

---

# The Importance of Fantasy, Fairness, and Friendship in Children's Play

## An Interview with Vivian Gussin Paley

Vivian Gussin Paley is a teacher, writer, lecturer, and advocate for the importance of play for young children. Author of a dozen books about children learning through play, she has received numerous honors and awards including an Erickson Institute Award for Service to Children, a MacArthur Foundation Fellows award, and a John Dewey Society's Outstanding Achievement Award. Paley taught early-childhood classes for thirty-seven years—chiefly at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools—and in her books she describes and reflects on her own learning experiences shared with thousands of students. Her writings focus primarily on three major areas of concern she sees in children: fantasy, friendship, and fairness. Paley learned early the value of observing and listening to children, recording and studying what they said and did in her classroom, and using what she discovered to improve her teaching and children's lives. In all of this, Paley has been a gatherer and teller of stories, and she remains so in this interview and in her continuing work as a sought-after speaker and consultant. Her latest book, forthcoming in 2010, is *The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play*.

**A** *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PLAY*: In *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*, you wrote, "There was a time when play was king and early childhood was its domain." Why is that no longer true? What has happened?

**Vivian Gussin Paley**: Once kindergartners could crawl under tables and between chairs meowing and woofing in secret communication, and they weren't considered too babyish and told to stop. "Pretend you're a lost kitty and then you meet a puppy" could safely follow, and there would be time to flesh out character and plot. Those days are fast disappearing.

I walked into a kindergarten classroom this past winter and the meow-meow, woof-woof part of the drama had just begun under the math table. The teacher smiled apologetically, jumped up, and closed the door to her room. "Now the children can play a little," she said. "We've had to skip recess for three weeks because no one will clear away the ice and broken bottles in

the playground. This sort of play and all superhero play are banned anyway, so I protect the children's rights by closing the door."

"Is there no way to explain the puppy play to your principal?" I asked.

"Actually," she said, "I did present very convincing evidence to her. There was a crisis recently when Erik accidentally pushed Jenny against the wall while coming back from watching a film, which is the school's substitute for recess. The children were all pent up, and a certain amount of pushing was inevitable after that much sitting. Jenny's parents came to school, and everyone was furious with Erik. The principal totally humiliated him. A few days later, Jenny decided to be a puppy, and she told Erik he was the big brother puppy who was taking her for a walk. Suddenly they were friends, and all the past hurts were gone in a moment of intimate puppy play. This is what I tried to explain—play on its simplest terms. The principal smiled but said, 'Sorry, there's no time for that.'"

Kindergarten teachers know the cost of cutting down free playtime, but few people who set policy are listening. Kindergarten children have been arbitrarily reclassified as pseudo-first graders, and, in the preschools, there is pressure to prepare children for kindergarten standards. No matter how we look at it, young children are being deprived of at least two years of spontaneous, imaginative play.

**AJP:** In *A Child's Work*, you tell how, during your senior year in college, a nursery-school teacher introduced you to the notion that "play is the work of children." What is it about children's play that makes it work in your view? And is adults' inability to see that connection part of why play is no longer king?

**Paley:** My original title for *A Child's Work* was "The Endangered Occupation." Play is the serious and necessary occupation of children; it's not just a pleasant hobby or a frivolous means of spending nonworking hours. Freud considered our life-force as made up of work and love, in equal measure. For a child, the formula would better be stated as "play and love equals life." In the not too distant past—in my own childhood, certainly—there was no other serious occupation—no work—for the young but play.

Today's picture is radically different. Adults impose phonics, math, reading, writing, and other tasks into a primary position in the young child's life and set play aside as relatively unimportant. In many early-childhood classrooms, the brief periods of free play that are permitted tend only to create awkward and detached episodes. This lack of consistent practice

of play skills leads to judgmental errors on the part of the adults: “These children do not know how to play,” they say, or even, “Play is a waste of time in kindergarten.”

Play is, in fact, a complex occupation, requiring practice in dialogue, exposition, detailed imagery, social engineering, literary allusion, and abstract thinking. Being both work and love for young children, play is absolutely essential for their health and welfare.

