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A Greater Fairness: May Justus as Popular Educator

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May Justus started teaching in rural Appalachian schools in the 1930s. These schools were often the center of community life and drew subject matter from the needs of the students rather than imposing a curriculum designed by professional educators. Her techniques fit the modern definition of "popular education," even though this phrase was not commonly used for another forty years. She left the formal teaching profession and began publishing childrens' books that held up Appalachian values of commitment to family and community as models. She volunteered extensively at the Highlander Folk School, which focused on adult education, labor organizing, and the civil rights movement. Her work at Highlander led to a deep commitment to racial equality. After local schools were bombed and Highlander was attacked by segregationists she wrote two children's books that showed how Appalachian folks might live in a peaceful community when their schools were integrated. In her books, the children recognize that black and white people already agree on the important things—strong families, loving parents, and strong communities that pull together in difficult times. May Justus was a true radical educator, an "inside agitator" who drew on the region's best values to promote social change.

Elementary school children filing off a bus, their backpacks and tee-shirts emblazoned with Disney characters, kept in line by a teacher's stern glare, seem more prepared for indoctrination than education. These kids are learning to obey rules, and that being a "good citizen" often means molding oneself to the system. Questioning the fairness of that system may earn them a low "conduct" grade or a phone call to their parents from a school administrator.

Yet the renowned Brazilian author and educator Paulo Freire (1970) argued that true education is revolutionary. Through his work with illiterate peasants, he found that when the politically and economically oppressed read and think critically about social forces they begin to seek ways to challenge the status quo. As Richard Shaull (1970) has said, when this happens, "Education is once again a subversive force" (p. 9).

This concept of education, with its focus on actions that create a more just society, is widely referred to as "popular education." It is rooted in the belief that the voiceless and powerless already possess within themselves the knowledge they need to gain voice and power. The popular educator takes whatever steps are necessary to elicit this latent knowledge. Freire taught literacy to the Brazilian masses because it had become clear to him that they needed this skill to fight for political and economic power. In another situation, the popular educator might teach computer literacy, or public speaking skills, or knowledge of how local government operates. But the skills are only tools that the people themselves use to seek creative solutions to their own problems. In this way, popular education is antithetical to traditional models of education, in which the "experts" possess the valuable knowledge, which they then transmit to the ignorant masses in the form of lectures or books.

While Freire (1970) was a "radical" by his own definition, he disdained all forms of dogma and sectarianism, whether from the left or right. In the preface to his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he writes:

> Sectarianism, fed by fanaticism, is always castrating. Radicalization, nourished by a critical spirit, is always creative. Sectarianism mythicizes and thereby alienates; radicalization criticizes and thereby liberates. (p. 21)

In this sense, neither a dogmatic Marxist nor a religious fundamentalist are radicals. Both are sectarians and make the same mistake, ". . . treating history in an equally proprietary fashion, [and] end up without the people—which is another way of being against them" (p. 23). But the radical is of the people, questioning the authority and actions of those in power with an eye toward the common good.

The history of this radically democratic methodology illustrates that it is indeed a threat to the status quo. Repressive regimes and oligarchies have feared it and have taken swift action against its proponents. Freire himself was arrested and lived in exile for almost 20 years after a 1964 military coup in Brazil. Anne Hope, a South African nun, and organizer of a mass literacy campaign was arrested and exiled from apartheid South Africa in the mid-1970s (Hurst, 1995). And in the mountains of east Tennessee, a popular educator named May Justus, a native Appalachian woman,

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defied the threats of the KKK and the FBI and stood up to an inquisition led by the state of Tennessee, inspiring a new generation of Southerners to topple the walls of segregation and dare to work for a peaceful, racially integrated society.

In the early 1930s, May Justus and her companion Vera McCampbell were working at a mission school in Lee County, Kentucky. Such rural areas were slow to adopt state-mandated concepts of universal education. Formal schooling was only one strand in the fabric of community, and the task of teaching children was dispersed throughout the community. Lee County schools were generally open for only 3 or 4 months a year, leaving most children free to learn how to operate a farm, mine coal, or manage a household, skills that most parents would have insisted were essential to survival. Some parents, though, wanted their children to have more formal schooling, and the mission school attempted to provide it. As educators, this left Justus and McCampbell in a unique and extremely challenging position. They would hold formal classes for those children whose parents wanted it and would educate the others through direct participation in all aspects of community life (Wigginton, n.d.).

