

A Woman and A Scholar

Memoir of Learning and Teaching

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(Final Draft)
12-08-04

Teaching is a deep red thread woven into the tapestry of my life. It keeps showing up. In its essence, I have relished that excitement of unlocking a door in another person's mind—from teaching a sixth-grade boy named Victor how to read by using wordless books to teaching a new American and Cambodian friend named Yorn the details of written expression.

When did this love of teaching begin? I first taught Sunday school to five-year-olds in Rochester, Minnesota at about the age of 14. Way back then, people said I should teach, that I “had a way with children.” I remember simply having fun with children. And as years passed, even after college studies, I would downplay the choice to become a teacher, sometimes reciting that girls in the 1960s had three main career choices: nurse, secretary, or teacher. Now I see that there is something in my being that loves and comes naturally to the process of teaching.

Teaching is that willingness to listen—straight on—to young people or peers for what *their* life experiences have been, not only as they have intersected with my own life. It includes an ability to recognize when a concept just presented was too complex, and then carefully back up, circle around and break it down, building it to the now-understood level once again. It is a love of reading, books, images and stories—I learn through story—in bits and sparkles of meaning, each new awareness or surprise added to the old. Learning and teaching are interconnected, and I love weaving them together. Very often I learn a concept one day and teach it the next.

My life in teaching began most intentionally at the University of Minnesota from 1968 to 1972, where I trained for a career in Elementary Education. This period of my life was focused by a very important mentor named Dr. Norine Odland.

By the time I met her, Dr. Odland had achieved a solid and remarkable reputation for scholastic rigor and achievement in the field of Children's Literature. She had also earned a reputation as a judgmental woman, specifically one who disapproved of female teachers who married. Ostensibly, the marriage of a young woman would distract her from scholastic achievement; of course, this was often true. She may have been a feminist in her own way, but mainly Dr. Odland simply did not ascribe to the contemporary adage that elementary education was a good field to “get in and out of,” as I, too, had been advised. Elementary education, to Norine Odland, was a profession and a sacred trust. For instance, when referring to children, one did not use the colloquial “kids.” She loved children and always made time for them. Mainly, we learned through her that the trade books read at home or in the classroom were alive with wonder, color, and creativity.

My luck began one day at the end of a class in Burton Hall called Teaching Language Arts, taught by Professor Naomi Chase. It must have been winter semester, early in the year 1970. As I was pulling my papers together and standing to go, Dr. Odland approached me and asked if I'd help her with something. Thinking that I was being asked to move a couple boxes of books, I said, "Sure!" and stood up to join the next eight years of my life. Little did I know that day that I was saying yes to paid employment that would fit into school and later (yes) married teaching life. I was saying yes to professional associations and trips to exciting cities, yes to physical and spiritual gifts, to an easier path into my first job as a teacher in Minneapolis, to a deepening path with books and writing, and to a mentorship turned friendship that would last the rest of Norine Odland's life.

These were dynamic years to be college-age. My high school days ended on June 8, 1968, the day that Robert F. Kennedy was killed. Martin Luther King had been murdered in Memphis only two months prior. By the spring of 1970, campuses were aflame with rallies and marches in reaction to the U.S. invasion of Cambodia. Though Vietnam would escalate for five more years, much of the country was already deeply skeptical about our presence there. And the campuses marched on the leading edge.

Who was the Beth Waterhouse of those early college years? Sincere, yes, but fairly disconnected from the real "self" of myself. I skirted the hippie culture, yet gazed at it with occasional longing. I still imagined I could control my future, lived in hopes and structures. I worried far more than I do now, and this without yet learning that life sometimes takes you and simply twists you 90 degrees off the path you thought you were walking. I was small-town to the core, shy, and nothing yet had my name on it. I was physically homesick most of the first year at the University. I still remember the day that Dad drove me up from our home in Rochester, Minnesota, to the big city of Minneapolis and left me, two suitcases, a radio, and a guitar at Sanford Hall. Our drive up was silent—for me, choking silent—neither one of us wanted to break down. The following year I bused home nearly every weekend, yet the break was finally made, and with it a worldliness that I would not have achieved had I not had the courage to break ties with family and hometown.

