



Lessons in Living

A Teacher's Journey

by Susan

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Contents

Summer Days on Cedar Street	1
The World According to Mrs. Patterson	3
Finding My Voice at Oregon	5
Room 214	7
Building Our Family	9
The Grandchildren Years	11
When David Walked In	13
The Year Everything Changed	15
Teacher of the Year	17
What I Know Now	19
Glossary	19

Summer Days on Cedar Street



Our house on Cedar Street, Portland

I grew up in a modest two-story house on Cedar Street in southeast Portland, where the summers seemed to stretch on forever. My parents bought the house in 1965, two years before I was born, and it was the only home I knew until I left for college. The backyard was enormous by city standards — a sprawling green space bordered by old-growth fir trees that my father refused to trim, no matter how many needles covered the lawn.

The neighborhood was full of children my age, and we spent our summers in a kind of wild freedom that I think has largely disappeared. We would leave the house after breakfast and not return until the streetlights came on, riding our bikes to Laurelhurst Park, building forts in the empty lot at the end of the

block, or wading in Johnson Creek when the weather was warm enough. My mother would pack me a brown bag lunch — always a peanut butter sandwich, an apple, and two cookies — and send me off with nothing more than a reminder to be careful.

Those Cedar Street summers gave me something I did not fully appreciate until I was much older: a sense of rootedness, of belonging to a place and a community. The families on our block looked out for one another. When Mrs. Henderson broke her hip, my mother organized a meal schedule. When the Johnsons' roof leaked, the men on the street gathered one Saturday to fix it. It was a quiet, unglamorous form of kindness that shaped my understanding of what it means to be a good neighbor.

The World According to Mrs. Patterson



The hallways of our high school

I was a quiet student for most of my school years — capable but unremarkable, the kind of girl who did her homework diligently and rarely raised her hand. That changed in my junior year of high school when I walked into Mrs. Patterson's English class and found, for the first time, a teacher who saw something in me that I had not yet seen in myself.

Louise Patterson was a tall, formidable woman with silver-streaked hair and reading glasses she wore on a chain around her neck. She had a way of asking questions that made you feel as though your answer genuinely mattered, as though the entire class was waiting to hear what you thought about Atticus Finch or the symbolism in "The Great Gatsby." She assigned an essay on

Thoreau's "Walden" that semester, and when she returned mine with an A and a note that read "You have a voice — use it," something shifted in me.

It was Mrs. Patterson who first suggested I might become a teacher. "You have the patience for it," she told me after class one afternoon, "and more importantly, you have the curiosity." I remember laughing and telling her I had no idea what I wanted to do. But the seed was planted, and it grew quietly through my remaining years of high school, watered by every book she recommended and every conversation we shared about the power of literature to change lives.

Finding My Voice at Oregon



University of Oregon campus

The University of Oregon was only two hours south of Portland, but it felt like a different world. Eugene was smaller, greener, and infused with a liberal idealism that was intoxicating for an eighteen-year-old who had never lived away from home. I arrived in the fall of 1985 with two suitcases, a box of books, and a determination to study English literature that puzzled my practical-minded father.

College was where I learned to think for myself. My professors challenged me to question everything I had taken for granted — about literature, about society, about the kind of life I wanted to build. I discovered Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, writers who showed me that stories could be both deeply

personal and profoundly political. I joined the campus literary magazine, where I published my first essays, and I volunteered as a tutor at a local middle school, working with kids who reminded me of myself at that age — capable but unsure, waiting for someone to tell them their voice mattered.

By the time I graduated in 1989, I knew with absolute certainty that I wanted to teach. Not because it was practical or prestigious, but because Mrs. Patterson had shown me what a single teacher could do for a single student, and I wanted to pass that gift along.

Room 214



My classroom, Room 214

I started teaching at Lincoln High School in September of 1992, and for the first three years I was terrified. Not of the students — I loved them almost immediately — but of the weight of the responsibility. These were young minds in my care, and I was acutely aware that what I said and did in that classroom could shape the adults they would become, for better or worse.

