



"Dear Josie": Witnessing the Hopes and Failures of Democratic Education. Joseph Featherstone, Liza Featherstone, and Caitlin Featherstone. New York: Teachers College Press, 2003. 186 pp.

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Next to my bed lies a book of poems that I treasure, *Brace's Cove* (Featherstone 2000). The poem "Trouble" begins,

Now, and again, I need the story--

how my grandfather carried a sick kid

on the San Souci trolley

from the valley to the mountain

because he believed that pine trees heal. (p.30)

In times of despair and hopelessness, I need a poem. When the headlines shout about standards that are raised while children and teachers are judged failures; when the educational discourse is saturated with high stakes testing, and the ironically named "Leave No Child Behind Act" promises to leave behind massive numbers of poor and immigrant children; when every politician has become an educational reformer--I need a glimmer of hope about the educational world.

Dear Josie provides that sustenance, and the author, Joseph Featherstone, is also the poet cited above. With a poet's heart, an historian's perspective, a storyteller's narrative skills, and a visionary's clarity, Featherstone offers us images, analysis, vision, and hope. The chapters, edited by Liza and Caitlin Featherstone (two of the author's daughters) reflect Featherstone's writing over a period of more than 40 years. Included are pieces that situate current educational practices within a historical context, descriptions of educational practices and policies, and portraits of individual classrooms and teachers. The span of the articles allows us to see what has changed in the last half a decade and what--strangely, reassuringly, or despairingly--remains very much the same.

The volume is a "Who's Who" of educational reform, including portraits or analyses of



John Dewey, Deborah Meier, Herb Kohl, and Vivian Paley, but this is no romantic, overly lovely view of education. We read of misguided busing policies that do little to address broader economic inequalities, of promising practices in progressive education that are diluted and distorted as they cross from England to the United States, and of educational policies that are antifamily and disrespectful of children. Featherstone reminds us to be suspicious of rhetoric and sloganeering--that taking away children's recess can be called "educational reform." The fact that some of these articles were written 40 years ago both deepens our perspective and is depressingly maddening: How can so many of the problems of the past remain the problems of the present? Why haven't things changed?

Featherstone is deeply concerned as well: "It would be a terrible irony--especially in this democracy of ours--if in the name of 'standards,' our schools turn away from being places where children explore, joke, pursue passions, speak the poetry of their lives, and have wonderful ideas--just as this ambition for them and their lives was shown to be utterly realizable" (p. 41). But we are not allowed to sink into hopelessness. Featherstone reminds us that we must learn to live on two levels, level one a vision of a "just and equal democratic society" that allows us to know what questions to ask, and the second level of immediate tactical goals--the "how do we get there" discussion (pp. 26-27).

Because of the need for praxis, the merger of hope and reality, the morphing of theory into practice, the most valuable parts of the volume are the profiles of individual teachers and classrooms. When Featherstone describes classroom practices that respect children and that hold schools to a high standard of social justice and democracy, we can see concrete principles, too often presented only as abstractions. Featherstone reminds us "anything you say that matches any classroom reality is bound to be complicated and messy" (p. xv); he does not pretend to simple formulas for success but offers small gems of interaction, vision, faith, and love.

Featherstone writes about Jeanette Amidon's first-grade classroom: "When the guppy dies, the response is swift. 'We need a meeting' " (p.152). We can immediately picture a community that understands that interacting with others makes meaning for understanding the importance of little democracies and the social context of schooling. When we read Vivian Paley's assertion that by kindergarten children have already internalized a status hierarchy and that "a ruling class will notify others of their acceptability and the outsiders will learn to anticipate the sting of rejection" (p. 162), we feel the power of exclusion and understand the teacher's critical need to counter societal patterns of unfairness.

Featherstone concludes with the chapter "Dear Josie," a letter he writes to a young teacher beginning her career. He shares his vision of the teacher as the architect of embryonic democracies, as one who can put the lie to the belief that there isn't enough to go around and that unfairness must be endured, not challenged. He challenges this new teacher to construct learning experiences that will equip "everybody's children . . . for full



participation in work, culture, and liberty" (p. 164). I want my 30 future teachers to read these words as Featherstone and I cheer, "You are going to be a teacher. You can make a difference. It's a huge job, but you don't have to do it alone. Most importantly, it really matters." I recommend this book to my students, and to anyone who needs to be reminded that, as Myles Horton said, we are in it for the "long haul."

References Cited

Featherstone, Joseph

2000 *Trouble*. In *Brace's Cove*. Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press.

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