

# ORIGINS OF IMAGINAL EDUCATION

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When I was 22, I went to work in a foreign country inside North America – among African-Americans in Chicago’s inner city. It was 1962. Naive, liberal, white, female and sublimely well intentioned, I was regarded as an outsider, a tourist. Fresh from university, a series of painful initiations taught me a way of learning/teaching far removed from lectures, textbooks, fixed roles, and information acquisition.

## THE GHETTO

The half-glass door swung open and Ebenezer Porter presented himself. Red shirt loose at the back of lime-green trousers, belt pants unbuckled and open as if ready to unzip the fly and pee any minute, he swaggered slowly through, arms slightly raised on either side, singing, “Com’on Baby, won’t you light my fire.”

I attempted firmness. “Ebenezer, please go back out and come in when you’re more presentable.”

“Hey, Teach, whatsamatta witcha? Think yur my Mama?”

Feet scraped, books slammed, twenty-five or more throats cleared. “Yur Mama.” “Yur Mama.” “Yur Mama.” sounded as a chorus throughout the room. Not knowing exactly what the slang meant, I gathered from the gestures and grimaces that it was a vulgar sexual insult.

I struggled to remain calm. “Ebenezer, leave the room until you’re dressed properly. Class, get out your homework while I call the roll.”

Ebenezer turned to the class, grinned from ear to ear, and gyrated his hips. “Whazamatta with this?”

His loud slur irritated me. A large-toothed purple comb jiggled at the side of his nappy black hair. Several students rose from their one-armed chairs. The girls stuck out large breasts and swiveled their hips. More boys unbuckled their belts, unbuttoned their shirts and imitated Ebenezer’s movements. “Cool, Man.”

On the edge of panic, I moved for the intercom. “Ebenezer, get out of here before I call the principal.”

Pelvis forward in a lewd gesture, he raised his arms, gyrated through a half-circle and wriggled toward the door. I stomped across the hardwood floor, slammed the door shut, spun around, hands on my hips and glared at my freshman Remedial English class. Slowly, one by one, students stopped swaying and humming and sat down.

A boy at the back spoke up, trying to cool my temper. “Hey, Teach, us Niggers don’t want no trouble.”

As I began calling the roll, a girl’s voice interrupted. “Teachah, my homework’s in the locker. I haveta go git it.” She headed for the door, after Ebenezer.

My arm shot out to halt her movement. “Sorry Billy, if you can’t remember to bring it to class, I’ll have to record it as incomplete. We need to get on with today’s lesson.”

From two or three places in the room I heard, “Bitch.” “Muthafuca.” “Pussy yur Mama.”

They had me over a barrel. Challenging me to prove myself, I knew I had to win the respect not only to teach them but to keep my job. My first “professional” job, I wanted to succeed. To be accepted by the students, I felt I needed to understand them and I didn’t.

They seemed to be constantly in motion, swaying rhythmically in the classroom, in the halls, in the lunchroom, on the stairs. Many the boys had repeated grades and were huge, towering a foot and a half over me with broad shoulders.

To a large majority of the students, school seemed to be enemy territory, requiring hidden and overt opposition. Teachers and students were sworn enemies. A subtle game of warfare lurked behind each gesture, a smell of hostility permeated halls and stairwells.

Fall faded into winter. It became a daily ordeal of bracing myself against forty-mile-an-hour winds on the "L" platform waiting for the Englewood B train. Numb with cold I would fight for a seat so I could grade homework. As likely as not, the warmth and movement of the train would put me to sleep instead. I would put all my energy into teaching my five classes and trudge back to the L, dreading the wait once again for the noisy train. Days I had to monitor sixty rambunctious teenagers in a detested study hall left me completely wrung out.

At home there were the daily chores of rising early to fix breakfast or staying late to wash and dry dishes for the twenty-four people in the religious community where I lived with my husband. Most nights I was up past midnight creating lesson plans and grading homework.

Day after day I made a journey from one world into another. My students permitted me, to a certain extent, to enter their world. They never entered mine. Education had opened me up to universes far beyond the bread on the table, shoes on the feet, preoccupations of a blue-collar family. I had assumed such social mobility was possible for anyone who acquired similar skills. One distinguishing factor began to dawn on me. I had white skin.

