

CHILDREN OF HOPE

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I went to what was then the Soviet Union to a symposium on children and the arts in the spring of 1987. Another of the delegates was a handsome Russian illustrator named Vladimir Vagin. Vagin was well known in the Soviet Union as an illustrator of fairy tales. Neither of us could speak the other's language, but through the help of translators we got to be friends during the time we were together. As a farewell gift, he gave me an exquisite little book which he had illustrated.

Nina Ignatowicz, then an editor at Harper and Row, and a fluent Russian speaker, asked me to do a book that Vagin would illustrate which could then be published in both countries. One of the aims of our symposium was to develop this kind of project. The Cold War had not yet completely thawed, and we who cared about children and the world in which they must grow up were trying to encourage the work of peace.

"I'd love to write a book for Vagin," I said to Nina, "but Vagin needs a fairy tale to illustrate," I said, thinking of the book he had given me. "And I don't write fairy tales."

"Well think about it," Nina said.

I didn't really think about it at all. I was busy finishing *Park's Quest* and I only have room in my head for one book at a time. Then Christmas came and, as usual, our house was filled with grown children and relatives. At last one morning the house cleared - John went off to work and everyone else went off to ski. You can imagine what the house looked like, so instead of cleaning up, I thought I'd take a shower. When I got into the shower I was thinking only of what needed to be done to bring the house to some kind of order before the next meal, when I got out of the shower, I had a whole fairy tale in my head. Where it came from is anybody's guess. Anything to keep from cleaning house, I suppose.

I rushed to my study and began to scribble down my story before I forgot it. Of course, it was revised both before I sent it to New York, and later after Nina had read it. But the story John and I have just read in *The King's Equal* is essentially the story as it came to me in the shower.

I've tried to analyse this. Well, I say to myself, it's because it's a fairy tale. Fairy tales are a fill-in-the-blanks sort of proposition. They begin with "Once upon a time ..." They end with "Happily ever after" and everything in the middle happens in threes. There's nothing to it. You just take the form and fill in the blanks.

Someone asked me not long ago whether I'd ever considered leaving the arrogant prince out in the snow to freeze. "How could I do that?", I asked. "It was a fairy tale. Everyone knows that a fairytale has to end happily."

No matter what you think of the traditional fairy tale and the effect this particular form has had on us, it is hard to argue the power of story itself. As I often say to children, life often doesn't seem to make sense but a story has to or no one will put up with it. And because stories make sense, they help us to make sense of our lives.

Like many of you I was raised on stories. There were family stories which were told over and over again. How My Father Lost His Leg in France and Became a Hero. How My Mother Met My Father on the Street Car and Forgot to Pay Her Fare. The Short Life of Brother Charles Who Died Before I Was Born. How My Grandfather Bought the First Car in Rome, Georgia and My Mother Drove It Through a Plate Glass Window.

Then there were the stories that were read to me. My parents were missionaries in China when I was young. We lived in the northern part of Jiangsu Province in a city without English libraries or bookstores and hardly any English-speaking people. The books that were read to me were in our small family library, but they were good books and I heard them over and over again.

The most important book in our house was, of course, the Bible. We had only the King James Version in those days. But I'm not sorry about that. I'm sure that the rich language and powerful rhythms of the King James taught my ear

to hear the beauty of the English language.

It was the stories, though, that mattered most to me. Little Moses in the bulrushes with his brave sister standing guard. Homesick Jacob seeing a vision of angels in the wilderness. Joseph, proud to be his father's favourite, humbled by adversity and emerging at last a prince in Egypt and a gracious savior of the very brothers who had despised him.

I often fancied myself as a Joseph. I wasn't my parents' favourite, none of us were, but I was all too often an unbearable showoff and my older brother and sister took it as their mission in life to keep me humbled. The story of Joseph gave me great hope. Okay, Liz and Ray would tease and pester me. They tricked me into letting them borrow my beautiful new American doll, returning it with its golden hair dyed purple with berry juice. They regularly brought me to tears by calling me "Spook Baby" because of my Halloween birthday. They made sure that not a single naughty deed I committed went undetected by the Amah or one of my parents. Oh, yes, they might torment me now when I was small. But someday, someday, I would show them.