**AJP:** So, then, does referring to play as children’s work cause adults to take play more seriously?

**Paley:** Yes, I believe so. When we see play as representing work and friendship—or love, if you will—we are likely to reward the activity with more time and attention in the early-childhood curriculum. For example, “What are you working on?” one might ask children in the block area. “We’re trying to figure out how to keep Jason from pushing over the spaceship,” could be the underlying message in the exclamation, “Jason’s spoiling everything! Take him away!” The potential of this “workplace altercation” for emotional, intellectual, social, and logistical impact on learning is enormous. It is not frivolous and easily dismissed. It is the important work of the classroom community.

**AJP:** Is there any downside to describing children’s play as work?

**Paley:** There is no downside to a serious consideration of play as the central motivating and learning tool of young children. When teachers say to young children, “Finish your work and then you can play,” they diminish respect for the signature characteristic of their students. When teachers pretend that a phonics game is a fair substitute for free, imaginative play, it further dims the differences between “original research” and “applied technology.” In play, children begin with their own set of premises and learn to follow through, step-by-step, scene by scene in the complex process of creating a logical and literary dramatic project of their own. In each episode, one can intuit a child’s individual approach to the principles underlying fairness, friendship, fear, storytelling, and personal history. In each episode one can study the development of a community of learners in a hands-on, face-to-face, authentic manner.

**AJP:** You write most about fantasy play. Why is fantasy play important? What does it do for children, or what do they accomplish through it?

**Paley:** It has been suggested more than once that I concentrate too much on fantasy play. Going back to *Wally’s Stories*, my editors expressed concern

that my readers would think that nothing else happened in my kindergarten but the children's make-believe. Pretend this and pretend that? Is that the entire curriculum?

I had assumed, of course, that readers would take for granted that everything else is, indeed, taking place in my classroom: books are read several times a day to individuals and the group, and math, science, music, art, and dance are interspersed throughout the day, to our enjoyment and benefit. But the glue that binds everything together is the children's imaginative play; the best conversations arise out of the children's own play and storytelling; we learn to know what we are *thinking* about by the ways in which we play; we learn to support one another's private and public plans (including the teacher's) through our developing skills in play.

Sometimes I'm asked, "Aren't there other kinds of play? What about just plain running around?" Certainly an important component of free play is its physical expression. These are skills we have in common with all mammals; children crawl, run, climb, jump, push and pull, pounce and pummel, and hug and squeeze. Only human children, however, add narration. The most characteristically human skill of all is imaginative role playing in the context of storytelling and the dramatization of ideas and imagery.

**AJP:** When in your career did you first recognize that fantasy play is important, and how did you come to that conclusion?

**Paley:** Early in my career as teacher and writer, I began to realize that any discussion with young children based on the substance of their fantasy play went very well, whereas discussion evolving from my own agenda frequently got stalled in rote responses and restlessness. Group or individual conversations that referred to events, pretend characters, story lines, and social issues encountered during play merged into lively considerations of such urgent matters as friendship, fairness, and fear, in which every child voiced an opinion and often expressed deeply felt emotion.

The fairy princess in the doll corner must find out if the baby unicorn she is playing with needs feathers in order to fly. So, she says, "When I get my power back, I'll glue you on some feathers!" And, in the blocks, Superman claims he is the one who identifies all bad guys, so his companion asks, "Why is he always the one who says who the enemy is?" It is a matter of some urgency and perhaps even some delicacy to determine the acceptable

characteristics of unicorns, princess fairies, and superheroes, and these decisions are likely to change every time a scene is repeated, as new characters enter the story.

A teacher's (or writer's) impressions of the importance of fantasy play can be influenced by a single brief scene, such as the following, final episode in *White Teacher*, my first book. On a class walk to a nearby pond, Sylvia, the black child whose behavior most concerns the adult world, is suddenly at my side crying. "Nobody likes me any more," she sobs. "Those girls is saying four is too many." She buries her head in my lap.

"Why is Sylvia crying?" asks Philip.

"She feels sad," I tell him.

Philip studies Sylvia's face through his thick blond lashes. She is someone he has rarely played with, and he seems curious about her tear-stained face.

"Hey, Sylvia, you wanna be Batgirl?"

Sylvia sits up and smiles. "Sure. I'll be Batgirl!"