Dorm life was right for me; I sat on the student council and baked lemon meringue pies in the kitchen. I understood academia and studied hard. I wanted to play equally hard, but seldom found the courage to do so. Thus campus life seems to have been full of paradox. I walked everywhere within 20 square blocks, but learned nothing of the larger city. My friendships were solid when I got to know people, but the University was a huge and busy place and students were torn between the duality of beer parties or panty raids, and the Vietnam War. Tuition was cheap-- \$135 per quarter for a full load—and I took whatever I could get. I dove into the course catalog and found myself able to register for the smaller Honors courses, able to test out of English and language requirements, and thus able to fit in Logic, Astronomy, Choir, other creative CLA course and 30 credits of Sociology.

Thinking back, what I remember first about Norine Odland is her hands. She became a constant friend for a decade, and those hands still stay clearly in my memory. Small, tight-skinned, ruddy fingers often cold to the touch—mostly functional hands. The rest of her—carefully dressed, never in slacks, hair always the same soft waves—was the image of the academic scholar, although Dr. Odland was never showy. Perhaps her hands belied her in some way. In my memory, they did not dance and caress, never wove of their own accord when she spoke, always in control. I can see Norine’s hands on a new book jacket, surreptitiously paying the bill at Lee’s Dining Room, or even holding my baby daughter in 1976, but now I imagine something hidden in those hands—secrets never to be shared, a distance held, a desire for softness not quite found. In one sense, they were a farmer’s hands turned scholar. I soon learned that Norine was born and raised on a corn and hog farm near Clarion, Iowa—and proud of it.

And oh, the doors that those hands opened for me! Under Norine’s direct guidance, I finished my bachelor’s degree and then she personally arranged an interview for me with Minneapolis Public Schools, where I got a real job with real pay and one of the few remaining tenure track positions. With her guidance, I also went directly on to graduate school so that I could work five summers for her as a teaching assistant. She had dreams of me going farther with graduate work. She gave me the task of editing masters’ theses for her finishing students—a task foreshadowing some of the work I do today. Those hands introduced me to fine food in the Campus Club at Coffman Union or in the French Quarter of New Orleans. They opened the door of the Empire State Building or fine shops on legendary Fifth Avenue in New York City.

I remember the days back in the now infamous spring quarter of 1970, when students took over the campus resisting the U.S. presence in Cambodia. The wiser of the U of M educators were letting students rally or sit in, going with the anti-war protests and teaching from the ready-made pulpits of that political time. We were given our mid-quarter grades as the final quarter grade and let loose to learn political science from the grassroots. One day in May, I had picked up Norine and an author, Ellen Rankin, at the airport and I was driving them back to campus. The East Bank was fearfully silent, no one in sight, the air acrid with tear gas—a demonstration had just passed through. We drove slowly right through the center of fear that day and went on with our schedule.

Upon reflection, I laugh about that day. We said so little, but fell into step with it all. In contrast to the chaos on campus that day, I was riding in a car with the expected agenda, a few unspoken rules, an assumed behavior. It was all part of the relationship that started that day in Language Arts in Burton Hall.

In addition, that spring day seems indicative of the juxtaposition of two sides of myself. I was learning the politics of the Cambodian crisis and would occasionally sit in a rally or run off 100 flyers. I was experiencing the power of community-based organizing, and living in the times of a student takeover of Morrill Hall. Yet as both novice rabble-rouser and practiced good girl, I was also tethered by my commitment to

my studies, and my equally important commitment to Dr. Odland and my respect for her position, her wisdom, and her discipline as a professor. Looking back, I can see that she grounded me during those months.

Why Norine chose *me* that day in Burton Hall is a poignant question—one that might never be clearly answered. Who did she see? I never asked her directly, all the years we worked together. I knew instantly that she trusted me and valued my skills. I know that her professional care for me gave me a boot up, a feeling of quiet special attention, and I know she held a high bar for my academic studies. I expect it was part of what gave me the impetus to stay with my career choice and finish what I had begun.