Still, throughout the stories of the Bible there was more than this Cinderella kind of hope to someday show everyone. There was the enduring assurance that God, the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekkah, Jacob and all his children loved every foolish, fumbling one of them. And, believe it or not, and I often found it hard to believe, I was one of those much loved children.

There were other stories that gave me hope. There was Peter Rabbit - as naughty as he was, didn't he get safely home to his mother's care? And Eeyore - didn't he have a happy birthday despite all his friends' forgetfulness and bungling? And Mary Lennox - her temper was fully as bad as mine, but didn't she find the key to a secret garden?

All children need the kind of hope that stories can give them. Children are small and weak and, as powerless as we adults sometimes feel, we are giants and ogres compared to our little ones. But some children need a larger portion of hope than others. The year I turned five I became one of those children.

The scenes I recall from the first four years of my life are mostly idyllic. The water carrier giving me a ride in one of his buckets. The wonderful smell of my mother as she read to us. Searching for asparagus shoots in the garden with my tall father who thought any child who could locate a shoot barely breaking the earth was very clever. I had lunch almost every day with Mrs Loo who was a wonderful cook and the food was always Chinese and she talked to me as though I were a grown up friend.

And then, the summer before I turned five, came war. The journey that had begun as a summer morning, now was a nightmare voyage menaced by dragons of the deep and terrorised by monsters.

Two times, first when I was five and then again when I was eight, we became refugees. We fled the war in China and came to the place my parents called "home". I wanted America to be home. I remember telling my little sisters who couldn't remember the year they had spent in the States, that America was a place as magical as Oz, that they would like America. "You can buy anything you want there," I said. I remember saying this because when I said it I caught a glimpse of my mother's face. I realised that she wasn't excited about returning "home"; she was very sad, and I felt ashamed that I said it.

And of course America was even less home to me than it had been the first time. America was, as I had remembered, a rich, magical land, but I had forgotten that those riches would not be for me, that I would be poor. And it is at this point in my life that I met Eugene.

Some of you have heard this story before, but I shall probably retell it until I am convinced that there is not a living soul left in my audiences who has never heard it before.

After a few crowded months as refugees in Virginia, my father was called to serve on the staff of a large church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. We moved there just after my birthday in the Fall of 1940 when I was in the fourth grade.

The fourth grade was a time of almost unmitigated terror and humiliation for me. I recognise now that some of my best writing has its seeds in that awful

year, but I can't remember once saying to my nine-year-old self, "Buck up, old girl. Someday you're going to make a mint out of all this misery."

There were, however, two people that I remember with great fondness from that horrible year. One was the librarian of the Calvin H. Wiley School who, I'm afraid, died long before I could let her know what she meant to me. And there was Eugene Hammett, the other weird kid in the fourth grade.

There was a difference between me and Eugene. I was weird through no choice of my own. I spoke English, as my friends in Shanghai had, with something of a British accent. I could hardly afford lunch, much less clothes, so my classmates would, from time to time, recognise on my back one of their own donations to charity. On December 7th, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and because it was known that I had come from that part of the world, there were dark hints that I might be one of them.

Eugene, on the other hand, was weird by choice. Or mostly by choice. I guess he didn't choose his looks. He was a perfectly round little boy who wore full-moon, steel-rimmed glasses long before John Lennon made them acceptable, and sported a half-inch blond brush cut. My only ambition in the fourth grade was to become somehow less weird. Eugene's declared ambition was to become a ballet dancer. In North Carolina, in 1941, little boys, even well-built or skinny little boys, did not want to be ballet dancers when they grew up.

