

## 2002 NCTE Outstanding Educator in Language Arts

I'd like to begin my remarks with something meaningful and whole. We might even call this a whole language beginning.

This is the first selection in Vera Williams' book of poems Amber Was Brave, Essie Was Smart

Amber could write her name in script  
Essie taught her  
But Essie could read hard library books  
Amber could tie her own shoes  
if Essie double tied them for her  
Essie could thread a needle  
cook toasted cheese sandwiches  
make cocoa  
put the lipstick on just right  
when they played dress-up  
Amber was brave  
She could get the grocery man  
to trust them for a container of milk 'though their mother  
couldn't pay him till payday  
Amber wasn't afraid of the rat  
in the wall under the sink  
or of climbing up in high places  
Essie kept their house key in her little purse  
but the front door to their building wouldn't even open  
unless they both pushed on it hard  
Essie was tall and Amber was small  
Essie was smart and Amber was brave  
Essie and Amber  
Amber and Essie.

One line I particularly love in this poem-description of Amber & Essie is: **Essie kept their house key in her little purse but the front door to their building wouldn't even open unless they both pushed on it hard.**

When teachers get sick and tired of talking about imposed curriculum and politically-normed tests, I've found that discussions turn naturally to their classroom communities, and the power of kids helping kids, making each other look a head taller, in those classrooms.

They also talk about the power of teachers helping teachers. It's evident in those conversations that supportive colleagues are considered to be pure gold, priceless and necessary for their learning, teaching, and researching.

There is a saying that many of you know and have probably repeated. When a piece of heretofore unknown information comes out about a friend or colleague, someone says, “Ah, the network never sleeps!” Well, good. For if it were not for that network, that safety network, many of us might not be here this evening.

That sleepless network is made up of our Ambers and Essies. Add your name to several of the intersections, the strongest points in a net. Then add the names of the smart and brave colleagues/friends who have helped you push on countless hard-to-open doors. And within the last few years, we’ve had more than our share of heavy doors, more than our share of rats lurking behind those doors and walls. But thankfully we’ve also had our brave Ambers and smart Essies.

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At a conference recently I met a teacher who told me how excited she had been about going into teaching, and how now only five years later she was disheartened and burning-out-fast. She kept saying that she didn’t trust anyone any more and that actually distrust was her survival skill. We talked about this for a time and then we began to think about how she might replace distrust with trust and confidence in herself and in other like-minded teachers...and to do it within a supportive professional guild of teachers helping teachers.

Later, I found some information about NCTE membership which I sent to her. I thought the first paragraph of that information sheet might start her thinking. It reads:

“In NCTE you’ll be welcomed into a community of teachers whose devotion, inspiration, determination, and uniqueness come together in a way that will make a difference in your career, classes, and community.”

The “community of teachers” was what this discouraged teacher did not have and desperately needed.

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Mary Rousseau writes in her book, The Tie that Binds, (1991) about community from the perspective of friendship in which a person looks at another as if that person were himself or herself. The idea is that in freely giving to another, you’re actually presenting a gift to yourself. Mary Rousseau calls this *active giving*, as opposed to *passive* or *contractual giving* which is a relationship in which something is given so something will be received. Rousseau sees “active giving” as the “tie that binds,” the tie that creates community, the tie that creates the safety network.

**Anthropologists** point to the importance of a strong sense of community of indigenous cultures. For example, the Lakota Sioux traveled the Great Plains in *tiyospaye* (bands) or extended families. A strong bond of belonging and caring permeated these nomadic familyships in which each member was responsible for the others. I’ve read that a recurrent phrase in Lakota ritual, *mit-a-ku-ye o-ya-sin* captures the spirit of the responsibility within the familyship.

I believe that within some of our communities, our professional guilds, that same spirit exists. We may not be able to put our finger on it, or to articulate it precisely, but we know that if we didn't have it, we might not have professional lives.

For without that sense of support:

\* How could we meet the expected demands of our profession, to say nothing of the unexpected heart breaking absurdities, not of our making, that seem to swallow us up?

\* How could we cope, when those farthest from classrooms are dictating curriculum that has no purpose other than raising test scores?

Without a partnership of teachers how could we endure:

\* A time when scripted lessons that look a lot like test items replace inquiry about the earth, the sky, the seas; the past, present and the future. When music, dance, and the visual arts are driven out because they aren't likely to be on the test therefore the official word is don't teach them.

\* A time when our Assistant Secretary of Education Susan Newman tells us that we must implement the new federal education reform in order to put an end to creative and experimental teaching. She says, "It (the reform) will stifle and hopefully it will kill."

Without our supportive guild how can we survive:

\* The media generating conflict and fueling the polarization of educational issues in order, not necessarily to get us, but to get a story—at any cost. Controversy is exciting and sells, no controversy is dull doesn't sell.

\* A time when we hear people loudly expressing doubts that students can be excited about learning, and teachers can be excited about teaching.

\* A time when legislators, publishers and even some educators feel that to cure all the ailments of our country we need to standardize the non-standardizable in order to achieve one prevailing curriculum, submissive teachers and compliant students.

Without our safety network, how can we face:

\* The banning of native language support from our immigrant children.