Norine represented a generation of women scholars at the University of Minnesota who took the term seriously. She seldom discussed her personal life, other than her brother, Bud, in Iowa and favorite nieces and nephews Lisa, Laura, and Danny. She insisted that the world take her profession seriously, and she especially seemed to thrive on professional challenges, national associations and the whole live realm of children's book writers and publishers. Her colleague and close friend, Dr. Naomi Chase, taught language arts and assumed much the same role (with me) of professional colleague, teacher, and advisor. They lived near each other in a classic brick 2-story town-home-type housing complex in Highland Park. I remember dim lights, classic furnishings, impeccable cleanliness, and trim around doors and windows painted a satin crème color. The window blinds were wooden.

Naomi Chase also opened doors for me—more inner psychological ones, I think, such as a love of writing and recognition of nature's beauty as my pen's favorite topic. It was through Naomi that I first observed and wrote of spring life and light at the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum. Through Naomi, I learned of Jacqueline Jackson and her children's book, *Chicken Ten Thousand*, another foreshadowing of my work advocating for animal rights in agricultural settings.

Sadly, Naomi developed cancer shortly after my daughter's birth in 1976. She died with explicit instructions to Norine that the beautiful things in her home should not be put up for sale. I will never forget the day, some weeks after Naomi's passing, when Norine opened the house and let me go through Naomi's things. For the second time, I had been chosen. I gathered from artifacts of Naomi's life, a single and accomplished woman, wealthy enough to have traveled and chosen carefully a house full of beauty. I walked away with a car full of blessings including a like-new maple four-poster bed! I chose with an eye to necessity, but also to unique quality-- a pure woolen blanket, crystal glassware, towels, a collection of match books from all over the country, and as my luck continued, 24 pair of size 8 1/2 N shoes, nearly all brand new! Each pair fit perfectly. It was Norine's generosity that led me into the trove of treasures that Naomi's life revealed, and all I can hope is that I gave reverence and life to those many items over the years. The shoes are worn out and gone (even the orange leather heels) the blanket remains one of my favorites, and a sculpture of snuggling china ducks from Copenhagen daily remind me of Dr. Naomi Chase.

Norine Odland also brought writing to life for me in the form of dozens of producing authors. She had befriended writers of children's books from all across the country, and as her professional shadow for several years, I got to meet dozens of them. Here were contemporary men and women—Ellen Rankin, William Armstrong, Arnold Lobel, Tomie de Paola—putting meaning between colorful shiny-jacketed books for all children to read. Here were illustrators or writer/illustrators like Maurice Sendak, bucking the trends and opening new paths of imagination for children. I was taken with the truth of those books, how children's literature cracks open small ideas from everyday life and makes them huge. Books came to life. I honed a reviewer's skill that serves me well to this day, but more than that the mystique around a new book somehow included both reverence and accessibility. In those days I did not call myself "writer," and now if I am considered such, I step up to the role with great humility and fond memories of my two mentors.

After I married Mike Hager, I realized that Norine's reputation was not as judgmental as the campus rumor mill would have it. She enjoyed meeting Mike and a few years later, when Rachel was born, Norine gifted her like a grandniece. She often gave Rachel books and once a little rag doll of Ramona the Brave—a spunky eight year-old literary character not unlike the child Rachel would become.

On my living room bookshelf, sits a crystal artpiece that always reminds me of Norine. It is Steuben Glass™, an excellent hand-blown crystal. One afternoon on my first visit to Manhattan, Norine and I walked down Fifth Avenue and into the Steuben Glass gallery and shop. It was a small museum of light and life carved into glass. Silently, we gazed at the pieces each displayed in their alcoves of velvet and light. Later, we stepped out into the daylight on the street, and from the sheer beauty of art, I burst into tears. We talked for a moment, and suddenly Norine excused herself to go back into the Steuben shop—she had forgotten some detail. I waited, holding an unmentioned hunch. Later that spring, when I graduated from the University, the postman came carrying a heavy, well-wrapped box from New York City. Inside—for the new teacher—a solid crystal apple. When you gaze into the apple, every detail in the room is reflected, although your world turns upside down.

