"You were pretty wild when you were little," said my mother, her voice carrying a mixture of exasperation and delight. "A hard one to control," she added.

I smiled into the phone. Dear to me, my defiant spirit is a thing whose reality I can not deny. It seems a life beyond my own—as it has led me places a more timid me would not have ventured—bringing consequences both dire and fortunate. It was met by most teachers with great disdain. I laughed too loudly, talked too much, ran too hard. But here was my mother’s affirmation, now, to her thirty-two year old daughter, three thousand miles away and over the phone: “You were wild.” I heard the sweetness in her voice.

But what of those teachers? How had they reacted to my spirit? How had they responded to that force which never really wished to be kept in line, but instead always sought the line in order to go beyond? How they reacted—indeed, how they taught—was evidence of their values. Did they value creativity? Discovery? Order? Submission? Correctness? Experimentation? Whatever the teacher valued transcended her curriculum to become her most important lesson, the lesson every student learned—whether the lesson be a grave one or a life-giving one. From kindergarten through twelfth grade, I experienced lessons of both the grave and life-giving variety.

So many of my teachers, particularly in elementary school, held mere compliance and docility as golden virtues paramount to student success. Such expectations simply set me up for what they would see as failure. Not one of these teachers, I am sure, would say, “Creativity is worth nothing.” But that was the lesson they taught all the same. They loved order—and maybe power—too much. I did not always respect their order; I did not always acknowledge their power. It was not because I was mean, nasty, or ill-bred (I was not). It was not because I did not want to learn—I did want to learn, to experiment, to create and discover. But my desires did not represent what they were asking me to do. And so teachers reacted. They labeled. They made the calls to my parents. They recommended me for testing by the school psychologist. Various school psychologists had various remedies for “my problem”: “Buy her a pants suit.”
“Put her on Ritalin.” “Buy her a horse.” I was high strung. I was a joker. I had an attitude. I was different.

“Yes, you were wild,” my mother said over the phone, and she laughed a little bit. We talked of when I left St. Michael’s Catholic School after second grade to attend public school. Knowing my penchant for mythologizing myself, I decided to ask my mother if I had, as indeed I thought I had, been kicked out of Catholic school at the end of second grade.

“Absolutely not!” came her sharp and somewhat amused reply.

I had, in fact, left St. Michael’s after second grade, but I hadn’t been kicked out. My own memory, however, had exalted me to outlaw status, creating for my reminiscent delight a sort of Jesse James of the second grade, terrorizing nuns and generally acting in complete defiance.

My mother said that she and my father decided to remove me from St. Michael’s for a couple of reasons. Mom said it all had to do with the busing, a situation that had not been in place when my eight older siblings attended St. Michael’s, but which was now the case due to a new facility the church had built for grades one through three. “You had to travel forty minutes every morning,” Mom said. “It just wasn’t worth it.” Dad said the reason was Mrs. Robarge.

That Mrs. Robarge was a teacher who liked boys better than girls was a fact “commonly known among St. Michael’s parents,” said my mother. However, neither she nor my father shared this fact with me when I reported daily to Mrs. Robarge as one of her second grade charges. It was not a child’s role to question; for my parents to reveal their mistrust of my teacher would only exacerbate what must have appeared a difficult situation regarding their daughter, whose conduct report from Mrs. Robarge read “D.”

A “D” in conduct! I remember feeling mortified. I always felt, and still do, that it was Mrs. Robarge who deserved the “D”—maybe even an “F.” At recess she separated the boys from the girls on the playground, the boys’ side being where the jungle gyms were located. It was she who had treated me every day with nothing short of contempt. Without knowing it, I was learning that I was somehow a bad person, and that girls were not as good as boys.

I am sure it was the inherent nonsense of her method that prompted my own bit of nonsense one time. I was never very successful with math. In an effort to inspire me and other underachieving math students, Mrs. Robarge ceaselessly praised the
mathematical talents of one of my classmates, John Olesky, who always received the highest grade on every math endeavor. She dangled his achievements before us like a savory morsel; were we only to nibble at the bait, we too might be able to achieve such greatness. Her method did not work for me, however. I remember taking a math quiz and feeling as if it were worthless for me to even try to answer correctly. After struggling through the first few questions, I simply began putting down wrong answers, not even looking at the problems, but instead writing “23, 24, 25, 26” and so on, perhaps as an outward exhibition of my boredom. Before handing it in, I wrote “John Olesky” in the “name” blank at the top.

