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Feuerverger, Grace. (2007). *Teaching, Learning and Other Miracles*. Taipei, Rotterdam: Sense Publishers

Pp. xiii + 156 \$24.50 ISBN 90-8790-000-7

Reviewed by Carol A. Mullen
University of North Carolina at Greensboro

February 27, 2008

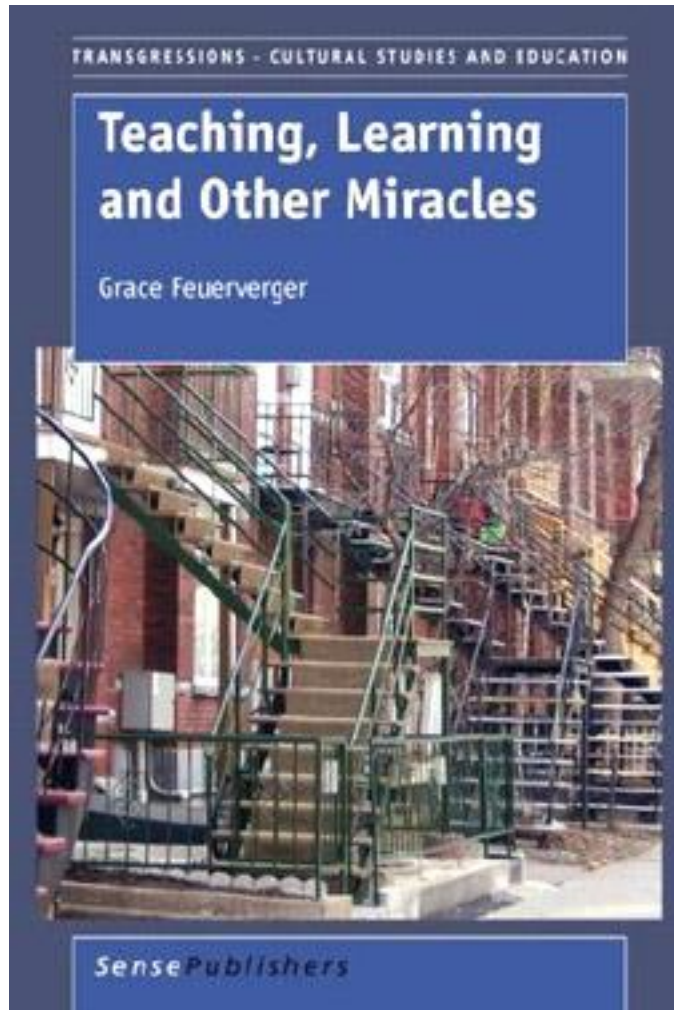
At the American Education Research Association conference in San Francisco, 2006, I had the chance to talk with Dr. Grace Feuerverger about her future book *Teaching, Learning and Other Miracles*. During this time it rained heavily but then sunrays arched across the grey skies. Against this backdrop the author shared stories of her childhood and early schooling years. While desolation had engulfed her at the time, she became a survivor of immediate and past threats. As author, she described her intention for this book, which was to infuse education with something more powerful than hope—sacredness and magic, and to share with teachers of today and tomorrow how they can personally make a difference.

The arch storyline of this book is a meta-tension between Hope and Hell. Hope (life) is that which is lived out through schooling and Hell (death), that which stalks during war times. Such psychoanalytic dichotomies are far too simplistic in this work, though, where the psyche stages life dramas that are simultaneously “dangerous” and “wondrous.” Behind and underneath the formal classroom curriculum lurk phantoms, remembrances of blood-stained, embattled characters, both loved ones and the loved ones of loved ones. As a child, she learned and grew through pain; the memory of the “battered soul[s]” of death camps never let her live completely freely or forget “the blood of my relatives,” even within the safety of the school building (p. 13).

It is within this autobiographical framework the author shares her wishes for teachers, including those she returned to visit that day in Montreal. Similarly, for readers who are teachers and for educators in general she longs for them to push past their own fears to “look into the heart of the pain of your pupils” and “make them feel worthwhile and loved and respected” (p. 16). Teachers have responsibility for diverse groups of students who are stories deep and legacies thick; for Feuerverger, this reality is the penultimate challenge facing today’s teachers who are, for many students, the “only ray of hope” (p. 16).

