

## Orchid Nature

Dear Max,

The autumn day that your second grade teacher said to me "I think your first trip needs to be to his pediatrician... and then he needs to see a psychiatrist," I died a little bit.

My cold hands clenched together on the kid-sized desk where I sat across from Mrs. Jenkins, her caring and concerned face registering real fear at your quick descent into madness.

Second grade started off for you – for Dad and I, too – more hopefully than first grade, because according to everybody Mrs. Jenkins was "the best teacher in the school system." If anyone could make your schooling experience positive, it was Mrs. J.

And now, here she was sitting in front of me and sharing about your tantrum when a kid called you a crybaby, about your resistance to even the slightest bit of writing or math work, and about the tremendous anxiety you now exhibit in class: "... And then earlier this week, I arrived in my classroom to find Max sobbing as if his little heart would break. "I didn't know where you were, Mrs. Jenkins, and I was afraid," he said to me, because I was a little late walking back into the classroom after lunch!"

In September, Mrs. Jenkins predicted you would be strong both academically and socially. But just a few months later, you lag far behind your classmates in finishing any academic work... Mrs. J observes you spiraling often into loud, helpless tears.... and, cue the psychiatrist remark.

As I say, something inside me died at this conference. But you had already been dying, ever since you entered first grade.

You started school looking and acting just like every other kid – that adorable first-day

picture makes me shiver still, just from sheer lack of foresight. We had no idea what was coming as you stood there in your new shorts and polo shirt, grasping your backpack and grinning alongside your little brother.

During the months that followed, Dad and I watched you descend into your own private hell. For you, school held only the guarantee that at the end of one week of academic work, another just like it waited in the wings. When the shutter snapped on that picture we had no idea about the migraine headaches, the weight loss, or the unholy night terrors that would come on nearly every night of first grade. We didn't know yet about the homework assignments that, even if they felt really small to us, made you cry and took away your appetite. When you'd come home after getting in trouble – for talking with friends during group-meeting time, usually – you reeled for days. After a few weeks of first grade you hardly ever laughed.

In preschool, you always loved ciphers and mysteries. So, to encourage your writing, I found a code in a children's book series and created a little codebook. In it I'd ask you questions, which you duly decoded, and together we created little dramas in which your Transformer figures came up against some terrible trouble and, through me, they'd send you a code and you'd go help them.

Sometimes, you'd take the lead. Just today I came across a codebook you made for me, the summer between kindergarten and first grade. The pages are all uneven, your code symbols huge and sliding off the page. That day, during a summer that served as a breath of fresh air before the toxic war-campaign of first grade, you hid your favorite Transformer, named Backstop, and wanted me to find him. The coding you wrote was signed "Backstop," but your words seem so prescient, now, after all that's happened:

"Mom. I am lost. Help."

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As it was unfolding, we had no idea why, or even what to call this. Who ever heard of PTSD in a six-year-old?

The way I've come to think of it is, school stifled you. It's easy, as a teacher, to confuse fostering development and stifling it. I've done it myself.

"Young man, please leave circle time and go sit alone at the snack table." That was me, before I became your mother, stifling a disruptive five-year-old in my full-day preschool class. Jack gleefully crashed down block creations, raised his voice, and incited young friends to run through our classroom with him. I sent Jack away from circle time a lot.

The thing is, he wasn't mean. He was simply exuberant, with playful high spirits, a charismatic nature, and tons of heart.

No – tons of soul; the energy radiating from this child encompassed more than his heart. Jack invested all of his very being into whatever hijinks he was getting up to at the moment. He sucked all the oxygen out of our room; it simply wasn't a big enough space to hold him. So I worked hard to shove his big personality into a small box – exactly the opposite of what I should have done.

I should have expanded the box.

I succeeded in stifling Jack. By the end of the year he complied with most every requirement of mine. He was passive, defeated, even. I had subjugated his soul, which sure made my job a lot easier in May than it had been in September; but to what end?

I thought about Jack a lot after you were born. I regretted stomping on his high spirits and exuberance, belatedly realizing that when we take away those, a child also loses curiosity, playfulness, questioning, and creativity. I wish I'd let him bloom.

Max, you possessed every bit as much soul as Jack, but your fire was all internal, all in your imagination. When you were three or four, sometimes you'd grasp my hand and pull me into your bedroom. Then you'd direct me into an imaginary elevator, which brought us down into the place you liked to tinker and build in your imagination; you called it your "building basement." Where I saw just your bed, shelves, and carpet, you saw rocket engines in one corner and transmogrifiers in another. You transported us via time machine to the age of the dinosaurs, hands clasped behind you in that commander-of-all-I-survey fashion.

As your writing skills strengthened, I started using our codebooks to ask more mundane questions. Once I asked "Did you enjoy the Chinese food?" and you took up the entire next page with the code for Y-E-S. When I asked you what kind of pizza you wanted for dinner, you answered "pepperoni please," only in coded, endearing inventive spelling – "peprone pese." These beloved tiny missives opened up a window into the inner workings of your inventive mind.