As the comforting sounds of the Batmobile zoom around the pond, we all know the world is a happier place. And I know that I must listen more closely to the fantasy play surrounding me in kindergarten.

**AJP:** What are the most important ways in which fantasy play facilitates learning?

**Paley:** Fantasy play allows the child to step back and watch the ways in which thoughts play themselves out in action and then continue on into new thinking and actions. Dramatization is an essential piece of the process. If a little girl is asked, for example, "How do you like your new baby brother?" it is hard for her to imagine what the question means and what answer she ought to give in response.

However, if she transposes the question into "How does Goldilocks feel about Baby Bear?" she can imagine an entire scenario and even involve her playmates in a consideration of various aspects of the issues concerning big sisters and little siblings. Fantasy play provides easy entree into abstract thinking and sets up patterns of "what if" and "in other words" that become a model for discussions on all subjects.

This means, then, that we must ask ourselves: Do our children play enough to accomplish these lofty goals? Children in earlier generations could depend on five or more years of continued practice in imaginative

play, unhampered by school or technology. Today's young child often is short changed in hours available for free play and leisurely conversation. Is there time to invent pretend worlds and to build real communities?

**AJP:** You wrote in *A Child's Work* that fantasy play helps children achieve an open mind. How does it do that?

**Paley:** In fantasy play, children learn to envision new roles for themselves and for other people. They learn to change and redirect the outcome of an imaginary plot and to include the ideas of others in their plans. When the common story becomes more important than one's habitual stance, the individual mind expands in the search for more common ground. Experience teaches us that we and our narratives become more interesting when we add maximum variety in people and ideas. It is a tall order, but the more we play out the problem involved, the more likely we are to find the right balance between the individual and the group.

I have found that my own core curriculum, consisting of the dictated story acted out on a pretend stage, gives us the opportunity to step aside and see the larger picture. Just as play itself opens the landscape, the additional structure of storytelling and story acting enables children to reenvision some of the spontaneous scenes remembered from play and to reshape them in further detail or design, thereby creating an open-ended dialogue with oneself and the community.

**AJP:** Do you have a favorite example of fantasy play helping a child to achieve an open mind or helping a group of children to do so?

**Paley:** I'll give you an example, from *Mollie Is Three*, of two three-year-olds learning to view their classroom roles in a more objective, open-minded way, thanks to the imaginative intervention of a four-year-old.

Frederick, new to the ways of school, seems locked into the notion that when he sees something he wants, he can take it even if another child has it first. The toy he wants is a cash register, and Mollie is definitely playing with it. When Frederick pulls it away, the usual scenario takes place: Molly cries, the teacher intervenes, and Frederick retreats, sullen and resentful.

However, when the aggressive act is repeated a few moments later, Libby steps in. "Don't let him come to your birthday, Mollie. He's just a robber."

Molly stops crying, and Frederick pauses to consider. "Yeah, I *am* a robber," he says.

“Well, too bad for you,” Libby continues, “because robbers can’t come into the doll corner!”

The children have begun a robber-in-the-doll-corner plot, and there are well-established rules to cover its exigencies. “She’s right, Frederick,” the teacher says. “If you want to play in the doll corner, you’ll have to be something else, not a robber.”

“He can be the father,” Samantha says. “Put on this vest, Father. And Mollie is the baby. Get in the crib, sweet child.”

Suddenly, Mollie and Frederick are part of a drama that has its own conventions and evolving set of rules. There is nothing in my curriculum that can match the doll corner in its potential for examining behavior and ideas in an open-ended process. The moment Frederick, the bad boy, becomes Frederick, the robber, the problem of the purloined cash register can be addressed according to the rules of the stage, where characters can easily change their personas on demand to suit the ongoing story.

**AJP:** What happens to children when they are deprived of fantasy play in classrooms?

**Paley:** The absence of imaginative play in a classroom greatly limits a child’s options. For some children, the opportunity to spend part of the school day as a kitty, for example, can alleviate such problems as loneliness, transition from home, awkwardness with others, pathways to a friend, and the necessity of belonging to a group.

In children’s play, meow-meow is not babyish; nor is it a waste of time, as I have heard it described. On the contrary, meow-meow and woof-woof can create deeper connections to a classroom community than a teacher-initiated phonics lesson can possibly achieve. And without the sense of intimacy afforded by meow-meow, some children cannot listen well to other voices or perform other tasks—such as a phonics lesson.