Justus later described conditions in Lee County as "pretty primitive," with the mail being delivered by a mule drawn covered wagon. There were no doctors living in the county, so Justus and McCampbell delivered medicine to the sick and administered first aid to injured coal miners. Sometimes they trudged through creeks far up into isolated hollows to tend to the sick or injured. When a doctor came once a year to perform operations, they turned their school into a hospital. When someone died, they held funeral services that would be formalized later when the circuit preacher came through. While the pay was only fifty dollars a month, the two young teachers received so many vegetables, chickens, and support from their neighbors that Miss Justus could describe it as "good work" (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 16-18).

Justus and McCampbell had not been in Lee County long when McCampbell's mother, who had come to live with them, developed cancer. The two teachers wanted to move the elder McCampbell closer to a hospital, and Miss Justus remembered a letter she had received from Dr. Lillian Johnson a couple of years earlier (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 18-19). Dr. Johnson, a former college president with a history of support for progressive causes, had opened a school to help educate the people of Tennessee's Grundy County. The school was traditional in many ways, with outside experts coming in to lecture the local people in areas where they seemed to need help. But unlike many educational theorists of her day, who sought a curricular template that would work in both urban and rural settings, Johnson believed that strong rural community ties contained the seeds of a unique and innovative kind of education. She felt that a mountain school should be the center of life in the community and wanted to recruit teachers who would take an active part in all aspects of community life. One of the people she contacted was May Justus (Adams, 1975). Justus was familiar with Dr. Johnson's ideas about education and must have felt comfortable with them after her experience in Lee County. Dr. Johnson welcomed both May and Vera to the Summerfield School's staff. The two young teachers had committed to a path that they would follow for the rest of their lives (Wigginton, n.d., p. 19).

May Justus, Vera McCampbell, and Mary B. Thompson, from Memphis, Tennessee, taught the entire curriculum from first through eighth grades. Under their leadership the Summerfield School drew its subject matter from the needs of the students rather than imposing a curriculum designed by "professional educators," a principle characteristic of popular education. May Justus describes the curriculum:

> One of the things we taught in school was arts and crafts. The girls made rag and hook rugs and honeysuckle baskets, and the boys made toys, bookends, book racks, anything they could make with a coping saw. We sold our crafts, some locally, and some of them we sold through my publishers.

And the school's "soup pot" met a real need as well as helping to develop a sense of collective support and community.

> [W]e had markets in five different cities. With half of the money we made from the sales of the handcrafts, we bought food for our soup pot. We were running our soup pot before there was anything like lunchrooms in this part of the state. The mothers would send me canned tomatoes and green beans, anything like that. And the children brought all sorts of vegetables from home. We had a seven-gallon lard bucket and a great old big pot-bellied stove to cook on. I would buy rice, and the various things they couldn't bring from home. And later on, another teacher would bring meat down from Tracy City where she lived. We'd peel our own vegetables and prepare everything for the soup. So many of the children have said, "We were just like a family." And school ought to be an extended family. (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 20-21)

This was several decades before the term "popular education" began showing up in educational theory. Yet it sounds very much like one modern definition of popular education as, ". . . democratically structured cooperative study . . ." (Hurst, 1995).

It is difficult to trace the beginning of May Justus's literary career. She grew up in a house of storytellers, whose tales made up her earliest memories as well as the plots for her books.

> Mother told us so many stories she remembered from her childhood which sounded like made-up stories to us, going back to the days when their clothes were woven and everything was so primitive. She told how Grandmother knitted the socks and stockings they used, and how they made coverlets and quilts and did all those things. That was vastly interesting to us because we had graduated to store-bought goods. It was all like a storybook. And when the neighbors would come to visit, they would talk about old times, too. So you see, I was brought up in a storytelling atmosphere from the beginning. And, unknown to the little girl who listened at that time, it was all stored away in her mind! (Wigginton, n.d., p. 3)

As she grew older, she and her nine siblings, along with their parents, read aloud to each other sitting in the yard or at night around the fireplace. They read the Bible, *Pilgrims' Progress,* and assorted works by Hawthorne, George Eliot, and Dickens. She credited *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as causing her, ". . . first sympathy with the Negro people." She and her brother once estimated that they had read a 150 books aloud between the ages of 12 and 15 alone. Their literary exposure was so broad that the same brother once claimed that when he got to college, he had already read nearly every book that was required in his English classes (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 7-10).

