are.

I also learned that I liked working with small groups of people on tasks. Even though the tasks were not "real world"-like that I can remember, they were fun and challenging and never boring. The time just flew for those 30 minutes, and I think I learned back then in those moments that working on tasks made time pass quickly and that I liked being busy and productive and in the "flow," and, truth be told, at least the designated leader in the space. The truth is that it was one of the ways that I was bonded with Mrs. Kemp, with her always asking me to provide "leadership" on the scene. Mrs. Kemp gave me that opportunity, and I appreciate it to this day, even though I never could get the whole team working on the tasks at hand together at any point. The rest of us did our best, and that no doubt translated to better relations and better outcomes throughout fifth grade together and beyond.

Over the years, of course, I've also thought about my lunch excursion to Snack Time with Mrs. Kemp after dad's first heart attack. I realize now, after thinking harder and harder about what happened, that the following clues stack up to something deeper going on. First, dad stayed home that morning, and he hardly ever did that, usually leaving for church at the same time or before we left for our walk to school nearly every day, a routine. Also, I walked home for lunch almost every day of our fifth-grade year, and when I told mom about the "invitation" from Mrs. Kemp, she wasn't surprised or thought it exceptional. It just started making sense to me after all this time that Mrs. Kemp probably had me out for lunch because mom had to go with dad to a doctor's appointment or procedure and didn't want to worry me and that they had probably set it up together, which adds something to the depth of my interpretation of the lunch with Mrs. Kemp.

Even though it was mostly an awkward situation for that hour, Mrs. Kemp treated me like her own child. And this should mean something. What I am trying to say is that she did her best. She tried. She kept the conversation going with me the entire lunch and in the car. I wasn't nervous, and we had a good time. She showed up and came through. That counts a lot. And I remember all of it probably because it was such an exceptional moment in my youth. I didn't routinely have lunch with my teachers. I rarely got to go to Snack Time for a burger and crinkle fries. And the conversation, now that I have had time to really think about it, was actually quite good, especially in terms of Mrs. Kemp's ability to just let me be, not force it, keep it casual even as she did her best to let me know that she knew and that she would help any way she could.

And along the way she figured out a way to connect with me by bringing up baseball and especially the upcoming season opener and the looming record-breaking home run for baseball and cultural icon Hank Aaron. I have been re-reading Buber's

(1990) *I-Thou,* thinking that he might help me interpret Mrs. Kemp's relational moves with me as a teacher, mostly in terms of her attempt to connect, to relate to me. It's common, though perhaps not pervasive *enough*, these days to talk about how important it is for teachers to connect with students in order to have any chance of reaching them. But most teachers I know who love their work and students view teaching as more about connecting with students, relating to them, than they view it as merely teaching content. The knowing in the classroom is of course almost always spinning around activities that are meant to teach the basic understanding of a subject, at all levels. And great teachers also love the content of the subjects they teach. But at root is a constant urge toward connecting, understanding, relating to students.

It may seem somewhat cliché now, but Mrs. Kemp no doubt subscribed to the adage, "I teach students, not subjects," long before it came into common discourse in teaching and teacher education (Moje, 1996). Teachers attend to teaching and learning the subjects, but they also attend to so much more. They view their students as human-beings, with lives and struggles and barriers and problems and hopes and dreams and possibilities. If that is a baseline understanding, then it suggests that the most basic, important, and critical part of becoming a teacher and teaching is committing to connecting with students, in ways that enhance learning of the subject but that also at the same time in ways that deepen the relationship between the teacher and learner with an understanding that the curriculum of being a human being supersedes learning multiplication tables or learning to read. School learning can come without a deeper human and relational knowing, but at root, relational knowing enhances and no doubt deepens all learning, in all contexts.

And so, Mrs. Kemp connected with me through baseball. Buber argues that being in relation with others, persons and things, can result from contemplation, as the world in particular is approached. Buber uses the example of the tree, which can be an object, but he argues that something else is possible, beyond the dissolution of the thing at hand to a mere other, an It:

> But it can also happen, if will and grace are joined that as I contemplate the tree I am drawn into a relation, and the tree ceases to be an It. The power of exclusiveness has seized me. (Buber, 1996, p. 58)

To become I-You, in relation together, something exceptional happens: the thing comes into reciprocity with us, into relation, transcending our seeming distant connections in the world. And so it was with baseball—something wrapped in tradition, and rules, and language, and movement, and games played, with access to most children and adults to play it and watch it in multiple contexts, appreciating its nuances and mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual natures all at once. It becomes something more, especially as it serves to connect and reshape and transform us and others as we experience it together. The It becomes a bridge to I-You, to connecting to it, and connecting us.

And I would go so far as to say that Mrs. Kemp expressed a knowledge of me by expressing love, by trying, being there, searching for a connection, and connecting. She viewed me as more than a student in her classroom, an "It" to teach, more so as a person. When we take the knowing risks to love, to relate, to connect, especially in the larger framework and context of educational pursuits, we make a difference, perhaps even if the results of our attempts don't seem to manifest immediately. Contemplating love and its connections to relation, Buber (1996) clarifies:

> Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. Our students teach us, our works form us. The "wicked" become a revelation when they are touched by the sacred basic word. How are we educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity. (p. 67)

And now I view my 5th grade year more clearly, looking back on it, as a deeply relational, educational year in my life, perhaps one that solidified my trust and belief in caring adults, that established my respect for people willing to connect with me even in the worst of times, and not flee. And I see more clearly than ever how crucial Mrs. Kemp was on that journey, providing a most loving, knowing, constant relationality. Knowing me, caring, being there, connecting, searching for ways to make evident her care and concern.

Teaching. Knowing.

This journey, this life, this education, at each turn, takes two, at least. Perhaps, too, at most. Here's to you Mrs. Kemp (1932-2012). Rest in peace, with a knowing wink through gladsome tears of gratitude for all that you taught me.

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