From the reports you brought home in kindergarten and first grade, it was clear you weren't like Jack at school either, crashing down block creations or zooming around, shouting at the top of your lungs. It was your disinclination to focus on what they needed you to focus on that had them concerned; you just wanted to bring everyone along in your imagination.

When Dad and I attended your first grade Parents Night in 2006, a fellow mom asked "what's different now, as opposed to before No Child Left Behind and all the testing?" Your teacher lamented the changes: "First grade is big business," she told us gathered there that September night. "We used to spend lots more time on the children's interests; if they wanted to study salamanders for six weeks, we studied salamanders for six weeks. We did a lot more cooking in the classroom."

Those words, "first grade is big business," proved a grim harbinger for your elementary

school career. To cope with the academic pressures, you retreated into yourself. School taught you to bury your feelings so deep that even you couldn't find them, and also to believe yourself stupid and terrible at learning.

You stopped going into your building basement, no more code-books appeared to engage me in Transformer search-and-rescue campaigns. By a few months into first grade you were as unreachable as if you'd fallen down a well, your soul closed off even though you were right in front of me.

And I had no clue what to do about it. As a teacher myself, I wanted to make schooling work; but I couldn't figure out how. Watching you react so badly to it, knowing school was the problem, I wished desperately for an alternative.

This was happening with you, but it doesn't happen to every kid – ever wonder why? If you imagine the classroom as a garden, some kids are dandelions, and others, orchids. Actual orchids – the flowers – need specific conditions. Without the correct humidity, temperatures, and soil, orchids curl up and die. Which is a shame, because they're incredibly beautiful flowers, given the right conditions. It takes a lot more to damage the super resilient dandelions, both the flowers and the people. "Vulnerable, highly reactive children – the orchid children – have the capacity for both withering and thriving;" I read that in the 2011 *Scientific American* article, "On the Trail of the Orchid Child."

In the same essay, author Wray Herbert discusses research on "the genetics of heavy drinking" which concludes that "the kids who ran the highest risk of developing bad behaviors... were least likely to struggle when living in healthy, nurturing homes."

Where a dandelion-child would be fine, an orchid-child simply isn't. It's these orchid-children who struggle the most to fit themselves into the cracks in the education sidewalk, to

find purchase in this No Child Left Behind world.

When he heard about this idea, your little brother immediately pronounced himself a dandelion. But you, my firstborn, are definitely an orchid-child.

I suspect your second-grade teacher, Mrs. Jenkins, pegged me as an interfering mother out to undermine her classroom teaching. This was thanks to an argument we'd had on the phone, before the parent-teacher conference, about inventive spelling:

Me: "All my early childhood education training taught me that inventive spelling is a valid way of learning to spell. When I look at Max's ability to spell inventively, I see a kid at least engaged, at least *trying* something."

Mrs. J, in a clipped, curt voice: "But when kids learn to spell a word correctly the first time, they remember it better."

Me: "I used inventive spelling myself at least into the third grade, and I'm one of the best spellers I know."

Mrs. J: (Makes obscene gesture that I can't see... I'm ninety-nine percent sure.)

Still, Mrs. Jenkins worked hard in September of second grade to build a thriving classroom community, which you fit right into, and by early October you felt at home there. But then suddenly it wasn't back-to-school time anymore. You had to buckle down and do some academics. That's when you started crying uncontrollably in school, when you lost your appetite again. That's when you returned to your first-grade, passive self.

Maybe Mrs. Jenkins and I didn't agree on inventive spelling, but we united in our concern for you. Hence, her recommendation that you see a psychologist when we met in conference that fall. She couldn't understand what was wrong, any more than we could.

During our conference, Mrs. Jenkins also shared an odd conversation she'd had with

you. It felt off, somehow, and ended with the following pronouncement: ""Well, Max," I told him, "I don't like to clean my toilets, either, but it still has to be done. Just like your math work.""

Here's this compassionate woman, obviously worried about you – but trying to motivate you by comparing your academic work with... toilet-scrubbing?

At that moment, I started to wonder if the problem wasn't so much with you – but with the system.

"We are beginning to see the first generation of children who never played... It is very scary. Because everything is so organized for them, they don't know the meaning of "play," and they cannot connect with it." College professor Miriam Beloglovsky shared this on my podcast\* one day in 2017.

During our conversation Miriam's colleague and co-author of the *Loose Parts* books, Lisa Daly, agreed: "We're seeing students who no longer seem to have passion, or creativity... They're just very stifled; they sit there waiting for instructions. It's almost like they're frozen."

Though I can't see Lisa and Miriam as we record, with them out in California and me here in Massachusetts, I do hear their sincere worries over Skype. Lisa's voice hums with concern as she describes a young adult who scored perfectly on the math section of his SAT, but who didn't understand how to operate a screwdriver.

Just let that sink in for a moment, Max.