Somewhere around the age of 12 Miss Justus was inspired by the character Jo March in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* to become an author herself. She described her first efforts:

> The letters that people would write Mother sometimes were written on one side leaving the other side blank. Instead of throwing these away, my mother would give them to me, and I wrote on the blank sides. I remembered in our Tennessee history how people in pioneer days made pens out of goose quills and made their ink out of pokeberries. Well, pokeberries grew in abundance around our house, and I thought what the pioneer girls could do, I could do too. So I made the pokeberry ink. We didn't have geese but a neighbor did, so they told me how to make a goose quill pen. I took a sharp knife, pointed the quill and made a little split from the point back so that it would hold the ink. . . . And I wrote my stories that way! (Wigginton, n.d., p. 11)

Soon after she came to Summerfield, at age 29, she published her first children's book, *Peter Pocket.* Over the next 12 years she published at the rate of about one book per year, and by 1939 had at least five different publishers. She received a Julius Rosenthal fellowship, which gave her a year away from the classroom to focus on her writing, and the book she produced that year was her first to deal directly with a serious social problem, alcoholism and its effect on a family. One publisher balked at this topic, considering it inappropriate for children, or "far out," as Miss Justus described it, but Random House did publish it (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 23-27).

In 1939, Miss Justus developed a heart ailment. This, combined with a desire to devote more time to writing, led her to give up full-time teaching. She ran a private tutoring service in which she worked with children who were having particular problems, holding "class" outside whenever possible (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 26-27). The books she wrote are didactic; a primary purpose was certainly to teach children proper ways to behave. But her characters do not simply learn rules of polite society as they might in a finishing school. The behaviors they learn are connected to a collective sense of community; they illustrate the security and comfort that come to the individual when she or he puts aside personal desires for the benefit of others.

Jerry Jake Carries On (Justus, 1943) and *Use Your Head, Hildy* (Justus, 1956) are coming of age stories. Growing children mature through recognizing their interdependence with the larger society. Jerry Jake, who lives with his grandparents, is left in charge of the homestead when his "Grandpappy" leaves to take a job in a sawmill. Jerry Jake is very successful at carrying out the "man-sized work" around the cabin and at the end of the summer finds he will not be able to start school on time because there is a field of potatoes to be dug up. He decides to sacrifice his new pocket knife by offering it to his friend Tommy Tyler as pay to help him dig the potatoes, placing the family's needs above his "prized possession."

In *Use Your Head, Hildy*, a young girl takes over the role of mother and woman of the house to an infant, two younger siblings, and her father while her mother goes away for a month to care for her sick sister. She sells a rug that she has woven, delighted that she finally has the five dollars she will need for a "floweredy dress" she has wanted for a long time. She then mistakenly cooks her father's seed corn for dinner, all the seed he had saved for next year's crop. She uses her five dollars to buy a feast for the family and new seed corn for her father, sacrificing her dress, but leaving the family stronger.

May Justus's early work elevates and preserves southern mountain culture. The characters speak an Appalachian dialect which flows like poetry through the narrative. "Look-a-there, now, will you! . . . Stumbling about like a lack-wit, certain-sure," says Lizzie, in the book by the same

name (Justus, 1947, p. 10). And her Grampy later reassures her, "You'll soon have enough . . . to buy that flock o' wish book clothes. You'll be fancy-fine for certain" (Justus, 1947, p. 16). Entire folk songs are printed, along with the music. Recipes are reproduced with mnemonic memory devices. Traditional stories are retold as stories within the story, always entertaining and reaffirming a strong sense of communal responsibility and joy among the listeners. Herbal remedies are outlined, and the herb women who administer them held up as priests or shamans with a special knowledge and power respected by the entire community.

These books teach children to read beyond the words, to respect and live by the values of their southern Appalachian heritage. Independence and individual integrity are primary, and yet the individual is also interdependent with the collective society. Her characters become adults when they make decisions to suppress their personal wants for the family or the community. Popular education uses the experience and knowledge of the students as its subject matter, and this is precisely what May Justus's books do. While it may be difficult to think of these early books as "radical," their author does seem to fit Paulo Freire's (1970) use of the term as one who

> enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he can better transform it. He is not afraid to confront, to listen, to the world unveiled. He is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into dialogue with them. He does not consider himself the proprietor of history or of men, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he does commit himself, within history, to fight at their side. (p. 24)

While May Justus's early educational work as teacher and children's author focused on the needs and experiences of the students and made them active participants in their own education, it still lacked one crucial element of popular education. She was not yet encouraging her students to directly address oppressive social forces, such as economic inequality or racism, and challenging them to seek their own liberation from these forces. Some dramatic changes at the Summerfield School after 1932 moved Miss Justus to pay much closer attention to these social forces.