The would-be kitten, puppy, wolf, or baby bunny—or superhero or monster—who cannot reach out in the roles of their choice and be guided by the dramatic moment at hand, may become silent, or restless, or aggressive and sad. For healthy children, fantasy play is a necessity.

**AJP:** You continue to write, to travel, to lecture, and to talk with teachers about why fantasy play is important, as well as about other aspects of play and of teaching. What else needs to happen to ensure that young students are not deprived of fantasy play and other forms of play? What should society

be doing? What should policy makers be doing? What about schools of education?

**Paley:** For an appreciation of play to flourish and remake our early-childhood classrooms, we must become anecdotists and storytellers ourselves. Our sensibilities will not be awakened to play by means of theories and methodologies. Play cannot be listed on charts; it comes in the form of little episodes and scenes, and these are best described in stories about boys and girls at play, with dialogue and stage business accurately recorded.

Listening to children play, we become reporters and anecdotists, passing along our accounts and searching for meaning in what we see and hear. The search itself, which includes the children in our pool of curious researchers, becomes the academic tool of the children's intuitive activity. Play gives us the opportunity to seek its own meaning in a way that no other subject can, because in play the subjects are always seeking to know what they are inventing (though of course they are unaware of their design). Fantasy play is a curriculum filled with the potential for rich language and social experiences bound together by the structure of story.

Where do educators begin our practice of becoming anecdotists and storytellers? The opportunities are many: in our schools of education, in our faculty rooms, at our parent-teacher conferences, and above all, in the classroom with our children and fellow teachers.

Play is entirely local; each classroom resembles a novel in which increasingly well-defined characters act out their roles. If we begin to think of the early-childhood classroom as theater, we are on the right track. "What story are you playing in the doll corner?" we ask the children who rush in and put on new disguises each day. "Who is in the spaceship? Where are the enemies you are banging at? Tell me the story and later we'll act it out."

What should policy makers do? Come watch a preschool and kindergarten in which dramatic play, storytelling, and acting are the core curriculum and see for themselves how the search for meaning is established. One visit is not enough, of course, and, for this reason, teachers must be prepared with good stories to add to the experience.

**AJP:** You meet a lot of preservice teachers in your travels. What are their most common concerns about teaching as it relates to play?

**Paley:** Teachers worry about boys' play. The themes our young boys are determined to examine in play—good guys versus bad guys, superheroes and antiheroes, good against evil, safety and danger—present images that teach-



ers resist and, in many instances, outlaw. The boys act out their familiar scenes with a sense of heroics only to discover that they will be punished if they follow their dramatic instincts.

Teachers often express feelings of guilt about this, for they all remember similar play by brothers, cousins, and their own sons at home. However, the school establishment conspires to permanently alter boys' play—zero tolerance is the label—and to drive it underground. My goal when I speak to teachers is to try to put boys' play into a familiar perspective, as “theater,” not random mayhem. If children's play is theater, then we can develop “stage rules” for its various components. Since everything is pretend, the rules governing characters and plots can be easily arrived at, as in, “Robbers can't come into the doll corner if babies are present.” As in all classroom activities, no one can threaten another child; no one can touch another child except in friendship; and no one can exclude another child from a scene being played, whether at the math table or in a spaceship. Boys' play yields itself to rational behavior when the characters are identified and the plot is clarified, mainly because there is a great desire to be able to continue the play. Violent imagery in the monster's cave is not different from rude behavior at the clay table: it can be analyzed and adapted to the needs of a safe and respectful community.

**AJP:** In the latter part of your classroom teaching career, you devoted an entire book, *You Can't Say You Can't Play*, to how some children limit the social experiences of others by saying, “You can't play.” Why did you select that as a topic at that particular time, and what key classroom approaches did you use to help children learn not to say that or to respond to it?

**Paley:** Perhaps all of my books could have been titled “You Can't Say You Can't Play,” and, in a sense, the name would be valid, for I have been searching continually for the meaning of play and the reasons why no child may be excluded from a turn at center stage. However, in writing *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter*, I saw even more clearly that every child, no matter how strange his or her behavior may seem, must be given full inclusion rights. Furthermore, I realized that the children themselves wanted to bring in the “stranger” and achieve a balance between his or her ways and the culture of the larger group.

