



Remembering a Great Teacher: Olive S. Niles

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In my fourth year of teaching English in a suburban high school, Olive Niles came out from Boston University to do an hour's worth of inservice -- and changed my whole life. Although that change was dramatic and long lasting, there was nothing surprising about Olive's being the agent. To bring about change is a teacher's whole purpose, and Olive was a consummate teacher.

Her life was shaped to the teacherly task. A farmer's daughter from Vermont, she graduated from Mount Holyoke during the Great Depression when jobs of any kind were few and far between. So it was on to Bryn Mawr for her master's degree in English literature and then with her sister Amy to the University of London to pursue a doctorate. She was in the middle of her dissertation on the Venerable Bede when her mother cabled that there was a teaching position open in her hometown of Bennington. Without a second thought for the Anglo Saxon scholar, Olive took the first ship for the States and landed the job in the one-room schoolhouse down the dirt road from her family's farm.

After several years of learning the hard way (she might have said the only way) how to teach reading to children at every stage of development, from emergent literacy to learning from academic textbooks, Olive moved to Bennington High as an English teacher and from there to high school positions in Massachusetts. She was teaching teachers at the state college in New Britain, Connecticut, when Donald Durrell attended her inservice session and recognized at once that here was a woman who understood high school students and their teachers, who combined high scholarship with uncommon practicality, who eschewed jargon and could "tell it like it is." He drafted her to set up Boston University's clinic in secondary reading and, in her spare time, to complete a doctorate in Education. When I met her, she was doing both, and had been for some time, because Olive's commitment to the students in her clinic, to the teachers in the two courses she had developed on secondary reading, and to staff development in New England schools always came before her own needs.

As things turned out, we completed our doctoral dissertations during the same semester, but I always look upon Olive as my mentor. From her I learned all that there was then to know about reading in the secondary school, and I learned what hard work means to a Vermont woman with marble in her veins to keep her on task. We were collecting my data and analyzing hers one weekend at her farm in Bennington when she interrupted our activities with a promise to get supper. All I remember coming from the wood-burning cookstove that evening was a charred omelette that we joked about for years after. A scholar, yes; a cook, no; but Olive was not above such homely arts as hooking rugs when she could spare the time from preparing lesson plans.

Olive left Boston University while still an assistant professor because she wanted more opportunities to work with teachers in their classrooms than a professor's obligations

permitted. As the reading coordinator for the Springfield, Massachusetts Public Schools, she had those opportunities in abundance while still finding time for research. As part of the First Grade Studies in the late 60's, she conducted an experiment in primary classrooms that enacted many of the principles of what was to become the whole language movement, substituting trade books for basal readers and closely following the progress of every learner. Olive's long experience with remedial readers would not permit her to risk any child's success for the sake of research.

Always seeking challenges, always concerned with the needs of teachers, Olive left the city of Springfield in the late 60's for the larger arena of the Connecticut Department of Education. About this time, too, she began her many years' work with publishers. Her long experience as a teacher in elementary and secondary schools and as a mentor of teachers had convinced her that the surest way to effect change is through showing, not telling. Thus she talked with teachers and addressed professional meetings, and she invited teachers' reactions to lessons she taught in their classrooms, but she did not lecture them through print. She was under no threat to "publish or perish." Instead, she turned her gifted teaching directly toward adolescent learners, using publishing as the means to reach a far greater audience of both students and teachers than she could meet personally. In the late 60's and 70's she developed with a team of fellow teachers working with editors at Scott, Foresman a reading program -- *Tactics* -- that offered at-risk secondary students the useful and motivating help that many other educators talk wishfully about but do not implement. Through several editions, this groundbreaking series, as well as her contributions to other Scott, Foresman anthologies, introduced teachers and students to strategies to improve comprehension using literature that spoke to their personal and social concerns.

In the field of secondary reading, Olive's influence extended well beyond New England even though she always stayed close to the problems of Connecticut teachers and even though her articles appeared infrequently in professional journals. So it was a triumph for secondary teachers but no surprise when she was elected, in 1978, vice president of IRA to become president in 1980-81. From president-elect to past president, for four years, she turned her remarkable energies, her well-developed know-how, her perseverance, her tact, and, yes, her New England charm to teachers' needs on a worldwide scale. Having learned as her student that nothing would stand in the way of Olive's will to serve, I was not the least surprised to find her flying off to Paris and to the Philippines, although I remembered the many years in which fear of flying had kept her on trains, buses, and her overused automobiles.

Olive was over 70 when she retired from the Connecticut Department of Education and went back to the Vermont farm. But she never stopped working for teachers. She was appointed Distinguished Professor at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell, thus rounding out her career with a return to academe. Although she had retired from Lowell, she was still working the last time I saw her. She had driven the long way from Bennington to Concord, stopping to leave her intact collection of Reading Teacher for the Lowell education library, before participating in a two-day editorial conference with Sundance Publishers, through whom she continued to prepare materials for adolescent readers. A year later, now in her 82nd year and no longer able to drive herself, she still made the long trip to take part in yet another editorial planning meeting. In the same month she died.

Perhaps in that first doctoral study she pursued at the University of London, Olive learned the Venerable Bede's admonition, "It is better never to begin a good work than, having begun it, to stop." But I think she knew it all along. In any case, she applied that conviction to all her professional life and as a result teachers' lives and those of their students are better for it.

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