Scarcely realizing what was happening, the daily journey across the invisible boundary between the blackboard jungle and my Caucasian enclave was etching new

channels in my brain. More and more an insidious question lodged itself in my mind, "Why am I doing this?"

Back and forth I went. Round and round the questions spun. As paradoxical as it seemed, the boundaries separating me from my African-American students seemed to be both disappearing and reinforcing at the same time. Life seemed to be lived on several levels simultaneously and I never knew from moment to moment on which level I was living. I felt I was on the edge of a precipice, which required some dramatic action on my part.

One noon after the first three months of school, I went into the Women's Faculty room as usual. I glanced in the mirror. A sickly white face was looking at me. I stared in horror. Who was this person? Completely surrounded by dark skin, the ghostlike visage in the mirror seemed totally out of place. It didn't belong. Surely it wasn't me? I no longer felt out of place. I was at home in the classroom, in the hallways, in the study hall. I had made a place for myself. Who could this strange white woman be?

The religious community of which I was a member moved to Chicago's Westside ghetto as part of the Civil Rights effort to stop housing segregation. Our new home had served as a temporary refuge for Jewish and Spanish immigrants who had moved through on their way up the social ladder. Now it was the port of entry for blacks from the rural South flooding in to look for work. Unaccustomed to the close quarters and anonymity, they were frightened, and more than a little suspicious.

An idle sheet metal workers union hall on Jackson Boulevard announced the departure of skilled labor to better neighborhoods or the suburbs. A ten-story elders home on Independence collected the wasted lives of aged citizens. Bars and taverns on Fifth Avenue attracted drunks and derelicts. Substandard apartment buildings stood vacant. Plywood sheets covering broken

windows were being ripped off one by one to feed nighttime fires of homeless vagrants.

The area was devoid of public services except for overcrowded schools and one private out-of-date hospital. Lief Erickson Elementary School stood on the corner of Independence and Jackson. Built when Jewish residents deified education, it was now the meeting ground for lost and confused children whose parents had left school in the second or third grade to pick cotton in the fields of Mississippi or Alabama.

Catholic churches and schools were built during the Spanish immigrant era. They were being replaced by the better-off Negro families in greystone homes. The blue and white uniforms of Marilac and Providence St. Mel students made them easy lunch-money targets for the local bullies.

John Marshall Junior High and High School totally dominated the lower end of Jackson Boulevard. A mountain of bricks and mortar surrounded by cement and tarmac, these institutions succeeded in intimidating youth of transient families who had only known one-room schools. Roentgen Junior High on Kedzie took all the kids who flunked everywhere else.

After several of our kids got beat up going to or from school, we took precautions. We had them walk together, each older child responsible for one of the younger ones. Even though it was only two and a half blocks to school, we decided they should buy a hot lunch there.

Every street had several abandoned cars, rusting. Unpainted back porches and stairs were piled with useless stoves and refrigerators. Empty lots were strewn with decaying garbage. Unraked leaves lay in muddy pools on broken pavements and grassless yards. Metal gates were pulled across cracked and boarded up windows, protecting the miserable stocks in the stores on Fifth Avenue.

Local youth were hardening quickly into street gangs that were always checking us out, testing us. At first we left our apartments unlocked; but after several petty thefts, we locked the front gate to our campus. Morning and evening checks on all the buildings and doors were one of the rotating assignments. I always wondered what I would do if I ran into trouble when I was making the rounds.

Just to go to Sears, on the other side of the expressway, was a big decision. As one of two or three whites in the store, we were an object of attention and an easy target to pickpockets. So a simple thing like going to the store was an adventure. You had to be ready to enter into the adventure.

### **FIFTH CITY COMMUNITY DEMONSTRATION**

We delineated a fifteen-block area in which to recreate the closeness and support of a small town. Fifth Avenue, which had been the commercial area, seemed to be a node of activity. We began using the name Fifth City for our project and divided it into five geographic neighborhoods, called stakes. Each staff member took responsibility for getting to know all the people in one stake. We would visit the every week, talking about events in the area and inviting them to community meetings.

