

Mary the Dictionary

Mary Baine (September 2011)

When I began elementary school, I was ahead in reading, writing, and drawing, but behind in athletic and social skills. I took forever learning how to ride a bike, but from that point on, I had one favorite destination: the public library. Consequently, I developed a vocabulary that earned me the nickname "Mary the Dictionary," and I enjoyed school way too much to fit in easily with my tree-climbing, ball-playing contemporaries.

Though my inability to "blend" wasn't for lack of trying, I eventually decided that having friends my own age just wasn't worth the effort. Fortunately, my third grade teacher recommended Saturday classes at the art museum, where children from across the city and suburbs gathered to work with instructors from the university and teachers from the local schools. This happened during the '60s, when segregation was widespread, but I had the unique opportunity to meet a variety of people who shared my interest in art, even though many were different from me in terms of race, religion, and socioeconomic status. For me, the concept of "peer group" was transformed by the associations I formed there.

Though the middle school years were rather rough, I was ability-grouped for core classes in seventh and eighth grade, and I landed in honors classes during secondary school. I usually had one or two close friends, so I felt no need to be "popular," and, at some point, the others stopped bothering me. Honestly, being a loner was such an effective strategy that I struggled to become enough of a "team player" as an adult.

I think my favorite quote with regard to youth was uttered by a character on a television show: "I was a child once, and I wasn't good at it." The older I get, the better I like myself.