Unlike many current authors of educational texts, Feuerverger sees schooling as a sacred life journey, in part because as a “a child of survivors of World War II” (p. 9) she understands what it means to embrace schooling as a place to “escape” to, a kind of shelter of the heart and mind. What is especially intriguing is that she treats hope and the sacred as a kind of transgression and, within the scope of cultural studies and education, it may well be.

Autobiographical stories of remembrance involving school and education, and of personal reinvention and healing, connect the 12 chapters that are the fibers of this book. These travelogues of the self move through and across such themes as pilgrimages, calls to teaching, reclaiming voices, specifically those of non-English and Yiddish persons, wars, trauma, and dreams.





Grace Feuerverger

The author begins her story with a serendipitous account involving her conversation with a Catholic nun at a multicultural conference. She was overwhelmed to learn that they both had “Ecole Fielding” in common, a Montreal school where the nun worked at the time and where the author had gone as a child. She heeded the nun’s calling and returned to that place feeling triumphant, just as she had long ago, then a child of Holocaust survivors who transported herself into the French Canadian culture, her “life raft,” a “fantasy” world (p. 10). Healing had come from a feeling of deep connectedness that accompanied becoming another self, a French Canadian.

The author’s personal account of her journey brings to mind possible curricular activities for students of various ages and backgrounds. Readers who are teachers or professors can utilize this book in the following ways:

- In an effort to better understand their students’ life worlds, educators can approach these through discussions of language(s) and private and public associations. For the author, French and English became new “friends” while Yiddish, her soul language, was rife with sorrow.
- Images of formal schooling offer another window onto the self; for the author, school represented “a scared space and in it the desert in my soul began to bloom” (p. 29).
- Importantly, developing cross-cultural understandings and appreciations offers an invaluable life lesson, as in the case involving the author’s childhood friendship with a German girl and her need to process the meaning of this relationship. (It was her Jewish father who helped her to work through this psychic conflict, not a teacher.)
- The meaning of home is yet another valuable way for teachers to engage in meaning making with their diverse student groups—for the author, it was upon reflection over time that she came to see that “the classroom has always been my true home. I had found it long ago as a child of Holocaust survivors in need of safety, and later on as a classroom teacher offering home to others who needed it” (p. 150).
- Personal cultural learning also occurred for the author through the reading of bilingual books (in, e.g., Chinese/English) and African American and other stories. Stumbling across a bilingual book of stories about Jewish village life in Europe surfaced powerful emotions for the adult who was overcome with the memory of having felt forced, as a child, to attend Yiddish classes and read this very book. Decades later, the storybook had crystallized into “a little piece of wreckage off the emotional debris of my past” (p. 109). The author begins her multicultural literature course at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto each time with this book, this life raft.

It is not surprising that Feuerverger ends with an argument that supports hope, compassion, and love. She sees compassion as “the holiest among educational pursuits” (p. 151). Miracles happen, she says, where teachers and learners come together and where teachers help students to realize “their inner capacity for greatness” (p. 151).

In the current era of high-stakes accountability in education, efficiency and control have taken on monstrous proportions and “global conflict and terrorism are etched in our psyches” (p. 151). This is not a “how to” book that describes how teachers can battle the Hell that is high-stakes testing but rather, as William Ayers, University of Illinois at Chicago, eloquently states,

Here is a book about teaching as it could be, about democracy and freedom as aspirations yet to be achieved, about childhood as a lived and storied experience teetering precariously between propulsive power and utter vulnerability. Here, indeed, is a book about miracles—written by a miracle-maker for the miracle-workers teachers might yet become. (Foreword, p. xi)

A courageous undertaking, this personal telling that is simultaneously a political manifesto brings to life the Hope that is fundamental to teaching and learning—it honors the experiences of our students and the central place of their life worlds, and at all levels of schooling today. It also reminds us that education should always be about uplifting the human spirit.

Finally, readers should find this original piece of work compelling and inspiring. Not only is it extremely readable but also deeply engaging. Importantly, it offers a fresh perspective on immigrant and refugee issues in education, as well as issues of language, culture and identity. This book has relevance for the many students in classrooms in urban centers today coming from places of war and other oppressions.

About the Reviewer

Carol A. Mullen, PhD, is a professor and chair, Department of Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, School of Education, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She specializes in mentorship and democracy, faculty and graduate student development, and curriculum leadership. She is editor of the refereed international *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, a Routledge/Taylor & Francis refereed, international journal. Her most recent book is *Write to the Top! How to be a Prolific Academic* (with W. B. Johnson, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

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Carol A. Mullen

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