My stake was west of the campus, down to Independence Boulevard. I had a hard time getting people to come to meetings. Mostly I called on people in the elder's home on Independence. It had been constructed recently and still had working lights and elevators. The only person I could count on was a large vigorous and gregarious woman of 67 who lived on the eighth floor. Always trying to build community spirit by involving other residents, she suggested I call on Helen Eskridge, down the block.

The first time I went to Helen's home, a slender light-skinned boy about five feet five and mild-mannered, answer the door. The only light in the room was a study lamp, bent

low over a table, where I could see books and manuals spread out for work.

"I am looking for Helen Eskridge."

"Sorry, she ain't here."

"Is that your mother?"

"Yeah."

"I see you are really into studying. That table reminds me of the one where I used to study the kitchen at home. What are you studying?"

"Electronics."

"That's very smart. I never learned a practical skill like that. I'll bet your mother is proud of you."

"Yeah."

"Do you think she'll come home soon? Should I wait?"

"She's down in the bar next-door. I don't know when she'll be back." He smiled shyly. "She's a real talker. She clears out so's I can study. Well I got to get back to the books. See ya."

The unpainted wooden door closed, leaving me in the dimly lit hallway. One bare bulb, maybe 30 or 40 watts, burned at the landing between first and second floor. Scratching sounds magnified by bare wood sent me flying down the stairs, fleeing an army of bugs and mice.

I stood on the broken pavement outside Sam's Bar, trying to decide whether or not to go in. Not being a drinker myself, I had not been in any of the local bars. Yet I needed to meet Helen. She was reputed to know everyone in the and to be able to get them to do most anything.

"What's the use? Why don't I just forget Helen and go around to Boivens or Chandlers?" They were white families in the neighborhood who had responded to our challenge to

move into the community to counter white flight. The Boivens were a good Catholic family with nine children. They used to go about with Mama and Papa in the lead and all nine children in stair steps from the oldest down to the youngest. What a sight!

I turned left and started past the bar, jukebox blaring some non-identifiable music, a neon Blatz beer sign in the high narrow window. I was just passed it when my humiliation at always having the smallest representation at community meetings got the best of me. "What the hell. I might as well give it a shot."

I turned and walked cautiously toward the dark recessed entry door, the glass painted black so you couldn't see in. I pushed it open, eyes blinded by cigarette smoke. I blinked, trying to regain sight, and heard a mélange of voices.

"Come in, honey!"

"Well, what d'ya know, it's little red riding hood."

"Shut the door, you're letting in the cold."

I closed the door and found myself at the end of a long bar in a narrow room with a row of dark faces aimed in my direction. Taking a deep breath, I managed to squeeze out, "I'm looking for Helen Eskridge. Her son said she was here."

"Hey Helen, somebody ta see ya," shouted the bartender.

I woman stood halfway down the bar talking to a man seated on a stool. She turned and peered in my direction. Then she walked toward me, an enormous and somewhat toothless grin taking up her entire small and delicate face. She looked just like the young man upstairs, except more angular, more slender. She had one of those small, bony frames that look like a bent wire and are as indestructible as iron.

I moved toward her. "I'm Donna McCleskey. I live at the Bethany Seminary. We've been

holding community meetings about how to improve the neighborhood. Except for some people from the elders home not many people from this street have come. People say younger folks like yourself need to speak. Will you come?"

Helen shook her stringy black hair, the curls having been straightened out of it. Placing one hand on the bar, she motioned confusion and unclarity with the other one. "Why would I wanna do that?"

"Well, it just seems like there are so many problems. If we could get organized, we could begin to work on them. But it takes people like you who lots of others know."

Helen twisted around momentarily and winked at the guy she'd been talking with. "I'll do anything once. Where's it at? When is it?"

"It's Thursday night at 8:00 at the Seminary. If you'd like, I can come by and pick you up." (I didn't want to take any chances. I had had people say yes before and never show up.)

"You don't have to come. I know the way."