\* Or endure those times when we get so discouraged we want to quite being the adult, let someone else make the decisions. When we are tempted to do what we did in the past—close our classroom door—but this time not—as we used to say “close our door and then do what we know is right for kids,” but as the teacher I mentioned earlier told me, “I close my door because I'm embarrassed to let anyone, especially parents, see me doing the ridiculous things I've been told to do—see me teaching in ways I know are not right for kids.”

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In the November issue of the Council Chronicle in her President's Update, Leila Christenbury writes about the current popular sport of teacher bashing. She tells about recently representing NCTE at the Dept of Education Quality Institute in Wash. She was amazed to hear Sec. of Ed. Rod Paige blame teachers for almost all the problems of public education and the failures of students to learn. She heard the term “poor teacher” more frequently than ever before in her life. She writes that the cynical and mocking stories of teacher failure recounted from the podium were constant and disheartening. According to the speakers the solution offered “seemed

nothing less than firing ...teachers... and replacing them with retired military and ... liberal arts graduates who were mercifully untainted by ... useless pedagogical study.”

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Is it any wonder we feel that our cupboard of ideas and energy is bare, and to restore our enthusiasm and our spirit we need something beyond another faculty meeting, another in-service, even another conference?

I'm reminded of the picture book by David Saltzman The Jester Has Lost His Jingle. I'll read rearranged snatches that may help me make my point. It begins:

Our story unfolds, unfortunately,  
on a very unfortunate day.  
You see, this morning when the world awoke,  
no one was in any mood to joke.

... nobody giggled.  
Nobody yuck-led  
Nobody laughed  
And nobody chuckled.

“The Jester has lost his jingle!”  
the King yelled in dismay.  
“His bells no longer tingle!  
That's all I have to say!”

Then without a thought and on a whim,  
(King George) decided to banish him.  
(You'll need to read the book to see if it really says that..)

Ever get the feeling that there is a move on to banish us? We haven't lost it but there are times when we feel that our jingle must be with our car keys and we've misplaced them both.

But just as Essie and Amber had each other,  
the Jester  
had a special helper,  
as any jester should.  
A friend by name of Pharley,  
Who helped in everyway he could.  
The two were quite a pair.

as they  
searched for their jingle in every corner,  
under rocks and up in trees.  
they peered into the heavens and gazed deep beneath the seas.

Just as the Jester and Pharley *together* found their jingle, and Essie and Amber *together* opened hard doors, we *together* are regaining our professional, our fighting spirits. When disheartened we think of our colleagues and friends, who are not giving up. Because of them, and always because of our students, we aren't either. But this time we're doing more than surviving (even the attempted banishment by King George), we are learning from our experiences, we're growing up together and we're smarter than ever before.

So, after this conference we go home renewed, but in a few months we may feel as if our jingle is again with our misplaced car keys. What to do? Our spirit of community must constantly be reclaimed. We can't go out and buy a program called spirit then download it in our classrooms, in our faculty meetings, in our TAWL groups, at WLU at NCTE or any other collection of teachers.

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Deborah Meier offers a place to start in her thoughtful book, In Schools We Trust. She says, "What staves off discouragement, ... is the company we keep—colleagues, kids, families." She says, "Just as we want kids to keep company with adults because it's the best ... way for them to become educated, so too do teachers need to keep company with each other—for the sake of their teaching, ... as well as to make life smoother, more comforting, and more humanly decent, ...."

Later Meier adds something enormously important to us. She says, "It's hard to hang out with kids without wanting to surround them with a loving and beloved community."

I believe that to build that community for kids, to engage them in respectful, democratic and critical conversations we must ourselves be in the community of respectful, democratic and critical colleagues and friends. We gather and give the strength that we share with students, from the Ambers and Essies and Pharleys, in the network of our lives.

When we are, to put it mildly, unenthusiastic about continuing the struggle, I believe at least two things can strengthen and energize us: First, we must look to ourselves and to each other. For me, I can lose confidence in myself, but I never lose trust in my safety net, and I wager it's the same for you. That doesn't mean we don't have fiery discussion with those in our fellowship. Perhaps *it's because of that trust* we know we can talk safely and honestly.

And secondly, we need to reexamine and take pride in our track record. Through the years you have created with your Ambers and Essies and Pharleys a principled professional history. And you have never backed away from insisting that learners are at the heart of the matter.

Something meaningful and worth fighting for arises out of our histories and past accomplishments. The memories and stories of what you have made happen in your classrooms merge into and support our work right here, right now. Our history, our track record evolves to forge the bedrock of our responses to the dilemmas we face this minute and in the future.

Commitment to regaining the spirit, even within the community of like-minded professionals, isn't easy, it involves being vulnerable, of speaking up when our knees are knocking, and it means following through, hanging in, and standing firm when things get painfully rocky.

Supportive colleagues in a supportive fellowship are more than pleasant and congenial. That too, but we must see ourselves in multi-dimensional roles that shift as our own needs and the needs of others change: When the times demand we are:

1. resources
2. partners
3. representatives

Sometimes:

4. apprentices
5. experts
6. followers and
7. leaders
8. sometimes driving and other times in the backseat  
but always  
Steadfast friends and colleagues.

Discovering myself as a learner, as a teacher, and as a member of a professional family has, for me, never been a matter of solitary introspection. I've always needed and depended on conversations with you to bring my own thinking to light.

Some of you may at one time have been my students but, just as your colleagues here, you are always and forever my teachers.

My sincerer thanks to you all—my Ambers and Essies, Essies and Ambers, and Pharleys.

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NCTE  
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