Now sometimes outcasts despise even each other, but Eugene and I did not. We were friends for the rest of the fourth grade and all of the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. During my public school career, Calvin H. Wiley was the only school I went to for more than a year, and by the time Eugene and I were in the seventh grade, I had fulfilled my modest ambition. I was no longer regarded as particularly weird. Eugene continued to march, or should I say, dance, to a different drummer.

I moved that summer. I grew up at last and had a full, rich life in which people loved me and didn't call me names, at least not to my face. But from time to time over the years I would think of Eugene and worry about him. Whatever could have happened to my chubby little friend whose consuming passion was to become a ballet dancer?

Decades pass. There are a lot of scene changes. We are living in Norfolk, Virginia, and our son David has become, at seventeen, a serious actor. But in order to get the parts he wants, he realises that he needs to take dancing lessons. There is, however, a problem. Even in 1983, boys in Norfolk, Virginia do not generally aspire to become ballet dancers. He asks me to find out about lessons he can take without the rest of the soccer team knowing about it.

My friend Kathryn Morton's daughter takes ballet, so I say to Kathryn, "David needs to take ballet lessons, but he's not eager for all his buddies to know about it. Do you have any recommendations?"

"Well," says Kathryn, "if he's really serious, Gene Hammett at Tidewater Ballet is the best teacher anywhere around. Of course, you may find him a bit strange, but.."

"W-w-w-wait a minute," I say. "Gene who?"

"Hammett," she says. "He sends dancers to the Joffrey and New York City Ballet and Alvin Ailey every year. He's especially good with young black dancers. Terribly hard on any kid that he thinks has talent, but he'd give his life for them."

"Gene, who?" I say again.

"Hammett," she says. "You may have seen him around town. He's enormous and wears great flowing caftans. He does look a bit weird, but he's a wonderful teacher."

"You don't happen to know where he came from?"

"Well, he came here from New York."

"New York? He wasn't a dancer?"

"Oh, yes. He was quite good in his time. You wouldn't know it by looking at him now, but he was a fine dancer twenty, thirty years ago."

"You wouldn't happen to know where he grew up?"

"Oh, I don't know," she says. "North Carolina somewhere I think."

"Next time you see him, would you ask him if he remembers anyone named Katherine Womeldorf from Calvin H. Wiley School?"

Some days later the phone rings. "Katherine?" an unknown male voice begins, "This is Gene Hammett."

"Eugene! Do you remember me?"

"I even remember a joke you told me in the fourth grade. I asked you why if you were born in China you weren't Chinese. And you said: "If a cat's born in a garage, does it make it an automobile?"

Oh, I was funny back then. "And what about you? You danced in New York, and now you're a famous teacher of ballet. It's hard to imagine. You were a little round boy when I knew you."

He laughs. "Well," he says, "now I'm a big round man."

I saw Eugene a number of times after that, and he was a big round man. But I also saw pictures of him, leaping like a Baryshnikov from the boards of a New York stage. And even if I missed knowing him when he was slim and gorgeous and at the height of his career, I wouldn't give anything for knowing that it happened as he had determined it would, back there when we were both weird little nine-year-olds at Calvin H. Wiley School.

Eugene died recently, but I will never forget him. He is a mythical hero to me - straight out of the hero stories of ancient days. The unlikely youth who with wit and determination defeats dragons and monsters. Against all odds he achieves the prize and then returns to give good things to those about him. Eugene was a child of a great hope who grew up to give other children hope.

I am looking out at you all this morning and seeing many Eugenes. Many children of hope who have grown up to give other children hope. Just look at

the name you have chosen for this conference. "Books Across the Sea: Multiculturalism in Reading." How are we to unite the world? How can we cross all the barriers that separate us? How can we who come from different nations, different cultures, different religions, bridge the enormous gap that separates us? Years ago I said that I had spent a good part of my life trying to construct bridges. There were so many chasms I saw that needed bridging - chasms of time and culture and disparate human nature that I began sawing and hammering the rough wood at my disposal, trying to build a bridge for my children and for any other children who might read what I had written.