"Well, I always come for the elders anyway," I lied. "It's no trouble. I'll come for you about 7:45 Thursday."

I fled from the bar before she could object, the sound of laughter following me as I raced toward the corner of Independence and Congress Parkway.

Two days later, John F. Kennedy was shot, bringing me face-to-face with tensions on a larger scale. Kennedy was the first president for whom I had cast a vote. As his youthful image was replaced with Johnson's tired one, the election victory turned sour and had the smell of defeat. The euphoria of democratic elections was sliced out of me forever.

On one level it mattered little to me who the murderer was. He was only a fragment of the fabric of hatred in which my nation was bound. Kennedy, like Lincoln, like Patrice

Lumumba of Kenya, seemed to stand for recognizing the dignity and humanity of black citizens. I felt as if we were involved in another civil war. A deep coldness seeped into the marrow of my bones.

As TV cameras wove a hero's myth around Kennedy and cast the sorrowful shadow of the former first lady from all angles, I moved in and out of the sadness of my own life. As attention shifted to Arlington cemetery, I reflected on a different graveyard, Fifth City. It held none of the dignity of those who die in honor. My community's stark barrenness stood out in contrast to the pomp and elegance in Arlington. I looked out the window at the burial ground where I had come to live. What eternal flame could keep hope alive in my waning optimism?

## THE POWER OF ART

"What's that? You don't call that art, do you?"

I was teaching a contemporary religious studies course to suburban adults and had placed a five-foot print of Picasso's *Guernica* on the black board in front of the group. I waited for the hubbub to die down. "We're going to talk about what this picture means for us."

"He must have been crazy." "Look at that man in the fire!"

I waited. "The artist has said what he wanted to say. Now it's our turn. Great art always sets up a dialogue between itself and the viewer. Tonight we're going to engage in a triologue: the painting is speaking to us, each of us is speaking to the painting; in addition, we are going to speak to each other."

"Well, I can tell you right now, I wouldn't have that in my house."

"That is all right. We don't have to like what the artist is saying to us. But first it's important to give the artist a chance to speak. Let's first establish the objective reality of what is in front of us. Let's go around the table and

each person tell us one thing you see in the picture."

"A chicken." "There's a lamp or an eye at the top." "That woman's crying over her dead baby." There's a horse that is mutilated." "It's terrible."

"Changing the question, what do you feel as you look at the picture?"

"I feel like my entire insides are being turned inside out."

"If you were given this picture as a gift, where would you put it in your house?"

A flurry broke out. "In a closet ... in the bathroom ... That's easy, in the basement where nobody can see it."

"Pablo Picasso painted this picture. He called it 'Guernica' after the small Spanish village, which was the target of the first experimentation with saturation bombing. Guernica really happened in Spain. In another way we can see that it is a slice of life and each of us is free to choose how we will relate to it."

After teaching this course, I was in a conversation with Joe Mathews, the leader of our community, about a small grant the Wieboldt Foundation had given us to work with urban youth, particularly to get inner-city gangs off the street. Joe asked, "What would you do with them?"

My response was, "Why not use art, poetry, music? We already use Picasso's Guernica; we could do whole sessions using conversation on different art forms. I suspect it will be easier to get street kids to watch movies. What about a move like *On the Waterfront*? With that, Joe asked me to put together an art form version of a basic course."

#### The Muskadoodlers

One of the groups with whom we worked was a Southside gang, the Muskadoodlers. Their names for each other – Duck Tail, Half Human, Lover Boy – were revealing. While watching

"High Noon" and "The Guns of Navarone", they chattered endlessly, sharing painful stories from their lives. The difficulty of proving their manhood poured out as they talked about folk songs like "If I Had a Hammer" and "How Many Miles".

Slicker started the session on poetry by loudly reading e.e. cummings:

*"Buffalo Bill's  
defunct  
who used to  
ride a watersmooth-silver-  
stallion  
and break onetwothreefourfive pigeons  
just like that  
Jesus  
He was a handsome man  
and what I want to know is  
how do you like your blueeyed boy  
Mister Death"*

There was a stunned silence, then nervous laughter. They stared at the page.