It was logical for me, at this point, to wonder if a rule, a generic sort of golden rule, would be accepted as a natural part of classroom life. Since I happened to be returning to kindergarten and it was housed in a large

school, this became a good opportunity to try out the injunction, “You can’t say you can’t play,” and test the idea throughout the lower grades.

In *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play*, I wrote, “Equal participation . . . is the cornerstone of most classrooms. . . . This notion usually involves everything *except* free play. Yet, in truth, free acceptance in play, partnership, and teams is what matters most to any child.”

Preschool and kindergarten are exactly the right time in which to put across the notion that every person owns a place in the sun and a role in the ongoing story. When make-believe is the dominant mode of social intercourse, and friendship means having a role in the drama, the picture of fairness is sharp and clear. The children learn that when they play together they are friends; it is easy to visualize three princesses becoming four princesses, and four Ninja turtles becoming five. We can see ourselves becoming friends in terms of a story before we accept the habits of separation imposed upon us by the outside world.

**AJP:** You have written a lot about the importance of children’s storytelling in learning. How does children’s own storytelling help them learn?

**Paley:** When children dictate stories in order to act them out, the subject matter of their stories usually includes the same characters and plots as found in their dramatic play. Storytelling of this sort is one step away from play, suggesting a scene-by-scene review of their thoughts at the time. Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, describes the beginning of fantasy play in the lives of two children in this manner: two little sisters walk along hand in hand and the older one says, “*Pretend* we’re sisters and pretend we’re walking together holding hands.” The two girls have climbed the first rung on the ladder of abstract thinking. Now, let’s take them to the next rung. One of the girls dictates a story, “There was a girl and a big sister. And they went for a walk. And they held hands. And they see a dog. So they play with the dog.” Once they begin to see their ideas in terms of a story, they expand and build in new directions. As the personal narrative develops into a communal effort, the connection making that we call learning becomes more visible and therefore more accessible to group analysis and debate.

**AJP:** Is the fantasy play and storytelling we have been discussing important just for preschool children, or is it also important for older elementary-school children?

**Paley:** Storytelling is the academic precursor at every level of instruction. The imagination begs to be used at every age and stage of life; it frees the mind

of rigid patterns and allows us to visualize new approaches to old questions, moving us on to new possibilities. “What if” and “pretend that” are the motivational devices we require to move beyond self-imposed limitations as well as those levied on us by convention and convenience. In the older grades, as in kindergarten, social problems and issues concerning the individual and society become clarified when viewed in dramatic form on a stage. Students can step back and examine their prejudices in the light of new exposures and experiences.

The fact is, when we are eager to convince an audience—to persuade and explain—stories are a necessity. If we are to make authentic connections to ideas and ideals, we must bring in people’s dreams, fantasies, and personal narratives. Our political leaders know this, and our teachers should learn the skills required in storytelling and theater and practice them along with their students. The power of story trumps the power of authority.

**AJP:** What is the relationship between storytelling and free play in the classroom? We hear more and more about free play disappearing from American classrooms. Can storytelling as a way of learning be effective without free play?

**Paley:** The relationship between storytelling and free play has occupied much of my thinking for many years, and I am still searching for answers. Teachers ask me, if there isn’t time for free play, or if we can’t justify time spent in free play in the classroom, will story dictation and story acting be enough? Can we substitute organized storytelling for spontaneous play? In other words, can the imagination bypass the free association of play and go directly into a dictated story?

Since play itself is the original source of sensitivity, sensibility, and knowledge about the human experience, it is impossible for me to imagine children being able to create the abstract version of images that have not been practiced first in real time. If storytelling is the literature of play, then play is essential to supply new themes, characters, and plots.

Nonetheless, I tell teachers: Even if the children’s play is cut short, yes, by all means, *do* the storytelling and story acting; it will show you the many paths by which to return to play.

**AJP:** Making up your own stories became an important aspect of your teaching. How did you get started doing that?

**Paley:** When I left my own childhood, I was no longer a storyteller. But after years of listening to children at play, the shape and substance of story began

to reignite for me. Just as the children improve their stories with practice, I too became conscious of myself as a practitioner of this art form.