What, exactly, did my action mean? I do not remember assigning any meaning at the time; it was just raw action, reflex. In retrospect, I analyze my act of revolt as complex, multi-layered. For a surface explanation, it does not seem odd for a wildly imaginative second grader to believe that, were she to put John Olesky’s name on her paper, she might earn the high grades that always seemed to accompany his name. Going deeper, however, I believe it was my way of saying I was sick of hearing about John Olesky all the time—“What about me?” By calling Mrs. Robarge’s game, by putting her star’s name on my paper, I was saying “Look! I know what you are doing, and I am not your carnival dog; John Olesky is not my scrap of meat! I have my own food, and you would know it if you would only stop looking at me as if I were a mongrel.” Indeed, it was my subversive way of confronting a woman who scared me and saying, “Hey—there’s something wrong here.”

She saw something wrong, all right: me. It was that act which prompted her to recommend testing for me. It was that particular testing from which the school psychologist determined—after I had drawn pictures of myself wearing pants—that my parents should buy me a pants suit. The remedy was diagnosed for me, so clearly, I was the problem.

I was without power; I had no voice. Others were making determinations about what was good for me based on a piece of evidence that should have pointed to the lessons I was daily receiving in my second grade classroom: Boys are better. My parents bought me the pants suit. They were trying to do their best with their ninth of ten children in a society which allowed such injustices as those perpetrated by Mrs. Robarge.
Although I retain a number of vivid early memories, such as those from Mrs. Robarge’s class, a large portion of my schooling is simply a blank. The void in my memory, I believe, was created by the often lifeless and machine-like regularity with which teachers enacted our daily rituals. I imagine that a great deal of my schooling was an unfortunate and monotonous crush of paperwork, a set of demands whose tedium might otherwise be reserved for an adult clerk—yet such a list of tasks is doled out regularly to children between the ages of six and eighteen.

Such evidence of monotony, coupled with the fact that throughout my earlier years I was an egregious liar, a dramatic yarn-spinner of the first order, supports the notion that my schooling bored me, and that my teachers rarely connected their lessons to my personal experience. I received little affirmation of the validity of my experiences as a bright, imaginative, and playful girl. In their determination that order and compliance were of the highest value, many teachers seemed to negate, perhaps even scorn, my personal set of values of discovery, experimentation, and creativity. I participated in their hegemony by believing them. I lost trust in the value of my own experiences. I began telling lies to make myself appear better than I really felt I was. All the while, Mrs. Robarge handed out the “D’s” in conduct; Mr. Leist drilled holes in his paddle to make it more aerodynamic and painful; Miss Reed kept me after school again and again to copy the definitions for “rude,” “crude,” “vulgar,” “ill-bred,” and “contemptible” from the dictionary; and teacher after teacher burned their daily instruction out of my memory because they never made the effort to get to know the real me. Then I was saved.

One day in fourth grade, some visitors came to our class. Mrs. Cross told us that these men and women were our public school system’s music instructors. They were here to introduce us to musical instruments, and perhaps many of us might choose to begin learning to play. After learning about all the different musical instruments, I went home and told my parents I would like to play the viola. They supported my decision, and thus launched an important element of my learning and my life.

The public school system where I lived enjoyed a strong tradition of excellent music instruction. The educators who worked within the music programs never seemed impeded by bureaucratic red tape or lack of support. When I began learning to play the viola
through the program at school, I did not know how fortunate I was to have access to such well-supported instruction. Now I realize that such programs are rare; indeed, most children would need to study privately in order to learn a stringed instrument at such a young age. And now I also realize that such support for the arts conveys an important message to all students: Artistic expression is a valuable pursuit, is worthy of time, is admirable.

My music teachers throughout the years were all passionate lovers of the arts. I felt nurtured and cared for by these individuals, and I felt keenly aware of their desire for my growth. It seemed to me that these teachers were not excited simply by order and uniformity—they were excited by passion. That students need to cultivate a discipline in order to gain access to artistic expression allowed me to see order in a new and purposeful way. The discovery of music—music I created myself—provided the necessary channel for my energies. I began to see a reason for order in other parts of my life. Music had freed me to participate acceptably in the school community.