Some time around 1930, Dr. Johnson, the school's founder and principle administrator, began thinking about retiring. She hoped to find someone to turn her property over to who would carry on the educational work. Don West, an activist and minister and Myles Horton, a native of east Tennessee who had studied at Union Theological Seminary, heard about Dr. Johnson's plans and showed up with an offer. West and Horton had been influenced by the radical socialist movements of the 1920s, by the social gospel that Reinhold Niebuhr was teaching at Union, and by the Danish folk school tradition. They dreamed of transferring this folk school model to southern Appalachia, to help prepare the region for a coming egalitarian, socialist society (Adams, 1975, pp. 11-12; Glen, 1996, pp. 13-22). A fundraising letter dated May 27, 1932 and signed by Niebuhr explains the dream:

> We believe that neither A.F. of L. nor Communist leadership is adequate to [the southern mountaineers'] needs. Our hope is to train *radical* labor leaders who will understand the need of both political and union strategy. Without local leadership a labor movement in the South is impossible. . . . A small group of workers, above 18 years of age will live with the teachers on a small farm where all will work, study and discuss together. Personal relations will play an important part. There will be a limited number of regular classes, but the smallness of the group will allow ample time for individual work based on the needs of individual students. . . . We are proposing to use education as one of the instruments for bringing about a new social order. (Horton, 1998, pp. 61-62)

According to Myles Horton, when Dr. Johnson first heard these ideas, she was shocked. But Horton was persuasive and Johnson was always interested in innovative education. Over the objections of her family, she gave Horton and West a year's probationary lease (Adams, 1975, p. 27). Gradually, the Summerfield School's focus shifted from children, handicrafts, and cooperative community living to adults, labor organizing, and the civil rights movement. The new school was named the Highlander Folk School. It operated in Grundy County until 1959, just over a hill from the house where May Justus and Vera McCampbell lived. During these years, Highlander functioned as a labor school and as a center of civil rights activities in the South. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, Andrew Young, and John Lewis all participated in Highlander workshops. It's cutting edge social agenda was praised and supported by Eleanor Roosevelt and condemned by the Ku Klux Klan, the state of Tennessee, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Adams, 1990, pp. 26-27).

Soon after Highlander replaced the Summerfield School, May Justus began teaching at a nearby public school. But she worked as a volunteer for Highlander from the day in 1932 when Don West walked out to meet her on a baseball field where she was playing with children until the state of Tennessee forced the school to relocate in 1959. While she was never a paid staff member, she volunteered as Highlander's secretary-treasurer for many years (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 24-26).

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, May Justus had plenty of opportunities to hitch her wagon to sectarians on both the left and the right. Through her close contact with Highlander, which was attracting some noted American social radicals, she was well acquainted with the political left. Yet she joined no radical parties, and her work shows no political line. She belonged to a traditional, country Presbyterian church, yet she never allowed her social opinions to be straight-jacketed by biblical literalism. In fact, she loved talking about ideas with people who had read widely and critically (S. Bates, personal interview, February 19, 2000). But she did become politicized. At a time when most native-born Southern white "progressives" were waffling on the race issue, urging gradualism and moderation, May Justus took a firm stand for the full integration of Blacks into white society. And once she took this step, she never looked back, but only became firmer and more determined to help the cause of racial equality in the South.

Miss Justus was quick to point out that her commitment to racial equality was the result of direct contact with black people. In fact, she had not known any black people personally until she began meeting them at Highlander. "Highlander's racial policy certainly did influence me," she said:

> If people who are prejudiced were exposed more to those they are prejudiced against, that might change them. I know people who have been prejudiced but they've changed. I've had people tell me that. *They didn't get it by listening to sermons, and they didn't get it by reading pamphlets on toleration. They got it by meeting somebody, as I met the people over there at Highlander.* They met somebody like Septima Clark or Ralph Abernathy or Dr. Brazeal of Morehouse College. That's how. They met them, and they talked to them. They recognized quality. Only the blindest, most prejudiced person could refute evidence as strong as that. There's nothing in the world like personal contact. Nothing. Nothing. And the people who influence you most in your life are not the people who preach to you, but the people who live with you and the people you see in their daily lives. "What you are speaks so loud I cannot hear what you say." That's an old axiom and it's just as true now as it was when the first person uttered it [emphasis mine]. (Wigginton, n.d., p. 38)

In the late 1950s this was a courageous and eloquent argument for integration. The only way that racial intolerance could be overcome, she believed, was for black people and white people to get to know each other personally.

