

The Lesson I Learned in Sister Regina's Class

By Mary Lou Williams

I was four years old, and I was a failure. I failed kindergarten. I not only failed it once. I failed it three times. When I was a child, promotion to the next grade occurred twice a year at Our Lady of Grace elementary school in a suburb of New York City where I lived. So when I was 4 ½, my kindergarten class graduated to the first grade. I did not graduate with them. I was left back. I was the only one.

I tried harder. When I was 5, the kindergarten class that had come in six months after me graduated to the first grade. I did not graduate with them. I was left back. I was the only one. I tried harder still. I napped with all my might. I colored inside the lines with the meticulousness of Michelangelo. I built architectural monuments with my wooden blocks that rivaled the Taj Mahal and the Eiffel Tower. When I was 5 ½, the next kindergarten class graduated to the first grade. I did not graduate with them. I was left back. I was the only one. I stopped trying. An inner voice said, "You are not smart. It doesn't matter how hard you try. It won't make any difference."

I had no doubt of this. I believed it as unquestioningly as I believed that chocolate milk came from brown cows. It was the way it was. And there was nothing I could do about it. When I was six, the new kindergarten class graduated to the first grade. This time I graduated with them. I had no idea why. It seemed to have nothing at all to do with anything I did.

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True to form, I failed first grade, which was no surprise to me, but it was to my grandmother. My grandmother was an institution at Our Lady of Grace Elementary School. She played the piano and directed the musical productions at the end of each term. My grandmother had great influence with the nuns, and she used it to have me promoted. If it weren't for my grandmother, I would still be in the first grade. I promptly failed second grade. I was put ahead again, compliments of my grandmother. I proceeded to fail third grade. I was promoted anyway. I failed my way to fourth grade. My grandmother's influence knew no bounds.

It was not until I was older that I found out that it was because of my grandmother that I had started kindergarten at the age of four. At Our lady of Grace Elementary School, children started the first grade when they were about six years old. Therefore, they went into kindergarten at about 5 and a half. My grandmother thought I would be better off in kindergarten than at home and used her influence with the nuns to have me placed there a year and a half too early. Hence, my three "failures." I was left back until I was old enough to start first grade.

In 4th grade I arrived in Sister Regina's class. Sister Regina was beautiful. She seemed much younger than the other nuns. I believe she was nineteen. She must have told us she was nineteen because that is the age that sticks in my mind. She looked like nineteen. She had blue eyes, pink cheeks, and she was always smiling. Her face was framed by the black and white nun's habit of the Ursuline order. She had come from

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Quebec, Canada. My grandmother had come from Quebec. I was the only kid in the school who was of French Canadian descent. I felt a kinship with Sister Regina because I was French Canadian, too.

She told us stories about horse drawn sleigh rides in the snow, of her mother and father and brothers and sisters. I always pictured her with snow on her eyelashes. When I stepped into her classroom, I was stepping into another world, the world of Sister Regina's childhood in Quebec.

In Sister Regina's class everything went well for me. I even won something for the first time in my life. Sister Regina had a raffle, and I won a pair of rosary beads. They were little, plain, inexpensive black beads, but they were the most beautiful beads in the world to me.

Something else happened to me for the first time in Sister Regina's class. I passed a test. I copied from Kathleen Holmes. Kathleen Holmes got an 84 on the test. I got an 85. I thought to myself, "Kathleen Holmes got an 84. I got an 85. I got one point on my own. Maybe I am not dumb." This was an epiphany! For the first time I doubted my belief in my stupidity.

I started trying. When the next test came around, I didn't copy from anyone. All the points I got on that test, I got on my own. I passed that test. Sister Regina was proud of me. I could see it in her face. I didn't believe I was dumb any more. I believed I could learn. My goal was to get 100 on each test and make Sister Regina proud of me. I tried

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with all my might. When Sister Regina returned the first test I got 100 on, she said, "I am so proud of you. You got 100%. You were the only one."

No teacher ever meant as much to me as Sister Regina. She was the most important teacher I ever had. And the most important lesson I ever learned, I learned in Sister Regina's class. Believe in yourself: you become what you believe.