The years were not good to Norine Odland. She contracted a debilitating auto-immune disease first diagnosed as ALS (Lou Gehrig's Syndrome), yet since she lived for decades with this, it was later diagnosed as a form of multiple sclerosis. At first it stopped her from walking distances, then walking at all. It affected her eyesight. She continued to teach, and her nephew, Dan Odland, reports, "Teaching years after her diagnosis of M.S. kept her involved in a world she loved." Finally, Norine simply had to retire at age 70. At this point, according to Dan, Norine lost a lot of her previous motivation. She even literally lost much of her speaking voice. Still, she maintained a vast written correspondence with her colleagues, hiring young women to assist her. Finally, in 1995, her brother, Earl (Bud) Odland and family brought her home. Norine then lived at the assisted living unit in the Wright Medical Center in Clarion, Iowa.

Back home in farm country, Norine was apparently quite a presence. It was, according to Dan, "...so hard for her, because her mind was so clear." She kept current about world news, University events, and (as always) the Minnesota Twins. In the beginning, Norine organized some seminars for the nurses about MS. Dan reports that "She had the administrator under her thumb." The nurses did quite a bit of special food preparation to meet her standards, and although communication became limited, Norine definitely got across what she wanted. She also had a keen sense of people's character, even then, and selected nurses whom she trusted.

I did not stay in touch consistently after about 1980, but I expected, each year, the neatly printed Christmas card with Norine Odland's carefully chosen words penned by another's hand. I reciprocated, of course, and wrote the occasional letter, but mostly our bond diminished—at least the outward aspect of it. I heard that she set up a scholarship in her name at the College of Education.

Then on January 4, 2002, I had a vivid dream of Norine Odland. *I was standing at a table in a room in Burton Hall, University of Minnesota campus. I was alone in the room, collating something, when I heard Norine's voice in the hall. I peered around the corner to my left and saw her walking up the hall with a male colleague. They were discussing something professional. I called to her and declared how good it was to see her again looking hale and hearty. She was dressed in a bright red, soft wool dress, classic lines, and wore a furry white hat. We hugged a good long hug, and then I turned and grabbed my purse and followed her into an elevator. We were catching up along the way. As I awoke, I realized how I missed her voice and what a wonderful gift the dream world had given me—the sight and sound of her. It brought back a river of memories.*

At breakfast that morning, I searched for her telephone number and was surprised to find that I had recorded the number for her in Clarion. I called it and was rung through directly to her room. An aide answered, and my heart cracked as I was immediately aware that Norine could not speak. I could, however, pass a message to her through this aide. I told her who I was, that I had dreamt of her, and that I thought of her often. From outside the telephone, I could hear Norine expressing something and I thought I understood a syllable "—chel" which told me she had inquired about my daughter, Rachel. So typical of Norine to ask of the children, to remember my daughter's name. I said Rachel was fine, was 26 years old, waitressing and living in Minneapolis. Then I told the aide to tell Norine that I would write her a letter. Of course, I turned and did so that very morning. A copy of it remained in my files:

"Yes, I'm also teaching at the University of Minnesota," I wrote.
 "What fun to be on campus again and as a teacher! Sometimes I am amazed. The course, Environmental Ethics, is a terrific match to my inner drive to open the hearts of people regarding their relationship to the earth. I'm on contract as an instructor to teach the course and am currently playing politics to try to get another such commitment out of the department head. You remember such things!