My learning began to reflect my own values. My education seemed to connect with my life. I began to perform better in other areas of school, because I was engaged in learning. I received recognition. It became apparent that I was a talented musician. In junior high and high school I sat first chair viola, and was one of ten violists in the state to earn a chair in the Ohio All-State Orchestra. And I was learning something far more important than anything the previous facts and formulas and paperwork had taught me: that is, that the human spirit is important, and worthy of celebration. I had been trying to bring a sense of celebration into school for years. I had finally found a way.

The communal aspect of the arts supplied an important element of my education. I learned that people collectively engaged are people likely to treat each other with care and respect. We students of the arts came to believe that something exists that is greater than us, and that we needed each other in order to bring such greatness into the world. I learned what it means to labor with others, all of us loving the work in which we are engaged, all of us pouring our diversity of talents into each rehearsal, all of us learning to see a bit better through another's eyes. I have not forgotten such lessons of what can be accomplished when people remember to love and respect each other's gifts, and such lessons are largely responsible for
my undying optimism. Indeed, if we young performers could construct perfection upon a stage, perhaps humanity possesses the potential to construct a better world—a world of vision—within the world of reality. Such belief I came to embrace.

In the traditional classrooms of my youth, the major lesson taught was that value lies in correctness: following directions, clearly receiving information and accurately reporting it back to the instructor, knowing when and when not to talk, learning the instructor's "game." Outwardly, such learning is often sedentary, with students confined to desks watching a teacher deliver information from the front of a room. For me, the associated mental activity seemed rather sedentary as well. Such was not the case in the theatre or in the orchestra, however, where value was placed on doing, and on trying different approaches, creating community again and again. What fascinated me, too, was that there seemed little importance attached to any quantitative evidence of "productivity" in the arts. There was no accumulation of facts and figures, no skills focused on earning us millions of dollars. Yet what was going on was more important to me than anything else. Those teachers taught me that art was important because what was inside me was real, and I believed them.

But a survey of my education would not be complete without a discussion of two more traditional classroom teachers whose instruction made an impact on me. Mrs. Mathern and Mrs. King were, respectively, my composition and creative writing teachers. They shared a love of words. Their love showed me how the same human spirit driving the creation of music and theatre can be used to create ideas through language. In other English classes, it seemed that the ideas always came from the teacher. In Mrs. Mathern's and Mrs. King's classes, however, the ideas seemed to be coming from us, the students. Both were teachers who showed me their passion more than they showed me their knowledge.

In Mrs. King's class I came to realize that there could exist something very exciting and substantive in language—something which became even more exciting and substantive the more closely one looked. The discovery was electrifying.

It was Mrs. Mathern who really taught me to write. I liked her a lot as a person; she wore a T-shirt, sometimes, that said, "I'm a Mother Jones Hell-Raiser." I began reading Mother Jones magazine. She taught us how to write essays—introduction, body, conclusion.
She taught us to vary the length of sentences. Prancing about the room, she would present an idea with exceptional drama, “Try writing a twenty-five word sentence and then following it with one simple word: ‘Yes.’” And then she would ask us, “What do you think of that?” A new concept: that I could have some thought about an idea presented by a teacher! “What do you think of that?” she would intone, not giving any time for students to write anything down. And so we would come to know that simple writing down was not what Mrs. Mathern expected: She expected us to think.

How very far I had traveled, it seemed, from the oppressive and controlling methods of earlier teachers such as Mrs. Robarge. Truly, my education had evolved from one of condemnation and silencing to one of discovery and freedom. Even so, neither time nor experience has fully obscured the disempowering effects of those early authoritarian teachers whose harsh words and continual doubt of my abilities and my very value as a human being remain shadows in which I sometimes hide, finding it easier to doubt myself, even to mock myself, than to believe in my inherent value. Was I kicked out of second grade? “Absolutely not!” answers my mother. And indeed not, say I; nor was second grade ever really kicked out of me.

“We’re running up your phone bill,” my mother said, a sudden awakening of responsibility in her voice. “We should go.”

“That’s okay, Mom,” I assured her. “It’s been worth it.”

Such, too, was the case with my education: It was worth it to ignore the “shoulds,” worth it to run up the bill, worth it to inhabit that dynamic and dangerous intellectual frontier which lies between conformity and chaos. I respect the girl who earned the “D” in conduct from Mrs. Robarge. That girl learned about the person whom she never wished to become, the quiet and obedient girl for whom Mrs. Robarge longed. No, I would not be silenced then. It was worth it to get out of line.