But what I discovered gradually and somewhat painfully is that you don't put together a bridge for a child. You do as Eugene did, you become a bridge - you lay yourself across the chasm.

When I wrote, the book *Bridge to Terabithia* I thought I was writing a story to help myself make sense of the tragic death of my eight-year-old son's best friend. But the story is not simply about David and Lisa any more than Eugene Hammett is about a child who wants to be a ballet dancer. I began writing the story after Lisa's death, to be sure, but also the year of my own bout with cancer. I know that by writing *Bridge to Terabithia* I was wrestling with my own angel of death.

Last November I had the wonderful chance once again to be part of the chorus for Brahms' German Requiem. We had been practicing the Requiem all fall, and every time I sang it I marvelled. The German Requiem uses the German of Luther and is not your standard Day of Wrath and judgment requiem. Nor does it pray for the souls of the dead. It is a work of enormous comfort and incomparable beauty and it heals my soul to sing it even if Brahms did like to keep the sopranos stuck in the stratosphere of high G's and A's longer than any normal voice should attempt those heights without oxygen. In the third movement of this wonderful cantata, a baritone soloist sings and the chorus echoes the words of Psalm 39.

"Lord, make me to know the measure of my days on earth, to consider my frailty that I must perish. Surely, all my days here are as an handbreadth to Thee, and my lifetime is as naught to Thee. Verily, mankind walketh in a vain show, and their best state is vanity. Man passeth away like a shadow, he is

disquieted in vain, he heapeth up riches, and cannot tell who shall gather them." And then, in his grief for the fragility and apparent meaninglessness of his life the psalmist cries out:

"Now, Lord, O, what do I wait for?" Brahms piles up this universal cry of the human heart through anguished repetition from the soloist through every part of the chorus. There is an abrupt moment of silence, and then the answer comes at first piano then crescendoing into forte, crashing like great waves upon the shore: "My hope is in Thee."

Oh, I thought, as I was writing this speech with the words of the psalmist and the music of Brahms ringing in my head, that is what *Bridge to Terabithia* is about. It was not about Lisa's death and David's loss. It was about me. I was Leslie who must die, as we all must, and I was Jesse who had to learn to live with most unwelcome death. I am not the Biblical writer, nor am I Brahms, but in my little story, I have spoken of the brevity, the frailty of life, the fear that life may be vain and death victorious, and then I have heard the soaring affirmation of hope.

This is a world starving for hope. Which makes it of course a terrible world for children. I read an article in the newspaper recently that showed that in all the dirty little wars raging about the globe far more children have been killed and maimed than combat troops. This is a world of land mines and sniper bullets and indiscriminate bombing and planned starvation.

Three years ago I saw a television program that still haunts me. It was entitled, "Children At War". The correspondents interviewed children who are actual combatants in the many wars going on in the world today. One of the earlier scenes showed Mozambique government soldiers taking several guerrilla fighters as prisoners of war. Among the prisoners was a boy of about ten years of age. He was wearing a yellow, short-sleeved shirt. One of the soldiers offered him a cigarette. The camera closed in on his hard, cynical little face puffing away at his cigarette. I thought I saw in that face a perfect image of a child, robbed of his soul.

Towards the end of the hour, after interviewing child soldiers from Northern Ireland to Iran to Cambodia to the streets of Los Angeles, the interviewer

returned to the little yellow-shirted guerrilla, still puffing away at his cigarette.

'What do you want to do now?', the interviewer asked the child through an interpreter. 'If they release you, will you go back and be a soldier again?'

'Are you crazy?', the boy asked.

The interviewer was taken aback, then, he said. 'What would you like to be?'

'I'd like to be a little kid,' he said.

That didn't seem to be an unreasonable wish, and yet, will it ever, in this world be granted? It makes me furious to think that the little boy is probably fighting again if he is not dead today. I think of millions of children like him denied the loving parents of my childhood, the warm home, the freedom to learn and imagine and grow - and I am angry at the greed and hatred and, even worse, the self-centered uncaring of those of us who could give them a good and healthy life.