One of the first black people that May Justus ever had close contact with was Septima Clark, a teacher from Charleston, South Carolina, who had been fired for being a member of the NAACP. Clark had come to Highlander for a workshop and was deeply moved by this group of Southern white people who were eating, sleeping, and working with blacks for the cause of integration. She eventually coordinated Highlander's Citizenship School program on John's Island, South Carolina, which taught illiterate black citizens to read so they could pass voter registration tests. With texts such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the students were inspired to struggle for equality while developing their reading skills. The Citizenship Schools became the foundation of the voter registration drives throughout the South that registered tens of thousands of blacks to vote (Glen, 1996, pp. 158-165; Wigginton, n.d., p. 29).

May Justus felt an instant bond with Septima Clark. They were both teachers from rural areas. They were both raised in fundamentalist religious traditions, remained within that tradition, and yet were open-minded enough to listen to and embrace new and creative ideas. They were voracious readers, eager to talk with others about the books they read, and they were both teetotalers (S. Bates, personal interview, February 19, 2000). When she was visiting Nashville to meet a group of French students, Miss Justus took it as a personal insult when her new friend was confronted with Jim Crow:

> Septima and I, and I don't remember who else took them [the French students] down to Nashville to meet there at the Andrew Jackson Hotel. Somebody from one of the television stations was going to meet with them, so we met in the room there and they had this interchange. After it was over and we started to leave, Septima and I started down the hall and we came to an elevator. The elevator boy stopped us, and looking at her said, "You'll have to go down to the other end of the hall. The colored people do not go down on this elevator." "Well," I said to Septima, "we'll both go down on the other elevator." So we went to the other elevator. She couldn't go down on what we'd call "my" elevator, so I went down on "hers." I may have to suffer fools gladly sometimes, for politeness sake, but I'm not going to suffer wrongdoing gladly.

She wrote the manager to complain about the policy and express her hope that it would change one day. "Well, I never did hear from him," she said. "Never did hear from him and I don't know whether that did him a bit of good in the world or not, or changed the policy at all, *but it did me good to express my feeling* and I just thought in time that manager might consider that" [emphasis mine] (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 29-30). The good that it did her to express her

feeling would motivate her many more times, both in her public life and in her books.

Integrationists in Tennessee, with the legal support of the NAACP, had been making slow but steady progress for 4 years when, in 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered public schools to proceed "with all deliberate speed" to desegregate. The trench battles were violent, with taunts and threats directed at children and teenagers, armed National Guardsmen in the schools, and a series of bombings. The initial Tennessee desegregation suit in 1950 was filed on behalf of four black parents in Clinton. The case dragged on until after the Supreme Court's decision, and in 1956, Judge Robert Taylor of the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ordered that Tennessee would have to obey the federal ruling and open its whites only schools to blacks. The White Citizens' Council organized resistance to the ruling, forcing Governor Clement to call out 600 National Guardsmen to enforce the court order and attempt to keep peace at Clinton High School. Septima Clark visited Clinton and invited the black students to Highlander for a weekend retreat. The following year, after Bobby Cain became the first black American to graduate from a public high school, his alma mater, Clinton High School, was nearly leveled by three bomb blasts (*Welcome to Tennessee*; Glen, 1996, p. 168).

In Nashville, another suit won a group of 13 black elementary students the right to attend five different elementary schools. White parents resisted by keeping nearly half of the white students home from school. Within a month, the passive resistance turned to open violence when one of the elementary schools, the brand new Hattie Cotton School, was nearly destroyed by a bomb (*Welcome to Tennessee*).

Segregationists turned their ire on Highlander. They dredged up an old and familiar charge commonly used in the South against those who favored integration, they were either Communists or were under their control. By 1959, the national scourge of McCarthyism was subsiding, its namesake formally censured by the Congress and 2 years dead. But the state of Tennessee decided to use this tried and true method to close Highlander. It started with a visit to Tennessee's state legislature by Arkansas Attorney General Bruce Bennett. Bennett warned the legislators that they were in danger from the subversives pushing for integration over at Highlander and offered his services to help close the school. The legislators seized the opportunity and appointed a committee comprised of Senator Lawrence T. Hughes and Representatives Harry Lee Senter and T. Allen Hanover to conduct 2 days of hearings in Tracy City. Using the strategies of the Federal House Un-American Activities Committee, the committee called numerous Highlander associates to the stand, exposing them as members of "Communist front" organizations and the school itself as part of a vast international Communist conspiracy. Among those called were James Dombrowski, the former Methodist minister who had become director of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare; Lucian Koch, former president of Commonwealth College; and Claude Williams, a Presbyterian minister who had worked closely with the CIO's efforts to organize Southern workers. Also called to the stand was Highlander's secretary-treasurer and longtime supporter, May Justus (Adams, 1975).