"Would you like to hear that again?"

More nervous giggles. They began punching each other. Slicker read it again, this time barely about a whisper. It was so quiet you could hear people breathing.

"Did you like that?"

One boy nodded; another muttered, "This guy must have flunked in school, his sentences are all wrong."

"Did you get his message?" Slicker asked.

A dozen fuzzy and Latino heads nodded.

"Well, how do you like this one? Slicker read slowly and softly:

*"nobody loses all the time*

*i had an uncle named  
Sol who was a born failure and  
nearly everybody said he should have  
gone*

into vaudeville perhaps because my  
Uncle Sol could  
sing McCann He Was A Diver on Xmas  
Eve like Hell Itself which  
may or may not account for the fact  
that my Uncle

Sol indulged in that possibly most  
inexcusable  
of all to use a highfalootin phrase  
luxuries that is or to  
wit farming and be  
it needlessly  
added

my Uncle Sol's farm  
failed because the chickens  
ate the vegetables so  
my Uncle Sol had a  
chicken farm till the  
skunks ate the chickens when

my Uncle Sol  
had a skunk farm but  
the skunks caught cold and  
died and so  
my Uncle Sol imitated the  
skunks in a subtle manner

or by drowning himself in the watertank  
but somebody who'd given my Uncle  
Sol a Victor  
Victrola and records while he lived  
presented to  
him upon the auspicious occasion of his  
decease a  
scrupulous not to mention splendiferous  
funeral with  
tall boys in black gloves and flowers and  
everything and  
i remember we all cried like the Missouri  
when my Uncle Sol's coffin lurched  
because  
somebody pressed a button  
(and down went  
my Uncle  
Sol

and started a worm farm)"

"Nobody loses all the time," Slicker added  
in a whisper.

They were in shock. There was an uproar  
as boys slapped each other on the back,  
legs, arms.

"Do you see a poem you would like to  
read?"

Again, silence.

"We're dummies. We can't read."  
echoed around the room.

Slicker waited, just letting them look at the  
poems in their hands. After several  
minutes a tentative voice began,

"If you can't eat you got to  
smoke and we aint got

nothing to smoke:come on kid  
let's go to sleep

if you can't smoke you got to  
Sing and we aint got

nothing to sing:come on kid  
let's go to sleep

if you can't sing you got to  
die and we aint got

Nothing to die,come on kid  
let's go to sleep

if you can't die you got to  
dream and we aint got

nothing to dream(come on kid  
Let's go to sleep)"

The biggest bruiser in the group nearly  
exploded. "He read it! He read the poem!

Nogood read a goddam poem. Let me do it."

"Why don't you try the one right next to it, Duck Tail?"

Ducky put the paper down on the table, placed both hands on his knees as if to kick a football, took a deep breath and barle whispered.

"dying is fine)but Death

?o

baby

i

wouldn't like

Death if Death

were

good:for

when(instead of stopping to think)you

begin to feel of it,dying

's miraculous

why?be

cause dying is

perfectly natural;perfectly

putting

it mildly lively(but

Death

is strictly

scientific

& artificial &

evil & legal)

we thank thee

god

almighty for dying

(forgive us,o life!the sin of Death"

As he finished all the boys began clammering for a chance to read. Having now proven that two of the boys could read, Sillicker's large frame must have taken the aura of a giant. Every eye was on him. "Let's talk about this poem a minute. What for you is 'fine'?"

The boys began nudging each other. "Pussy" one of them finally said outloud. All the rest laughed and nodded.

"What for you is scientific, artificial, evil and legal?"

Almost as one voice they exploded, "School."

"Okay, Tommy, I want you to stand up here on the table and read this poem, putting in 'pussy' every time you come to 'dying' and substituting 'school' every time you see 'Death'."

Tommy tried to call under the table, but two boys lifted him onto the top. Duck Tail shoved the poetry into his hand, "I did it Tommy. You can do it, Man."

Tommy's hands were shaking. He took several gulps. "Pussy's fine ..." The room exploded with laughter. "...but schoool ..."