“Pretend we’re going into a deep forest” might be the way I began an activity, even classroom clean up. “Once there was a very sad little princess” could just as easily begin a discussion of social issues or a math problem. How did my storytelling connect to the problems at hand? This is the special province of storytelling, as the children have discovered. Stories connect to other stories; nothing is a non sequitur once the storytelling habit is established. Bridges are waiting to be crossed, and our expectations help carry our ideas into hospitable places. “What happened next?” is irresistible.

**AJP:** You encourage beginning teachers to keep journals and write down what they observe in their classrooms, just as you did for many years. If those teachers ask you why they should do that or how they can best use what they have written, what do you tell them? How did doing that affect you and your teaching?

**Paley:** I have found that the best way to listen to my own thoughts and hear my own questions has been to write them down every day in a journal. The classroom is a busy place, with two dozen or more people clamoring for one’s attention. Conversations are seldom remembered accurately without the habit of writing them down. Furthermore it is difficult to examine our own behaviors or the children’s within the active social discourse if we do not transpose what we say and do onto a readable format. The very act of putting contrary lines of thinking into writing helps explain where the predicament lies and suggests new approaches for the following day.

My daily writing habit began when I brought a tape recorder into my room and, for the first time, created a reliable witness to classroom events. Not having been an intuitive writer, the taped segments of conversation, group discussions, play episodes, and story dictation gave me material to write about, in much the same way that play helps children organize an open-ended dialogue. I found in what I wrote the subject matter for classroom discussions, references, and literary allusions. My journals came alive with new themes and curiosities, thereby enlivening the classroom. I strongly recommend the regular use of a tape recorder as a tool for learning about the classroom—its actual language and emotional urgencies—and the attempts made in it to connect all the voices of its community.

**AJP:** Did you transcribe all of your recordings? If not, how did you choose which parts to transcribe?

**Paley:** The logistics of using a tape recorder developed for me with daily experience. I found that if I limited myself to one sixty-minute cassette each day, I could find the time to transcribe the material and add my own commentary. No one else ever listened to my tapes or helped me transcribe the words. The art of transcribing is in itself an important means of internalizing the sounds and rhythms of speech, the children's and my own. Furthermore, as one transcribes even the briefest dialogue, the entire context of the surrounding action comes to mind.

I never left the tape recorder running or operating without my being present. To have left it running would have been more like eavesdropping than research. When children asked why the tape recorder was there, I told them, truthfully, that I liked to hear our conversations again, in the quiet of my home, so I could make sure I'd fully understood everyone. Then, if I had a question, I could ask it the next day. This always satisfied the children, and they never referred to the tape recorder again. They became quite used to hearing me say, for example, "John, I heard you tell Larry not to 'roam' on your paper and I'm not sure what this means. Can you explain it again please?"

John's answer, by the way, was, "Oh, you know how the cows roam all over in that song? Larry was roaming all over my paper. I told him not to."

"He was coloring on your paper?" I asked him.

"He was *markering* on my paper," he responded.

As you see, the journals became even more important as I used them, for now they contained all the transcribed material plus its aftermath in the classroom. As I myself became more focused, I became more selective in deciding what to transcribe.

**AJP:** You have written a dozen books based on what you saw and heard in your classroom. What propelled you to publish your thoughts and observations instead of keeping journals for your own personal use?

**Paley:** It was Philip W. Jackson, then chairman of the Graduate School of Education and director of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, who urged me to write for publication. I was forty at the time and felt myself at a crossroads: should I continue teaching young children or should I enter the PhD program and seek another sort of occupation? Professor Jackson suggested that I audit his Analysis of Teaching seminar and see how well I liked researching academic problems. The first paper assigned concerned teacher attitudes, and, clearly misunderstanding the goals of a research in-

stitution, I researched *myself*, telling stories that revealed my own feelings in a classroom. Phil kindly pointed out that, though I had failed to produce the required study based on library research, what I *had* done interested him even more. He asked me to turn my teacher story into a journal piece for *School Review*, of which he was editor. I titled my article “Adventures in Color Blindness,” and, five years and much work later, it emerged as *White Teacher*. Needless to say, I remained in the early-childhood classroom. Having discovered that I was a writer, I knew what subject I wanted to study.