"Lately," Lisa shares, "we've been talking to some high school physics teachers, and they are discouraged... They're seeing a group of adolescents coming into high school who

\* We Turned Out Okay Episode 152, April 25, 2017

have not played and tinkered as children. As a result, they are not understanding any of the physics concepts at all. They have to know about gravity, and about physics, and about velocity, and about force. [They learn] through building with blocks, constructing... [That's how] they're going to learn all future concepts."

As they speak, I envision the orchid-children – maybe my preschool Jack – sitting in college, passively waiting to be told what to do next.

You're now seventeen, Max. You were sixteen when we recorded that conversation; Miriam and Lisa might also be talking about you.

In her 2006 book, Dr. Madeline Levine writes about this patient of hers, a fifteen-year-old girl who "used a razor to incise the word EMPTY on her left forearm." This girl is the catalyst for Levine's journey into the mental issues of a whole generation – your generation – of kids who should be fine. "Cutting was one of the few things over which she felt control," Levine reports in *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*.

When you were seven years old, and your second-grade teacher recommended psychological help, did you feel any control over your young life? Sitting at that cold, pint-sized desk listening to Mrs. Jenkins, I spied a terrifying vision of your future self, passively waiting, empty inside.

Let's get back to that desk, back to my own dear seven-year-old orchid-child. Was Mrs. Jenkins right? Should we bring you to Dr. Davis and then let her refer you to a psychologist? Mental illness; medication; labels; special needs; education plan – all these words ran through my mind. What would happen to you, stuck in a system that was already stripping you of your imagination and your very soul?



"Mom. I am lost. Help." Your words in our codebook, two summers ago. Would you, now, stay lost?

With all my heart, I cried out against that. I remembered the dimple that appeared in your cheek when you laughed; I remembered your building basement and your "peprone" pizza.

How desperately I wanted you back.

My conversation with your second-grade teacher haunted me for days. On one of them, I met a neighbor who lived right along our walk to school. Judging from the toys and bikes I saw, kids definitely lived there.

In the yard on this November afternoon stood a man dressed like Ben Franklin. Wearing full 1700's regalia, he seemed right at home standing next to one of those round, plastic pools. The pool held water, and also assorted kid-stuff that spoke of rich imaginations and tons of free play.

A boy and girl chased each other around the yard, occasionally high-fiving Ben Franklin.

"Hi – I'm Gary. I run a Freedom Trail tour company," he said, gesturing at his garb.

"I wondered about the outfit," I responded with a smile. "Are these your kids? How come we've never met before?"

"Probably because we homeschool," Gary explained. He then spoke of his frustrations with his own schooling, the hesitations he and his wife shared about public school. They especially disdained the time that schoolchildren spend on someone else's agenda; "Kids have great ideas, they don't need somebody telling them to sit still and pay attention. We wouldn't send our son and daughter to school, it's too suffocating. "

Hear hear, I thought. With my teaching background, though, homeschooling felt like a betrayal. I told Gary as much: "I taught in a public school, I wouldn't want to betray the educational system."

Gary's response changed your life, Max.

"So," he asked from under his Revolutionary-era hat, "you're gonna sacrifice your kid to that?"

Whoa – is that what I'm doing?, I thought to myself.

Laughter rang out as Gary's son and daughter ran up for another high-five. Despite the November chill, they were warm in their fleece jackets and their open-ended play. Giggling, they took deep breaths of the free air.

For the first time in a long time, hope blossomed in my heart.

You know what happened next. After some serious deliberation, the day came when Dad and I asked "would you like to come out of second grade and homeschool?" Immediately, your eyes lit up with curiosity and enthusiasm.

Your night terrors ceased the very day you dropped out of second grade. Soon, you only got migraines from too much screen time. As if awakening from a long sleep, your orchid roots soaked up nutrients, hungry – for both food and learning – again.

After you left school, I always loved listening to you read Garfield comics aloud to your little brother, both of you giggling your heads off, still in your pajamas on the living room couch. Your grandmother always says that, for us, homeschooling looks like "perpetual Saturday morning," and I think she might be right.

The ensuing decade has seen your bloom, curiosity, and wonderment all restored. There is not enough space here to discuss it all, the light-saber battle lessons out on the front

lawn; the miniature city for Pokémon that you and your brother made with Gary's kids; the guitar playing, the Fridays at the park with hordes of other homeschooled children; the freedom.

You re-christened the forest behind our home Dragon Woods, made maps of it and built forts in it. You constructed a bottle rocket, in a free class at the library, and then shot it hundreds of feet in the air. You learned to snowboard and played Yu-Gi-Oh card games at the local comic store and engaged in myriad, unnamed other activities.

Finding that codebook got me thinking about the nature of the orchid-child, how you either turn out awful, or terrific. There is no in between.

We adults, your teachers and parents who shape your educations, help you grow into either enlightened beings of grace and beauty – or passive automatons. I've learned through watching you transform from the latter, back into the former, the importance of the correct growing medium for you.

You're an excellent example of how a person can thrive, given the right conditions, Max, a triumph of orchid-kind.

Love you,

Mom

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