The news commentators in America tell us that America is suffering from "compassion fatigue". Americans are tired of caring for the homeless, for refugees, for illegal immigrants, for the children of the poor. The needy have ceased to be individual human beings, they have melted into a faceless demanding mob, and Americans are tired of listening. Our last election seems to have borne this out. And even among those who think of themselves as caring persons, America's problems seem hopelessly immense. How can we take on the world's needs? Most of us can't even find Mozambique on the map, how can we worry about what happens there?

And then I see one little boy in a yellow T-shirt and everything is different. I know somebody in Mozambique now. It is not just a bloody blur on the map.

The magazine, *The Christian Century*, asked former President Jimmy Carter to contribute to its series, "*How my mind has changed*". In this series, prominent theologians tell how their thinking has changed over the years. President Carter protested that he was not a theologian and could not presume to write a theological essay, but he agreed to be interviewed on the subject.

The experience of being president was life changing and mind expanding for Carter, but within those years, he said, the experience that had the most influence on his thinking was his friendship with Anwar Sadat, the president of Egypt. Sadat, Carter said, was a devout Muslim, who loved to talk about his faith. Carter was a devout Baptist who loved to talk about his faith. At Camp David the two of them talked for hours, neither trying to convert or change the other, each of them excited about sharing with the other his own deepest beliefs. And each of them eager to hear and understand the mind and heart of the other and to find the commonality in the spiritual ancestor of Muslim, Jew and Christian - Abraham, who incidentally was born in Ur of the Chaldees, in a country known to us today as Iraq.

And these conversations changed Carter as an American and more especially as a Christian.

Carter's friendship with Sadat opened up his life and his vision. We may not be fortunate enough to have such a friendship, except through a book - a story powerful enough to allow us to eavesdrop on someone else's soul.

I remember a book that I had read as a child, entitled *Struggle Is Our Brother*. It was a book about the Russian resistance to the German invasion in World War II and about children caught up in that terrible time. It gave me a kinship with Soviet children that all the fears of McCarthyism and threats and posturing of the Cold War could never quite take away. I had seen myself in those children. If struggle was their brother, they were my brothers and sisters through the struggle.

I had friends in the Soviet Union. I could never dismiss them as a nation of monsters, bent on destroying the world.

I have often wondered in the years since the Gulf war, where are the books that will do for today's children what *Struggle is Our Brother* did for me when I was twelve?

If there was a single great tragedy of the Gulf war in America, it was its apparent success in dehumanising the Iraqi people. Bombs exploded like great Fourth of July celebrations on our 20-inch television screens. We could

scarcely imagine that the disembodied talk of military targets included human beings. Many Americans were outraged when CNN took us to the actual sites of human suffering beneath that beautiful technicolor display. The network, it was said, was allowing itself to be used as a propaganda tool by the enemy.

But if we Americans had truly known one Iraqi person, we could not say, as was often said of that war, "Thank God, there was so little loss of life". One hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, however uncounted or uncountable Iraqi, Kurdish, Kuwaiti citizen and alien resident lives - in the economy of heaven these cannot be accounted as "little loss of life". Nor could we, if we took these lives seriously, glorify war and celebrate victory with glee.

Where were the books that would have given us Americans a friend in Iraq whom we could not bear to destroy? There are hardly any books in the United States that are set in Muslim countries or cultures. And most of the books we do have are exotic tales of thieves and harem storytellers, when what we need, what our children must have, are books that will push past the heavy layers of stereotype and take us into the heart of another person. Here in Fiji, my husband and I have been searching out books from the South Pacific, to share with American children - our books have gone around the world - but how will our children know yours, if they do not have your stories?

There's a wonderful scene in the television drama *I Claudius* when Claudius rushes in to tell some of the rest of the family that their cousin the Roman Emperor Caligula has declared himself a god. "You're a god, too," he tells the emperor's sister. "We're not," he tells his brother.