Room 214 became my second home. I arranged the desks in a semicircle because I wanted my students to see each other's faces when they spoke, and I filled the bookshelves along the walls with everything from Shakespeare to graphic novels, believing that any book that got a teenager reading was a good book. I kept a jar of peppermints on my desk and a quote written on the

chalkboard that I changed every Monday. The first one, which I chose in a moment of idealism that I have never regretted, was from Walt Whitman: "I am large, I contain multitudes."

Teaching taught me as much as it taught my students. It taught me patience — the kind that comes from explaining the same concept for the fifth time to a student who is trying their best. It taught me humility — the kind that comes from realizing that a sixteen-year-old can see things in a poem that you missed entirely. And it taught me hope — the kind that comes from watching a struggling student finally understand something, watching their eyes light up with the realization that they are capable of more than they believed.

Building Our Family



Backyard barbecue at our Portland home

James was born in March of 1995, and Rachel followed three years later in September of 1998. Becoming a mother changed everything and nothing. I was still the same person — still a teacher, still a reader, still Susan — but I now carried with me an awareness of vulnerability that I had never known before. These small, perfect beings depended on me completely, and the love I felt for them was so fierce it sometimes frightened me.

David and I settled into the rhythm of young parenthood with a mixture of exhaustion and joy. We bought a house in the Woodstock neighborhood — a 1940s Craftsman with a big front porch and a backyard that reminded me of Cedar Street. Summer barbecues became our tradition, with David manning

the grill while I set up lawn games and the kids ran barefoot through the sprinkler. Our friends and neighbors would gather, bringing side dishes and staying until the fireflies came out, and those evenings felt like the closest thing to perfection I had ever known.

Balancing teaching and motherhood was the hardest thing I have ever done. There were mornings when I arrived at school running on three hours of sleep because Rachel had been teething, and afternoons when I sat in my car in the school parking lot and cried from sheer exhaustion. But I never considered giving up either role. Teaching kept me connected to the wider world beyond diapers and bedtime stories, and motherhood gave my teaching a depth of empathy that it had lacked before.

The Grandchildren Years

Nothing in my life prepared me for the experience of becoming a grandmother. When James placed Emma in my arms for the first time in February of 2021, I felt a love so immediate and total that it took my breath away. It was different from the love I felt for my own children — less anxious, more purely joyful, untainted by the constant worry that I was doing something wrong.

Emma was followed by Sophie in 2022, Rachel's daughter with Daniel, and then Liam in 2023, James and Claire's second. Our house, which had felt too quiet since the kids moved out, was suddenly full of noise and chaos and small shoes by the front door. David, who had always been the more reserved parent, transformed into the most doting grandfather imaginable — building elaborate blanket forts, reading the same picture book fourteen times in a row, carrying a pocket full of the organic gummy bears that Emma demanded.

Being a grandmother has given me a new perspective on my own life. When I watch Emma discover the world — her wonder at a caterpillar, her delight in a puddle, her fierce insistence on doing everything herself — I see echoes of the curiosity that Mrs. Patterson first recognized in me, and I feel the thread of connection that runs through generations, quiet and unbreakable.

When David Walked In



Cannon Beach, where David proposed

I met David Mitchell at a friend's housewarming party in the fall of 1989, three months after I had started my master's program at Portland State. He was standing by the bookshelf in the living room, examining the host's collection with the kind of focused attention that most people reserve for museum exhibits. He was tall and quiet, with kind eyes and a laugh that came easily once you got past his initial reserve.

We started dating that winter, and by spring I knew he was the person I wanted to build a life with. David was an engineer — methodical and precise where I was intuitive and scattered — and we complemented each other in ways that still surprise me after more than thirty years. He proposed at

Cannon Beach on a misty August morning in 1990, with Haystack Rock looming behind us and the sound of the ocean swallowing his nervous words. I said yes before he finished the question.

We married in June of 1991, in a small ceremony at my parents' church in Portland. My father walked me down the aisle with tears he tried unsuccessfully to hide, and Mrs. Patterson — who had become a family friend by then — read a passage from "Sonnets from the Portuguese." It was simple and perfect, and it set the tone for the marriage that followed: built on love, sustained by patience, and anchored in a shared belief that the ordinary moments are the ones that matter most.