“I often think of the many gifts you gave me—the biggest one being your belief in me. I try to spread that gift around and I have two or three young women in their 20s whom I mentor in a less consistent but very real manner. I actually walked through Burton Hall a few weeks ago (thus the dream, I suppose) and stood outside the long narrow room where you and Naomi used to teach. I still remember the day when I had just finished language arts and you asked me if I wanted a job. Thinking you meant hefting some books somewhere, I said, “sure, what do you need?” And you clarified, No, a real job—and on we went for the next several years. You brought books and authors to life for my sixth grade students and for me. You brought the idea of writing books into my view, and I think it stuck there, since it comes close to where I direct my dreams at this point. Books and authors, book signings and conferences to New Orleans or New York City—so many extraordinary experiences for a Midwestern girl. And all the while you steadily let me know that I was worth the commitment of your time.

“My deepest thanks to you, and I say that knowing that the only way I can truly thank you is to repeat the favor for young people today. My Ethics students (70 at a time) give me hope, and I believe I do let them know that they, too, are worth *my* commitment of time. In that way, your energy lives on at the University campus. And I can imagine that this story is true in many many lives.

“Breathe, be well, know that you are remembered fondly. May the days in front of you bring warm new memories and excellent old ones. Love, Beth.”

Norine Odland died on March 20th, 2002, at 83 years of age and less than three months after I wrote this letter. I did not hear from her again, but just before Christmas, her nephew and family sent word of her death. At the end, her beloved family was with her. I want to believe that in some form my energy was also there in her last weeks, and that it helped in some small way. Perhaps it was part of the plan that my image of her stayed as it was—not an old woman in a nursing home bed but a vibrant professor in a soft red wool dress. My subconscious carried the clear tones of her voice, and the images of my dream world had connected me to a soul lost to my daily life. I now know my words were read to her; Dan Odland found both my letter and a chapbook of my poetry among her things.

Today, I know that Norine embodies concepts strong in my memory and my ethic. *Steadfast* is one word that comes to mind. Punctual. Generous. Disciplined. Trustworthy. Her actions were loving without mention of the word “love,” and now I see that those actions were parenting beyond parents that I took to heart and tried to live up to.

As Patricia Hampl says in her book about memoir, *I Could Tell You Stories*, (1999) “Memoir is the intersection of narration and reflection...” In a memoir, one feels “a relationship developing between a former self and me... between an old world and me... We stare and drift because there we are historical... the past is radiant. It sheds the light of a lived life.”

Why am I *now* looking back on the late 1960s and adding the person of Norine Odland—in detail—to those memories of my former self, my “lived life” of those campus days? I am now 54, the age she was when we traveled together, and subconsciously I hold myself to many of her expectations of professional women. In retrospect, I can see the two sides of my 1970s self with more clarity: I was ambitious but needing a mentor, afraid of the war rallies and campus riots, *and* protected in the academic bubble that Norine helped create.

I was, nearly daily, receiving gifts (physical or of the spirit) that would last me a lifetime, yet I barely understood that fact—at times I was overwhelmed by the gifts, trips or special treatments. I do feel that I thanked her, but with less understanding of the real depth of her giving. I let my attention to Dr. Norine Odland sink to the subconscious as the years wore on and my career and home life got busier. Perhaps I write this now, in part to forgive myself for never getting to Clarion to see her.

If I now dare to fill the shoes given to me—to step up to my own personal authority as teacher, mentor, and friend to college-age students— it is helpful to reflect on my years with Norine Odland. As I switch the roles, test the skills, and mature to her age then, I remember her level of expectations of that young Beth. Through this process, I can hopefully spring my imagination toward the future and take young people with me in a clearer sense of my own purpose as mentor.

So this small memoir is written in tribute to Dr. R. Norine Odland, 1919 to 2002—a University of Minnesota Professor of Children’s Literature for 36 years. She was Iowa farm girl turned schoolteacher, scholar, recipient of the Kerlan Award for Excellence in Children’s Literature, groundbreaker, aunt, friend, and mentor. Women in academia now walk through doors opened by leaders like Norine Odland, and I hope that we can be as steadfast in our commitment to honesty and integrity in both mentoring and teaching. Much like my lovely crystal apple, my memories of Norine continue to focus and shed light on a life in teaching.

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