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Ruth Carter Day, 1978

### One Time When the Angel Came

And in my dream  
The Angel shrugged  
And said, If we  
Fail this time, it  
Will be a failure of  
Imagination.

And then she placed  
The world gently in  
The palm of my hand.

--Brian Andreas

It is with crystal clarity that I recall the moment when Ruth Carter was **“placed gently in the palm of my hand.”** I stood on the brink. My stomach was churning. **“If we fail this time, it will be a failure of imagination.”**

The year was 1976. There was no fuzz in that vision, and the task to pave the way for her to be the community director of the Fifth City Preschool was my assignment; I

had two years to bear fruit. Of course I could expect help from my colleagues, but my name was on that project.

Ruth and I lived in a Black ghetto on Chicago's west side where, as a staff member of the Ecumenical Institute, I worked as a teacher and later as the director of the Fifth City Preschool. At that time, in the late 60's and early 70's, there were approximately 250 children in the school, and a staff of around twenty Caucasian women from the Ecumenical Institute, along with several volunteer mothers. Our vision was that over the years it would become a community owned and operated program, a demonstration of how imaginal education could transform a community. It was a program intended for the world to emulate. Ruth commanded the respect of her fellow teachers and the entire community, so it was the consensus that all efforts would be made to prepare her for the director's position.

Ruth was one of those preschool mothers who began her career journey as a volunteer and soon became a teaching assistant. She proved to be an incredibly talented and ethically strong woman capable of supporting her family and all that involved while assuming more and more responsibility for the preschool.

Ruth had such compassion for the children, youth and parents in the community. She felt responsible for giving them hope. Her hope came from the songs and rituals that were part of the preschool curriculum. The images rubbed off on her, because you can't sing and recite to someone else without addressing yourself. Two of those songs and two rituals follow:

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

*I am always falling down,  
But I know what I can do.  
I can pick myself up and say to myself  
That I'm the greatest too.  
It doesn't matter if I'm big or small,  
I live now if I live at all.  
I am always falling down,  
But I know what I can do.*

*This is the day we have.  
This is the day we have.  
We can live this day*

*Or throw it away.  
This is the day we have.  
So, let's pick up this day and LIVE!*

*Food is good. Right? Right!  
Life is good. Right? Right!  
All is good. Right? Right!*

In 1976 I was the last Ecumenical Institute staff member working at the preschool. Ruth had begun to study for another attempt at her GED exam (possibly her 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> try), but in my heart and soul I knew that her chances of ever passing were doubtful. She had powerful stories to tell and much experience, but GED testing doesn't take those things into consideration. So, under the rubric of "imagination," Ruth and I talked about options. She chose to go back to high school, at age 37, to earn her high school diploma. She was filled with both excitement and fear about this prospect, but she embraced the opportunity with determination. It took her two years, and she graduated from St. Mary's High School with a real graduation in a white cap and gown and a ceremony and all. Her grades were above average, her class participation was awesome, and her motivation was top notch. She went to school evenings and weekends while she continued to teach. No GED would have brought the joy or confidence of that "real" diploma. She continued taking college classes until she had enough credits to be legally recognized as a teacher, and finally the director. To celebrate her accomplishments and the announcement of her new role as director, the community held a Ruth Carter Day, with a big feast, much singing, and a memorable ceremony. One of their own had made it! What a grand day!

Ruth retired last month after 40+ years of dedicated service, 28 as the director. She worked with approximately 100 women from the Ecumenical Institute from 1962 to 1978. At that point she took on the leadership responsibility of Fifth City Preschool. On more occasions than I care to remember, Ruth took no paycheck so that others could have theirs. She took no raises for years. She believed in living life to the fullest, regardless of her external circumstances. She says her social security check won't be very big, but it will be dependable. Of course there were no benefits like a pension, as is often true in non-profit settings, so colleagues were invited to shower her with checks to initiate the "Ruth Carter, Life is Good" Fund. And it happened!

I believe that this test of creative imagination was passed, and I know that The Angel is still smiling!

Alice Baumbach  
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