**AJP:** Once you decided to publish your thoughts and observations, was it easy or difficult to interest a publisher?

**Paley:** It was not easy to find a publisher for my first book, *White Teacher*, mainly because I looked in the wrong places. At first I sent the manuscript to many commercial publishers and received respectful and kind rejections. Then someone suggested that perhaps my sort of writing would do better with an academic press, and this proved to be good advice. Both Harvard University Press and the University of Chicago Press liked my teacher voice—so they said—and I found a home for all thirteen of my books.

**AJP:** How did your commercial success as a writer affect your classroom journal keeping? Once you began to write for publication, did you keep more or fewer journals?

**Paley:** Do you mean, would I have continued to fill journals with a record of my experiences and thoughts without the incentive of book writing? Probably not to the degree I have over the years, and probably not in so focused a manner. However, since the journals proved to be so important to my teaching and to my enjoyment of teaching, I think I would have kept up some form of journaling for its own rewards.

Writing is the means of having visible conversations with ourselves. This would be valuable in any profession, but the teacher is in the best position to follow through in hour-by-hour, day-by-day interactions. It can be a euphoric experience. One gains the ability to focus on specific issues and to collect anecdotes and commentary to support one’s interpretations, questions, and doubts. Writing about one’s own classroom is an ongoing process that provides continuity, purpose, and context. If this comes close to identifying the meaning of play, it is probably no accident. Writing about play and story can become a teacher’s form of play.

**AJP:** You write with great clarity. Does writing come easily for you? Have you always been a writer?

**Paley:** My advice to classroom teachers who want to write about their experiences and find their own special voices, is to keep writing. It is essential, in writing as in teaching, to learn to self-edit and rewrite sentences until they say what you want them to say. Also important is to find a good editor to respond to your work, line by line. A family member or friend whose language skills are excellent can serve that necessary function. In my case, my husband filled the role. Your editor need not be an educator, but it should be someone who knows and values good writing and can spot an empty phrase and superfluous comment. There are no short cuts: as with play, the more you practice, the better the writer you become. I was not a writer in my youth. Quite the contrary, I was in my forties when I began to write. It was, indeed, hard work, but a pleasant surprise awaited me. I discovered that I enjoyed the rewriting and rethinking and reshaping of a page fully as much as the first efforts. I was teaching myself to think about what I was doing in the classroom—and then to rethink every detail that interested me the most.

**AJP:** Among all your books, do you have a favorite?

**Paley:** Each of my books represents a different phase of my teaching and writing, evoking memories that still have the power to move me in new directions. I find it no easier to identify a favorite book than a favorite period of teaching. I sometimes think, however, that *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* may have influenced my teaching the most, giving me the sharpest picture of the mutual and reciprocal growth possible between the “outsider” individual and the “insider” group when the stated goal is to learn to play in each other’s stories. In *Helicopter* I learned to talk about and think about the moral dimensions of children’s play and classroom conventions. It was inevitable that *You Can’t Say You Can’t Play* came next, for I could see more clearly that the community must reach out to children who are different and even oppositional and find authentic ways to include them in every aspect of classroom life. I saw that the school community benefits as much as the stranger when there are no outsiders or insiders. It is the way our two-year-olds begin, and it makes sense as children grow older.

**AJP:** Which have you enjoyed most, writing or teaching?

**Paley:** Whenever I’ve been asked, “Do you consider yourself primarily a teacher or a writer?” I have always answered, “First, a teacher.” As I developed in both areas, however, they grew closer together in purpose and sometimes even in style. It felt almost as if I had created a classroom in order to write

about it, but also as if I wrote scenes in my journal in order to reenact them the next day in the classroom.

In *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, I asked what will I call myself when I give up the name of *teacher*? That book coincided with my last year in the classroom. It has been ten years now, and I have never relinquished the title. My travels take me into classrooms to demonstrate storytelling and acting and to collect children's invented narratives, those dictated to teachers and those spontaneously played out in the classroom. So I am still teaching and writing, most often now about children in other teachers' classrooms. Remarkably, the power of children's play and storytelling continues to offer me substance and inspiration, and I continue to write books. The habit of play and the habit of book writing have much in common.

