



Starting Strong

A Different Look
at Children, Schools,
and Standards

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foreword by Joseph Featherstone

Meditation: On Description

Describing I pause, and pausing, attend. Describing requires that I stand back and consider. Describing requires that I not rush to judgment or conclude before I have looked. Describing makes room for something to be fully present. Describing is slow, particular work. I have to set aside familiar categories for classifying or generalizing. I have to stay with the subject of my attention. I have to give it time to speak, to show itself.

I have to trust that what I am attending to makes sense; that it isn't a merely accidental or chance event. To discover the subject's coherence and how it persists in the world, I have deliberately to shift my own perspective in relation to it. I have to see and hear how it may change according to context or time. Description can't be done on a strict timetable: so much time and then the task is complete. The renowned geneticist Barbara McClintock says about observing corn plants:

No two plants are exactly alike. They're all different, and as a consequence you have to know that difference. . . . I start with the seedling, and I don't want to leave it. I don't feel I really know the story if I don't watch the plant all the way along. So I know every plant in the field. I know them intimately, and I find it a great pleasure to know them. (in Keller, 1983, p. 198)

To describe teaches me that the subject of my attention always exceeds what I can see. I learn from describing a painting or a rock or a child or a river that the world is always larger than my conceptualization of it. I learn that when I see a lot, I am still seeing only a little and partially. I learn that when others join in, the description is always fuller than what I saw alone.

Describing I am *in relation to*. What I am in relation to cannot be easily or lightly dismissed. It stays. It claims me. Describing commits the described to memory. Describing is a learning by heart. When I am learning a child's artwork by heart, I pin pieces up so that my eye catches them repeatedly.

Once when I had several small paintings hanging up that way, an older boy in the school, also a painter, stopped to look at them with me. After a time, both of us looking at them, mostly in silence, he pointed out the subtle color relationships and how the layering of paint created images. He asked me who made them. I told him his sister, then only 5 or 6. He took another long, considered look, then asked, "Does she crank out many like that?"

To describe requires and instills respect. Sometimes when I am describing a drawing or a handwritten story, I trace it. Tracing it, I experience the gesture of the line and how the letters are drawn. I map in my own hand and arm some part of the motion of the child's hand and arm. I do that when I am observing a child at work making something—a block building, a clay sculpture, a quilt. As I watch I map the child's posture onto my own body. Later, as I transcribe what I have seen, I re-enact the gestures, seeking for words sufficiently apt to translate them, words that do not flatten meaning and intensity, but call them forth.

Describing describing, I am describing a creative act familiar to every artist, familiar to every child, familiar to anyone who immerses in a something which recurrently is the sole subject of attention. Describing describing, I am describing a discovering anew that refreshes and animates. I understand this enlivening of meaning to be what Ernest Schachtel (1959) means when he writes in *Metamorphosis*:

In such perception the glance dwells on the frontiers of human experience . . . revealing hitherto unknown vistas. It has been compared with the child's glance when it is said that the artist and the wise man resemble a child. The resemblance consists in the freshness, spontaneity, interest, and openness with which the object is approached and reacted to. (p. 240)

To describe is to value.