Most people would have understood had Miss Justus chosen to keep a low profile. After all, she would have to live among the people of Grundy County long after the committee had left. She was committed to her local Presbyterian church, most of whose members disapproved of her relationship with Highlander, even as they loved and respected her personally. But this would have been out of character for May Justus. She thought of the children at that church, whom she had tried to teach in Sunday school that one had to decide early in life which side, good or evil, she would be on. She remembered having told them, "The sooner you get in the habit of doing what you know is right in your heart, the better it will be." Looking back on her decision to testify, she said:

> I had never been to a trial in my life. You know, someone has said that the reason there is so much trouble in the world is because nobody [on the side of good speaks out.] Those on the side of evil are wrong and they're very vociferous about expressing themselves. I've always felt that we should speak out [on how we feel about things happening around us]. (Wigginton, n.d., pp. 34-35)

Frank Adams (1975) describes Miss Justus on the stand in his book *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*:

> May Justus . . . was asked by the committee's lawyer . . . if she approved of blacks and whites dancing together. "I see nothing immoral about it," she said. "It's a square dance. I can look at television any time and see worse than that."
>
> "Don't you know it's against the law for whites and colored to marry in Tennessee?" he retorted.
>
> "Yes, sir, but I didn't know that a square dance was part of a marriage ceremony," she replied.
>
> He changed the subject and asked about her knowledge of Highlander's charter. "It says here one of your purposes is to train rural and industrial leaders. Have you ever issued any diplomas to rural and industrial leaders that you know of?"
>
> "I didn't know diplomas were required for rural and industrial leaders."

> Remarks of this nature won for her permission to stand aside. (p. 128-129)

Scott Bates, a Professor of French at University of the South, long-time Highlander board member and close friend of Miss Justus, felt that she was asked to step aside because she was turning the local crowd, whom the committee had hoped to manipulate, against the proceedings.

> They were a bunch of rubes and she knew it. Their mistake was to begin badgering her. The sympathies of the audience began to swing against these "outsiders" who were coming into the community, attacking this fine lady who had taught many of them and their children to read. They began to see the committee as outsiders coming in and badgering one of their ladies. (personal interview, February 19, 2000)

The committee had come to town ready to expose left-wing sectarian subversives, to portray them as outside agitators. They had no idea how to deal with a popular educator whose most radical ideas sprang from the very values of the people they were trying to manipulate.

May Justus remembered her own experience in Nashville, the personal insult that she had felt when her friend Septima Clark was treated as an inferior human for attempting to ride down on a "white" elevator. She remembered that she had felt ". . . on the side of the angels" when she had stood up to her state government's attempt to publicly humiliate her because of her long friendship with Highlander. The bombing of the Hattie Cotton School, ". . . distressed me very much—to think that that thing could be," Miss Justus recalled. This was, after all, a woman who had devoted her entire life to educating children. "I wanted to do something. I thought, 'Well, I can't demonstrate or do anything to show that I disapprove of the school being bombed, or about violence happening that way. So I thought and thought about it, and I decided I'd write a book.' *New Boy in School* (1963) is derived from that incident" (Wigginton, n.d., p. 37). May Justus had become what one historian later called an "inside agitator," one of those Southerners whose roots drew their nourishment from the region's best values: a strong and broad sense of community, boundless generosity, a willingness to help all who suffer, and a deep faith in a God who would never forsake those who would stand for right (Chappell, 1994). In the words of Paulo Freire (1970), she became the true radical who ". . . enters into reality, so that, knowing it better, [s]he can better transform it" (p. 24).

New Boy in School is dedicated to Robin, Jonathan, David, and Samuel Bates, the children of her friend Scott Bates (Justus, 1963, dedication page). These children, who had grown up around Miss Justus, were the co-plaintiffs along with several black children in a suit to desegregate the public schools of Franklin County, Tennessee. The suit may have been the first time that white parents claimed infringement of their Fourteenth Amendment rights because their children had been denied the right to go to school with black children. It claimed that both white children and black children ". . . are injured by being subjected to the inherent evil and equality of said racial segregation in the public schools, which results in daily indoctrination of the white infant plaintiffs with concepts of themselves as a superior race, while the Negro infant plaintiffs are subjected to said indoctrination classifying them as an inferior race" (Hixon, 1962). Ophelia Miller, principal of Franklin County's black elementary school, supported the suit, and Miss Justus had visited the black school to read stories to the children and had befriended Miller (S. Bates, personal interview, February 19, 2000). So beyond the Bates children, her audience for *New Boy in School* was all the children and adults at the white school and the black school where she had read her books. It was the children and parents at the Hattie Cotton School, which had been dynamited by one of her fellow Tennesseans, who had chosen to become a terrorist rather than a good neighbor. It did not lecture or moralize about the need for revolutionary social change. It simply showed how some white folks in Nashville, the kind of folks she had lived around all her life, might choose to act when their schools were integrated and how much better life might be if they would simply respond to the positive and constructive values of their culture.