**AJP:** How did you come to choose teaching as a career, where did you study, and what led you to the Laboratory Schools at the University of Chicago?

**Paley:** I was not one of those who always planned to become a teacher. In truth, I chose this career because I wanted a job, and teaching jobs were among those most easily available in New Orleans where I lived immediately after college. It took me many years to realize that I had picked the right path for myself. In fact, it was when I began to write about myself as a teacher, struggling to understand my own intentions and behaviors, that I began to feel the wisdom of my choice.

After New Orleans, I continued my career in Great Neck, New York, and then, in 1971, I returned to Chicago, my hometown, to complete my final years of teaching at the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools. I had come full circle, for I had been a student at the university in the 1940s, and, between Socrates and Dewey, I had begun to wonder about the aims of education. I was very young and inexperienced, and it would be many years before I could connect myself to some of the issues raised by the great thinkers. Needless to say, I am still trying.

**AJP:** Are there any particular teachers or writers who have had an especially important impact on your career, your approach to teaching and learning, or your beliefs about the importance of play?

**Paley:** My belief in the importance of play—and especially of fantasy play—grew out of my increasingly careful observations of children playing, in my own classrooms, year after year. As I listened to what children said and watched them in their spontaneous interactions, I was drawn ever more deeply into the narrative beginnings of childhood. Sylvia Ashton-Warner was closest to



my thinking in her admiration of the mythology of childhood and its roots in the mythology of all early peoples. She understood, better than anyone else, the passion in children's fantasy play and its profound connection to the process of becoming educated and becoming human.

**AJP:** What is the most important thing that you have learned from your students?

**Paley:** Children have focused my attention on the three major areas of their passionate concern: fantasy, friendship, and fairness. As I have watched and recorded their spontaneous activities and listened to their words and dramatized scenes, I have come to understand that children enter school seeking the warmth and the admiration of an intimate community. Nothing is of greater importance or urgency to them. We may consider ourselves good teachers only to the extent that we keep examining our environments to see if they provide this inclusive home for every child.

**AJP:** How did you play as a child, and what are your favorite ways to play today?

**Paley:** I think I played no differently as a young child than children do today when they are given ample time without TV, video, or standards. My early childhood was spent at home playing on porches, under tables, and on the courtyard of my apartment building. It has been a goal of mine as a teacher to provide the level of free play my playmates and I had as we listened in the alley behind our building for the voices of vendors on their horse-drawn wagons calling out: "Veg-ta-bles! Veg-veg-veg-ta-bles!" and "Ice today!" We pretended they were pirates about to attack our castles. We spent our days in make-believe, and we were expected to spend our time this way. School began for most of us in first grade, and the only preparation for school we knew about was receiving a much-prized pencil box. We were taught our ABCs in first grade, but until then, we played.

**AJP:** Are you working on another book, or do you have another one coming out soon, and if so, can you give our readers a preview?

**Paley:** I have just finished my thirteenth book, to be published February 2010 by the University of Chicago Press. It is called *The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play*. I begin with a description of "pure" play, an uninterrupted day at the shore by a four-year-old boy, and then I follow him and his classmates during the kindergarten year. There are various narrative detours, including letters to and from a teacher pen pal in Taiwan who joins me in a search for the meaning of play.

*AJP*: Is there any last observation about play or teaching you would like to leave with our readers?

**Paley**: There is a well-known cliché that tells us to “use it or lose it.” This warning goes too far, perhaps, if applied to the limitations placed upon the free, imaginative play of young children, because such a distinguishing characteristic as play in molding the human personality can’t be so easily shut down.

We must take care, however, that the current academic expectations arbitrarily imposed on our children do not produce less-creative and less-happy students in our culture. It is not too late to reexamine our curriculum in the early-childhood classroom and reset the clock to an earlier time, “when play was king and early childhood was its domain.”

Let me end with what for me may be the most important aspect of play we learn from the children: it is in play where we learn best to be kind to others. In play we learn to recognize another person’s pain, for we can identify with all the feelings and issues presented by our make-believe characters. “Pretend there is a lonely puppy, and then a friendly kitten comes along” begins a scenario that is adaptable grade by grade as we attempt to create a just society.