The boys kept on laughing and Tommy got bold. He continued in a loud, dramatic voice, "O Baby, I wouldn't like schoool if schoool were good..."



It took nearly ten minutes for Tommy to get through the poem with all the disruptive guffaws, but when he finished, every boy wanted a turn standing on the table.

We must have read twenty poems that night, substituting their own words to suit the tone of each poem. A change in their images of themselves was palpable; they began to see themselves as literate, as significant. Hearing and reading poetry akin to their own experience invigorated them and made that experience seem worthwhile. They became less aggressive and defensive and more open about their pain and sorrow. By the time they left, each boy was walking as if he were two inches taller. At least three poets – e.e.cummings, D. H. Lawrence, and Stephen Crane – understood their struggles and had ripped away their fear of reading and the white culture.

What we saw in the weeks to come was how difficult it was to maintain their newly experienced self-confidence in the midst of ongoing experiences of degradation at home, on the streets, even among themselves.

## THE VICTIM IMAGE

My education in urban sociology was not taught by university professors. It came from substitute teaching in Chicago and working in the inner city neighborhood. I came to know the downtown Loop, the blighted inner-city ring in which I lived, the self-satisfied suburbs further out, and conservative rural towns beyond the metropolitan area. In our neighborhood, we tried to create a fifth city, a new kind of urban community.

The first two years were spent mainly organizing cleanup campaigns and knocking on doors to get people to come to meetings. Black and white together, we held countless sessions trying to figure out how to upgrade and maintain the neighborhood. Community workshops listed hundreds of problems which we residents experienced daily – from not

being able to get the potholes in the street repaired to unemployment to lack of childcare services – 5,431 problems in all!

We began to see how the problems were interrelated. Lack of education and skills barred people from city jobs. Unemployment led to drinking, frustrated violence, and hopelessness. Discouraged about life and without money for proper food, some didn't have the energy to seek job training, to demand services from the city, or even to stimulate their own children.

Existing social programs aimed at a single solution, such as employment for organizing politically, holding slum landlords accountable for letting their buildings deteriorate. We were beginning to feel that our black neighbors were friends and this Westside area, so different from the small towns and cities in which we grew up, was our home. We wanted our new friends to get jobs and buy houses in the community. For this to happen we felt a more comprehensive approach was needed, some way to deal with all problems simultaneously.

Many people, especially our neighbors, thought we were crazy. We still believed in the myth of equality, social advancement through personal effort. But many of our neighbors suspected that America had no rungs on its social ladder for them to climb.

Armed with spurious optimism, we decided to send a large delegation to Selma in spring of 1965 to march with Rev. King in one of his peaceful demonstrations. I decided to go despite being six months pregnant. Boarding the bus for Selma, I still believed it was possible to create an integrated community.

When we arrived in Selma, we were put up in a church. The minister told us we could sleep on the benches and instructed us to leave our things and go to the rally grounds for march instructions.

Walking over to the rally grounds, we saw large black storm clouds on the horizon. We had been in the tent about ten minutes when

the wind slipped in and pulled up the tent pole and a whole row of stakes. The tent began to collapse; and the weight of the canvas smashed me to the ground. I must have fainted because the next thing I remember two women stood on either side of me, supporting me. After the tent pole and stakes were reset, we walked back to the church. Nervous chatter gone, hardly anyone spoke.

The next day 25,000 people marched through the streets of Selma. Still shaky on my feet, I nevertheless was determined to go the whole way. Many black people were sitting out on their porches, waving to us. On the streets, in their homes, in the shops, they called out to each other. I was confused about why I was marching in the street and they were sitting on their stoops. I went through the whole march and the long bus ride home in a state of shock, unable to join in the singing or talk to anyone, shut away in a vacuum of uncomprehending and thus inexpressible grief. We were a sober group who returned to Fifth City. Things seemed to be going okay, yet underneath we sensed something was eluding us. Some deep issue must be unearthed.

Spring blossomed into summer. A group of college students came as summer volunteers. The Boiven family, with all its teenagers, mixed well with the community and their home became a youth hangout. They often held parties which included neighborhood youth and guys from SCLC. Everyone loved the vitality and spirit of black music, soul music, and the black youth taught white kids how to dance.