New Boy in School is the story of a black elementary school child who moves from Louisiana to Nashville, Tennessee, and enters a newly integrated school. Like the white Appalachian children in Miss Justus's earlier books, Lennie Lane is isolated from the dominant culture through no fault of his own. Instead of a money-poor Appalachian white who is rich in folk knowledge and art, this time the child is a single seven-year-old African American boy facing, not only the adjustment of starting a new school in a new town, but also being the only black child in his class.

Miss Justus makes it easy to connect with Lennie. His father is a construction worker whose crew is forced to move to a new town every time the previous job is finished. The family is strong and supportive of his efforts to provide better homes and opportunities for them. Lennie likes school, but is afraid of his new situation, as when his father explains to him what an integrated school is:

> "What does integrated mean?" Lennie asked.
>
> "That means it is a school where Negro children and white children study and play together," the father explained.

> "Yes," said the teacher. "There are other Negro children in the school, but you are the only one in this room."
>
> Lennie felt too shy to say what he was thinking. He was wishing that at least half the children in that room had brown faces instead of white.
>
> "You'll feel more at home with us later," Miss Baker said, smiling down at him as if she understood. (Justus, 1963, pp. 12-13)

Here are Southern white folks acting with compassion instead of confrontation. It shows a faith in the capacity of people to seek out common humanity when confronted with people who at first seem different, rather than focusing on the differences. May Justus invites the children reading the book (and the adults who might be reading it to the children) to practice the Golden Rule. How do you think it would feel, she asks, to be Lennie?

But it's the children who are the real heroes of this book. Lennie's classmate Terry invites Lennie to look at the clay horse he has made and Lennie finally responds to this spontaneous act of friendship by molding a clay rider for the horse. This friendship opens the door to other friendships in the school and as more and more of Lennie's talents and interests surface, it becomes clear that he has more in common with the white students than he has differences. Finally, he thinks:

> It did not seem to matter any more that he was the only Negro boy in Miss Baker's room. Indeed, the color of his skin seemed of no more importance now than the color of his clothes. Lennie was happy. His parents were happy. (Justus, 1963, p. 33)

The happiness is short-lived, though. The class is due to have a Parents Day Program, at which the students will perform. Lennie is terrified at the prospect of his parents coming to the school, still feeling different and also ashamed that he won't have anything to perform like the other children. His father cheers him up by taking down his banjo and singing the folk song, "I Wish I was an Apple . . . " The next day Lennie teaches the song to Terry, and the other students ask the teacher if they can sing it for the Parents Day Program. They do, and their performance steals the show:

> Almost before the song was done the people started cheering. Lennie was so excited he nearly forgot to bow, but then he remembered his manners. A good thing he did, because Terry had nearly forgotten, too! When Lennie bowed, Terry bowed. Then they both bowed together. (Justus, 1963, p. 52)

Later, moved by stories of black families barred from white neighborhoods, and ". . . property values going down when a Negro family moved into a [white] community . . .," Miss Justus decided to address the question of integrated housing. In 1966, she came out with *A New Home for Billy,* ". . . about a Negro family who doesn't have a decent house to live in (Wigginton, n.d., p. 37). Like Lennie's family, Billy's is in search of a wholesome family atmosphere, in this case a safer neighborhood. And like Lennie, Billy has a color-blind friendship with a white boy, Fred. A difference in this book, though, is that the child openly confronts racism. Billy and his father go out searching for a house to rent. When they come upon a man nailing up a sign reading "For Rent or Sale," Billy shouts:

> "Look, Daddy, look!" What a nice little house! I wish that we could live there."
>
> His father stopped the truck. "Well, we can ask about it."
>
> "We are looking for a house to rent," he called above the hammering sound.
>
> "This is a bargain," the man said, not looking over his shoulder till he had given a final tap to the nail he was driving. When he did look around he nearly fell of the ladder.
>
> "I—I—I don't rent or sell property to colored people," he said. "This is an all-white neighborhood." He stared at the ground as if he were ashamed to look straight at Billy's father.
>
> Billy wondered what his father would say. But he did not say anything. He just gave the man a long, long look.
>
> "Come on, son," he said softly. "I guess we stopped at the wrong sign."
>
> Billy was puzzled. As they drove away he turned to his father.
>
> "What did that man mean, Daddy? Why didn't he like us?"
>
> "It's hard to explain, son," his father replied. "There no good reason to it—but some folks don't like other folks because of the color of their skins."