The Year Everything Changed



Autumn in Portland's parks

In the spring of 2003, David and I learned that I was pregnant with our third child. We were surprised but happy — the kids were eight and five, and we had just begun to emerge from the fog of early parenthood. But at twelve weeks, I miscarried. The grief was overwhelming, not just for the baby we lost, but for the future we had already begun to imagine — the third bedroom we had started to prepare, the name we had chosen, the family we would never quite become.

That same autumn, Marcus Williams walked into my classroom. He was a junior transfer student with a record of disciplinary problems, a chip on his shoulder the size of Mount Hood, and a reading ability three grade levels

below where it should have been. Most of the other teachers had already written him off. But there was something in Marcus that reminded me of the students Mrs. Patterson used to champion — something sharp and alive beneath the anger, waiting to be noticed.

I spent the next two years working with Marcus — after school, during lunch, on Saturday mornings when he would show up at my door with his backpack and a look that said he was trying but did not want anyone to know. The work we did together pulled me out of my grief and reminded me why I had become a teacher in the first place. When Marcus graduated in 2005 and told me he had been accepted to Portland Community College, I cried harder than I had on the day I lost the baby — but this time, the tears were something close to joy.

Teacher of the Year



Teacher of the Year ceremony, 2015

In May of 2015, I received a phone call that I initially assumed was a prank. The Oregon Department of Education informed me that I had been selected as the state's Teacher of the Year, based on nominations from colleagues, students, and parents. I stood in my kitchen holding the phone, unable to speak, while David watched with growing concern from across the room.

The ceremony was held at the state capitol in Salem, in an auditorium full of educators, administrators, and politicians. My family was there — David in a suit he only wore to weddings and funerals, James home from college, Rachel beaming in the front row. When they called my name and I walked to the podium, I thought of Mrs. Patterson, who had passed away two years earlier,

and I wished more than anything that she could have been there to see what her faith in a quiet, uncertain girl had set in motion.

I kept my acceptance speech short, because I have always believed that the best teaching happens in actions, not words. I thanked my family for their patience, my students for their trust, and Mrs. Patterson for showing me that a single teacher can change a life. When I returned to Room 214 the following Monday, someone had taped a copy of the newspaper article to my door, and my students gave me a standing ovation that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

What I Know Now

I am fifty-eight years old, and I have been teaching for thirty-three years. My hair is more gray than brown now, and I wear reading glasses that I lose at least twice a day. Room 214 looks different than it did when I started — the chalkboard has been replaced by a whiteboard, the desks are newer, and my students carry phones that contain more information than the entire library I grew up reading. But the fundamentals have not changed. Young people still need to be seen, still need to be heard, still need someone to tell them that their voice matters.

If I have learned anything in nearly six decades of living, it is this: the most important things in life are not the dramatic moments — not the awards or the milestones or the events that make the newspaper. They are the small, daily acts of love and attention that accumulate over a lifetime and form the substance of who we are. A brown bag lunch packed with care. A note on a student's essay. A misty morning at the beach with the person you love. These are the things that endure.

David and I still live in the Woodstock house. The porch needs painting and the garden is overgrown, but the front door is always open. On Sunday evenings, James and Claire bring the kids for dinner, and Rachel and Daniel drive up from their place in Lake Oswego. We crowd around the dining table that David built the year we moved in, and the house is loud and full in the way that I always hoped it would be. These are the lessons in living that no classroom can teach — and they are the ones I am most grateful to have learned.

Glossary

People, places, institutions, and organizations mentioned in this life story

People

- Barbara Townsend** — colleague
- Claire Mitchell** — daughter-in-law
- Daniel Park** — son-in-law
- David Mitchell** — husband
- Emma Mitchell** — granddaughter
- James Mitchell** — son
- Liam Mitchell** — grandson
- Marcus Williams** — former student
- Mrs. Patterson** — teacher
- Rachel Park** — daughter
- Sophie Park** — granddaughter

Places

- Cannon Beach**
- Cedar Street**
- Oregon**
- Portland**
- Westridge Community Center**

Institutions

- Lincoln High School** — Workplace

Portland State University — Education

University of Oregon — Education

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