Still, it wasn't all roses. One night two of the volunteers were headed to a bar. As they were walking down Congress Parkway, two black guys came up behind them, put a gun to the young man's back, and said, "Gimme your money." The volunteers jumped into the middle of the street and flagged down an approaching car and climbed in, wondering if they had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire, as the rescue car was full of unknown

people. Thankfully the rescuers drove the volunteers straight home.

We continued to hold community workshops. As we moved from listing problems to proposing solutions, we kept confronting an invisible wall. Our neighbors could not imagine solving their own problems. People with money and education, the city, the government, white professionals must know the answers, must find the solutions. We must lead the meetings, organize the workdays.

At every meal, at every staff meeting we talked about our work with the gangs, our encounters in community meetings, what was happening in the civil rights movement. Over and over we asked "What is keeping these people from acting?"

Wanda Lee came to all the meetings. She was our symbol of "the fat lady" from J. D. Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*, where Zooey tells Franny that whenever she went on the radio she always should shine her shoes for the fat lady that she imagined was listening. Wanda Lee was a fat lady, less than five feet tall, uneducated, with too many kids for any of us to count. Her eyes looked into the sides of the sockets rather than straight ahead. She always talked ghettoize. If you could tap Wanda's potential, you were a miracle worker. If you could be authentic with her, you could relate to anyone.

Another person we saw often was James Steplight, a wino on Fifth Avenue. He was small and wiry and always hanging around. We were important to him; we were a new element in his life. When we did things in the community, he came to sing and shout, "It's a great time to be alive." We guessed he drank because, as a sensitive man, it was the only way he could cope with the pain of the ghetto.

Then there was Eugene Beasley, a local gang leader, who rounded up his gang members for workdays. He was like a huge teddy bear, trying to act tough. His wedding was held in the chapel. He and his wife had several children before they were married who were the attendants in their wedding. Just as we

were about to start the ceremony, a tall man we had never seen before made his entrance. He had on a white suit, gold chains, white shoes, top hat and a beautiful body. The eyes of the whole congregation were riveted on him, rather than the bride!

We began to see that these predominantly recent émigrés from the South had a 'victim image', most probably residual to the slavery and discrimination background from which they came. We realized the wall we were confronting was the "Nigger" image. People internalized this image day after day. Wanda Lee, James Steplight, Bernard Higgenbottom and most other residents saw themselves as shiftless, no account, uncreative bums because that was the image which had been projected on them wherever they went. They were perpetrating that image on each new generation by using it against themselves. They were in a cycle of self-destruction. Unless that image changed, we could not expect the people of Fifth City to find solutions to their problems and create a viable community.

## IMAGE CHANGE

A house-to-house survey of Fifty City indicated that if we could provide childcare, mothers would be free to work and increase family income. So we started looking for funding to start a preschool, infant nursery, and after-school program. We began research toward an innovative curriculum to address the victim image. Another woman and I did substitute teaching three days a week and curriculum research two days. Nights and weekends we engaged several other women in study and research for the curriculum.

We were delighted when we turned up Jerome Brunner's *The Process of Education*. He described an unfolding learning process, which began in the womb and continued until death put one in the tomb. The early years were the foundation upon which each child continued to construct a life. Our curriculum must be broad and deep. It must provide a total life framework. Every moment

and every aspect must contribute to laying a solid foundation.

We read of Maria Montessori's work with Italian infants. She insisted that each of the children set their own pace and discern their own points of interest, learning in the process not only about freedom, but also how to interact with the freedom of others in a responsible fashion. We saw this as seminal to character development. Free responsibility within the context of city, nation, world, and universe became a cornerstone of the curriculum.

Jean Piaget's stages of development seemed germinal to healthy psychological growth, clearly showing the role of motor skills and imaginative play. Playground, playhouse, physical exercises must be designed to develop well-rounded bodies and minds.