> Billy thought this over, but he could not understand it.
>
> "Fred is white—and I am brown," he said, "but I like him, and he likes me."
>
> His father nodded and smiled. "Yes," he said, "you and Fred are very sensible boys. And you are not alone. Lots of other folks agree with you. (Justus, 1966, p. 19)

The father's wise perspective beckons the reader. "You are not alone" if you follow your best natural human instincts and love your neighbors without regard to the color of their skin. "Lots of other folks agree with you."

Billy and his father finally find a house that is the perfect size, and in a pleasant neighborhood, but which needs a good deal of work. The father works out a deal with the owner; he will make repairs to the house in exchange for a reduction in rent. When he is injured at work and unable to complete the repairs, the white community finally behaves the way decent white folks should and rallies to the aid of Billy's family.

> News must have got around the neighborhood of what was going on at the Allen's. People kept coming in all morning—men, women, children, even a few friendly dogs.
>
> The men came dressed for work. Most of them brought paint brushes with them. The women brought baskets full of food.
>
> The men went to work all around the house. The women went into the kitchen. The children and dogs rolled and romped in the back yard.
>
> At noon lunch was spread on the grassy ground in the shade of the apple tree. Men, women, children, and dogs all gathered around. Everyone seemed to be hungry and happy. (Justus, 1966, p. 54)

Bigotry and racism can be overcome through working together. To show us the way, Miss Justus does not call for radical social transformation or staunch unquestioning conservatism, those two imposters that Paulo Freire called "sectarian," and that isolate the educator from the masses of people. She is calling on her fellow whites to recognize the fact that black people and white people share a common set of values, that they already agree on the things that are important, a strong family, loving parents, and a strong community that pulls together in difficult times.

When May Justus was teaching children to respect their Appalachian traditions and live up to their responsibilities to their communities, she did it by simply demonstrating how folks ought to behave. Here is a child; here is the child in a conflict between her own wants and the good of the community; here is the child making the right decision, putting the community above her own wants. When she looked around and saw her fellow white Southerners acting out of racial hatred, she decided to begin teaching white children and black children how to live in peace together. She used her familiar formula. Here is a black child and a white child. Here is the black child in a newly integrated school or neighborhood. Here is the white child making the right decision, befriending the black child. As the *New Bedford, Massachusetts Standard-Times* said shortly after their publication, the books ". . . confirm a belief small fry usually take for granted until adults get at them: Prejudice is for the birds" (*New Boy in School*, n.d.).

May Justus died in 1989. Three years later, Eliot Wigginton published *Refuse to Stand Silently By*, a collection of interviews with grassroots activists who had passed through Highlander. The list includes people enshrined in official histories, such as Rosa Parks, Julian Bond, Andrew Young, and Pete Seeger. It includes others who devoted their lives to creating a just and equitable society working quietly, behind the scenes. Much of the May Justus interview used in this paper is included in this collection. Wigginton sums up what May Justus meant to the hundreds of people she knew and the untold number that she influenced by the example of her life:

> From her Grundy County home, she watched most of the people in this book come and go. As a good teacher and writer, she gleaned from them—drawing upon the strength of their ideas while gradually discarding concepts that time and experience proved to be weak. A white Southern woman lacking early relationships with blacks, she solidly embraced integration in her final novels. And a Grundy County resident, she embodied Highlander's spirit long after the institution moved elsewhere.
>
> In a sense, then, May Justus was the type of person that Myles Horton and Ralph Tefferteller, E.D. Nixon and Septima Clark, Andrew Young and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., all sought after: one whose mind could conquer prejudice, whose heart could embrace humanness, and whose actions could demonstrate a greater fairness. (Wiggington, 1991, p. 334)

If May Justus were teaching in the public school system today, what would she tell those children with the cartoon characters sewn onto their backpacks and tee-shirts?

That these items were made by children like them who are forced to work in slave-like conditions so that greedy corporate CEOs can make huge profits? Would she tell them that *when* you talk or read in school is not nearly so important as *what* you say or read? Or that walking in a straight line is not nearly so important as walking in your neighbor's shoes? No, she would probably write a book . . . a book about a little girl at a public school just like this one.

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