

## The art of medicine In search of a teacher

“Written and Illustrated by...” These words were written on a blackboard in September, 1971, in crisp, authoritative chalk. We first graders at Colton Elementary School sat in awe as a young, energetic teacher took the stage in our lives. Ms Zive (and she was the first person we knew who ever used the term Ms) beguiled us with a dazzling smile, a secret store of Bugle corn snacks, plus the tantalising promise to let us in on the magic that adults possessed: reading.

We watched her waist-length, raven-coloured hair shimmer as she carefully printed “Written and Illustrated by...” on the expanse of chalkboard that spread before us like an intimidating ebony altar. We copied the intricate lettering laboriously. These were heady words for fledgling writers; most of us were only just wrapping our minds around three-letter words with syrupy rhymes. Printing these words between the solid and dotted lines of our manuscript paper demanded enormous concentration from fidgety first graders. It also demanded a leap of faith.

It required us to follow Ms Zive out onto a limb with these lumbering words—filled as they were with double letters, consonant clusters, and passive voice. We had to trust her that these daunting words would be worth the sustained labours. But Ms Zive was firm in her conviction that all writers should take proper credit for their literary output, even if the stories were no more than a sentence

or two long. If it took every ounce of post-recess energy to corral those words onto the page—so be it.

Learning to read was an astonishing process for 6-year-olds. Converting that reading into writing was equally startling. By some mysterious alchemy those markings on the page could transform into words and stories. We could absorb them or we could create them—or both! This was beyond anything that Houdini or the Wizard of Oz could conjure up. This was practical magic, unfolding on our laminate pressboard desks every single day. Ms Zive handed us power, and it was exhilarating.

I read voraciously from that moment onward, unable to believe my good fortune. Over the course of that year, I wrote dozens of stapled storybooks—*Written and Illustrated by Danielle Ofri*—each longer and more detailed than the previous. Nearly every one featured our black mutt Kushi, and her exploits with the Ofri children.

15 years ago, when I published my first book—*Singular Intimacies: Becoming a Doctor at Bellevue*—about the journey through medical school and residency, I thought about Ms Zive, and the precious gift of reading and writing she had given to me. I couldn’t have written the book without her setting me on the path. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to contact her and thank her? Wouldn’t it be fitting to show her the book I’d written now, whose genealogy I could trace straight from those Kushi stories in her first-grade class?

But how would I find her? Teachers didn’t have first names back then so I didn’t even have a full name to work with. But I did know she’d married after our year at Colton and moved to California with a new married name, Steinberg. Most importantly, though, I’d heard—and took a secret pride in—that she had named her daughter Danielle. Periodically I’d do a web search on “Danielle Steinberg” in California. But California is a capacious state, brimming with Steinbergs and positively teeming with Danielles. When my second book was published, I tried again, but nothing came up.

I published several more books and by then I’d given up hope of finding Ms Zive. It had been more than a decade of searching. My medical practice and teaching responsibilities had multiplied, and by now I had three children of my own, all of whom were learning to write stories about their own black mutt, Juliet.

One day, however, while dabbling on Facebook when I should have been reading the latest clinical trials in *The Lancet*, I searched the Facebook database for “Danielle Steinberg, California.” I was shocked when the search yielded only one person. The very solitariness of the results made me suspicious. Perhaps this was some



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nefarious Facebook algorithm constructed to wheedle out whatever advertising goldmine I might possess. Maybe it was an infomercial designed to take advantage of the human soft spot for similar first names.

I gathered my courage and dashed off a shot-in-the-dark message that would rightly be flagged as junk by any halfway credible spam filter: “By any chance, is your mother’s maiden name Zive, and did she ever teach first grade at Colton Elementary School?”

A one-line reply zipped back: “So you are the person I’m named after!”

If managing to find someone 3000 miles away, in a state with a population of about 40 million, seemed statistically impossible, what was more impossible was that it turned out that the facts upon which I’d based my years of searching were entirely wrong. Ms Zive did not ever live in California; after our year together at Colton Elementary, she had moved to small-town Michigan and never left the Midwest prairies. I’d somehow “created” the California fact and embedded it into my version of history (perhaps my envy of magical realist novelists was getting the better of me.)

But in a version of life imitating art—or really life imitating misinformation—Ms Zive’s daughter, like generations of American settlers before her, had set out for the California frontier and eventually settled there. That bit of geographical serendipity is what allowed mistaken information to connect me to my doppelganger. Ms Zive (well, Mrs Steinberg, but I couldn’t actually call her that) was still living in Michigan. She wasn’t on Facebook and didn’t use email, but we were able to exchange letters—the kind that are written and illustrated on actual paper.

Some time later, I was invited to give a Grand Rounds lecture at a California medical school, not too distant from the daughter. It turned out that her mother was due to visit (there were now young grandchildren in the picture) and I invited Ms Zive and her daughter to attend.

All speakers at Grand Rounds must duly preface their lecture with their “disclosures”, usually an accounting of supporting funds or conflicts of interest. On a warm June morning, I disclosed the fact that four decades earlier I had entered a first-grade classroom and was given the gift of reading and writing from Ms Dorothy Zive. In front of a vast auditorium of medical faculty, I printed “Written and Illustrated by” on the board—although my doctor scrawl was a far cry from Ms Zive’s pedagogically precise penmanship. I explained what power those words had given me. I certainly hadn’t planned to become a writer: clinical training plus my years in the laboratory pursuing a PhD had directed me firmly on the scientific path.

But life paths work in mysterious ways, and here I was, back on the path where Ms Zive had given me that initial nudge so many years earlier. I surveyed the audience

before me. Our collective university degrees, graduate degrees, medical degrees, doctorates, research labs, six-figure grants, peer-reviewed publications, faculty appointments, and tenure tracks could be traced in a plumb line directly back to our first-grade teachers. Those stalwart women—and they were mostly women—who patiently guided us over the biggest developmental hurdle in our lives. Those long-suffering souls who bestowed upon us the keys to the castle

The political winds whip up with regularity, throwing education in and out of the spotlight. There are heated battles over public education, charter schools, parochial schools, teacher training, standardised testing, technology in classrooms, and teacher tenure. While some schools have a dedicated “teacher appreciation day”, our societal appreciation for teachers seems decidedly mixed. When I hear politicians excoriate teachers for every shortcoming in our educational system, I’m both pained and confounded. All of these politicians, after all, owe their own successful careers to the teachers who invested in their education.

My own children are in school now, attending public schools in New York City. I’ve watched their acquisition of reading and writing with unabashed astonishment. I witness the veritable miracles that teachers accomplish on a daily basis. What teachers contribute to our society offers more profound and lasting benefits to our collective future than our politicians, even the honest ones.

When I finally placed copies of my books in Ms Zive’s hands, there were tears in both of our eyes. It had taken far too long, but I was finally able to say thank you to the person who planted me onto the path to becoming a writer as well as a physician. These books were, in some way, her books too.

Hundreds of students passed through Ms Zive’s class during her years at Colton Elementary School. All of us walked out the door armed with the ability to read and to write. I multiply this times the tens of thousands of Ms Zives and their millions upon millions of first graders. We’ve scattered in terms of geography and career. We staff the hospitals of the world, populate the boardrooms, propel the levers of government, animate the legal system, run the engine of the global economy, but together we form a sprawling, motley book. Written and Illustrated—it should be said—by our teachers.

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