I don't expect this is news to anyone in this audience, but in case you hadn't heard, like Claudius and his brother, we're not gods.

Still, the fact that we are not gods doesn't relieve us of responsibility. It just makes it bearable. And you and I have the happy responsibility to work on behalf of children. We are gathered here today because we care. In a world where most jobs seem demeaning or meaningless, we are fortunate indeed.

Not only do we have the privilege of working with the young, we have the joy of sharing with them something we love - something which has changed and

enlarged our own lives and which we have reason to believe will enrich their lives as well.

For several years I was involved in a program to bring literature-based learning into schools on the mean streets of Boston, Massachusetts. The teachers I've had the privilege of meeting and working with in Boston are true heroes to me.

During recess one day I was taken into a first grade classroom by the teacher who wanted to show me a display her children had made. The room was empty except for one little boy who was seated with his head down on the desk in front of him. "Uh, oh," I thought, "someone has been naughty and is missing playtime as punishment." As we talked softly, the child sleepily raised his head.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy", the teacher said, "we're just leaving." We tiptoed out into the hall. "Jimmy came to me this morning and said that the gunfire outside his apartment building last night was so loud that he couldn't sleep," the teacher explained. "So I told him he could take a nap during playtime." What a wonderful job to be - principal - I tell my teachers. Outside the children live terrifying lives. Inside this building they will be safe and happy.

It has been wonderful to me to see how these Boston children, whose ordinary lives seem so frightening and ugly, respond to books. In one second grade classroom, the teacher asked me to read aloud *The Tale of the Mandarin Ducks* which is a retelling of a Japanese folk tale. Leo and Diane Dillon, whose work some of you may know, did the illustrations. In order to do so they spent months studying the woodcuts of 18th and 19th century Japan and based their elegant illustrations on this sophisticated art form. The book was declared one of ten best illustrated books of the year by *The New York Times*.

In this second grade classroom in one of the poorest sections of Boston, I sat on a low chair and the children who were multi-coloured and multi-ethnic gathered around. One little Hispanic girl leaned hard against me so she could see every picture as I read. The children already knew the book and the story. Their teacher had introduced it to them earlier in the year and it had been on their library table since the Fall.

Still they listened, their eyes shining, the little girl on my right leaning closer and harder with every page turn. When we got to the picture of Yasuko taking the drake out to freedom, perhaps my favourite, though it is hard to choose from among the Dillon's exquisite paintings, she leaned right across my arm and gently stroked the page. "This is so beautiful," she whispered. "Yes," I whispered back. "I think so, too."

Jackie Smith, the teacher in that classroom, is African American - her class is multiracial. The books she has gathered in the classroom - often using her own money to buy them - reveal her determination that her students know about their own various heritages, but also that their lives go far beyond their crime-filled Boston neighbourhood. She wants these children to be proud of who they are, but she also wants to help them to become citizens of the world. And she believes they need and deserve the most beautiful books she can get them.

Hope, as Jackie Smith knows, as Gene Hammett knew, as most of you know, hope is not a feeling, it is something you do.

My husband once gave me a quotation from Saint Augustine that seems very relevant to our thinking today.

"Hope," said the good saint, "Hope has two beautiful daughters: anger and courage. Anger at the way things are and courage to see that things do not stay the way they are."

We are not gods. We are people given the responsibility for nourishing the spiritual and intellectual lives of children such as these. We read the news, we watch television, we see children suffering. We see how school budgets and library budgets are cut, how even food, shelter, and vaccinations seem to be frivolous expenditures when it comes to the world's children, and we are furious. We do well to be angry. This kind of anger is surely one of the daughters of hope. But we must not stop with anger, we must embrace hope's other daughter, courage, and begin to make sure that things do not stay the way they are. I do not believe that simply giving books to children will save the world, but books can help. They can give us friends across the sea that we could not dare to harm. They can give us and our children hope for a better world.