Ghetto children seemed to exist in a state of "cultural deprivation". Few had ever seen a book, been read to, or gone to a library. If we were to counter the dropout and failure rates endemic to their social class, we must give them a "head start" with the basic skills of reading, writing and numbers. Engleman and Bereiter were experimenting at the University of Illinois in Champaign, Urbana with teaching infants the basic skills. Dolman and Delacato had succeeded in teaching sight-reading to preschoolers. Their work formed a critical piece in the daily agenda of what we hoped would be an unusual preschool.

But more important than anything else was addressing the victim image. Herein lay the Achilles heel. Unless we could undermine that image, the lives of these children would be flawed. In Kenneth Boulding's book, *The Image*, he articulated the important role images play in learning and the dynamics of image change. We studied, chewed, discussed, memorized, fought over Boulding's description, searching for a specific pedagogy which would unravel the victim image. From Carl Jung's *Man and His Symbols*, we knew the route to the unconscious was through art, image, dream, and metaphor. We decided to focus on an artful repetition of

strong positive images – personal dignity, freedom, and creativity.

We sought to transmit the Kierkegaardian and Jungian concept of a transcendent self, a person who is self-conscious about its relationship to the environment and freely chooses the content and quality of it. We hammered the concept of life affirmation into the daily rhythm of the curriculum.

The preschool proposal, which came out of the research, was accepted by the War on Poverty, under the Headstart program in 1965. They accepted our concept of Imaginal Education. In fact that was one of the reasons we were funded. They said the description of the victim image and how we would work to change it were provocative.

The preschool began with Lela Jahn as director. Tall, statuesque, her height was both a source of amazement and an unconscious message of power and authority. Her Amazonian energy moved the tired and nervous faculty to work superhuman hours stitching up black pants and red tunics for their teaching uniforms. She cajoled and cursed innumerable workmen to clean and paint the downstairs of an old gym, make stools so the preschoolers could reach the toilets and sinks, and install all the furniture. Under her tutelage the dark grimy rooms turned into cheerful places of welcome and color.

Friendly and outgoing, Lela's fiery eyes, reflected dynamism and creativity, instilling confidence in apprehensive mothers and fledgling staff. By the sheer force of her personality she convinced parents who struggled to make ends meet to buy red jersey pants and shirts for their children to wear to school. In hundreds of small ways she communicated, "This isn't a charity daycare program. This is the Fifth City Preschool. This is the best education available. It is a privilege to attend. And that privilege can be taken away."

As soon as a child arrived at school, the child was greeted with, "Who are you?" The

response (taken from Muhammad Ali) "I'm the greatest" followed. "Where do you live?" was answered with "In the universe" and "Where are you going?" was followed by "To create history".

The faculty took catchy tunes and wrote new lyrics containing positive, self-affirming images. On the playground innumerable skirmishes were broken up by a teacher beginning to sing:

I'm the greatest, you're the greatest  
That's the way life is.  
When you know it, when you show it,  
You are free to live.

The foundation of the preschool became its imaginal education curriculum, a series of songs, rituals, images, mottos, and events, which transmitted to the students that they were "creators of history". Although the school's curriculum included basic skills training, psychological development, and lessons in social responsibility, the design of the day and the pedagogical styles of the teachers were permeated with the energy of image creation and image change.

## CONCLUSION

While imaginal education was conceived in relation to the Fifty City Preschool, those of us who were the teachers saw its relevance to education at all age levels. In the summer of 1966 we gathered twenty-five teachers from across the nation to spend six weeks broadening our research. We delved into the process of education from the beginnings of recorded history, examining the dynamics of image change. We formulated a total knowledge model called the life triangles as the basis of spiraling curriculum up for infants through adults. We created curriculum at every age level, which were imbued with positive human imagery. We practiced teaching through images in a life-addressing style.

During the following year, we continued the research with a series of weekend workshops with a larger body of teachers, primarily from the Midwest. A dozen teachers joined our

religious community and taught in Fifth City schools. They met weekly to formulate imaginal curriculum for their classes. In addition to deepening the theory and methods of image change, the weekend

workshops and the teachers guild supported conscientious teachers trying to revolutionize archaic education systems in a responsible manner.