Newbery Acceptance Speech
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June, 1994

"How do you know where to start?" a child asked me once, in a schoolroom, where I'd been speaking to her class about the writing of books. I shrugged and smiled and told her that I just start wherever it feels right.

This evening it feels right to start by quoting a passage from The Giver, a scene set during the days in which the boy, Jonas, is beginning to look more deeply into the life that has been very superficial, beginning to see that his own past goes back farther than he had ever known and has greater implications than he had ever suspected.

"…now he saw the familiar wide river beside the path differently. He saw all of the light and color and history it contained and carried in its slow-moving water; and he knew that there was an Elsewhere from which it came, and an Elsewhere to which it was going."

Every author is asked again and again the question we probably each have come to dread the most: HOW DID YOU GET THIS IDEA?

We give glib, quick answers because there are other hands raised, other kids in the audience waiting.

I'd like, tonight, to dispense with my usual flippancy and glibness and try to tell you the origins of this book. It is a little like Jonas looking into the river and realizing that it carries with it everything that has come from an Elsewhere. A spring, perhaps, at the beginning, bubbling up from the earth; then a trickle from a glacier; a mountain stream entering farther along; and each tributary bringing with it the collected bits and pieces from the past, from the distant, from the countless Elsewheres: all of it moving, mingled, in the current.

For me, the tributaries are memories, and I've selected only a few. I'll tell them to you chronologically. I have to go way back. I'm starting 46 years ago.

In 1948, I am eleven years old. I have gone with my mother, sister, and brother to join my father, who has been in Tokyo for two years and will be there for several more.

We live there, in the center of that huge Japanese city, in a small American enclave with a very American name: Washington Heights. We live in an American style house, with American neighbors, and our little community has its own movie theater, which shows American movies; and a small church, a tiny library, and an elementary school, and in many ways it is an odd replica of a United States village.

(In later, adult yhears I was to ask my mother why we had lived there instead of taking advantage of the opportunity to live within the Japanese community and to learn and experience a different way of life. But she seemed surprised by my question. She said that we lived where we did because it was comfortable. It was familiar. It was safe.)

At eleven years old I am not a particularly adventurous child, nor am I a rebellious one. But I have always been curious.

I have a bicycle. Again and again – countless times without my parents' knowledge – I ride my bicycle out the back gate of the fence that surrounds our comfortable, familiar, safe American community. I ride down a hill because I am curious and I enter, riding down that hill, an unfamiliar, slightly uncomfortable, perhaps even unsafe … though I never feel it to be … area of Tokyo that throbs with life.

It is a district called Shibuya. It is crowded with shops and people and theaters and street vendors and the day-to- day bustle of Japanese life.

I remember, still, after all these years, the smells: fish and fertilizer and charcoal; the sounds: music and shouting and the clatter of wooden shoes and wooden sticks and wooden wheels; and the colors: I remember the babies and toddlers dressed in bright pink and orange and red, most of all, but I remember, too, the dark blue uniforms of the school children: the strangers who are my own age.

I wander through Shibuya day after day during those years when I am 11, 12 and 13. I love the feel of it, the vigor and the garish brightness and the noise; all of such a contrast to my own life.

But I never talk to anyone. I am not frightened of the people, who are so different from me, but I am shy. I watch the children shouting and playing around a school, and they are children my age, and they watch me in return; but we never speak to one another.

One afternoon I am standing on a street corner when a woman near me reaches out, touches my hair, and says something. I back away, startled,

because my knowledge of the language is poor and I misunderstand her words. I think she has said, "Kirai des'" meaning that she dislikes me; and I am embarrassed, and confused wondering what I have done wrong; how I have disgraced myself.

Then, after a moment, I realize my mistake. She has said, actually, "Kirei-des'." She has called me pretty. And I look for her, in the crowd, at least to smile, perhaps to say thank you if I can overcome my shyness enough to speak. But she is gone.

I remember this moment – this instant of communication gone awry – again and again over the years. Perhaps this is where the river starts.

In 1954 and 1955 I am a college freshman, living in a very small dormitory, actually a converted private home, with a group of perhaps fourteen other girls. We are very much alike: we wear the same sort of clothes: cashmere sweaters and plaid wool skirts, knee socks, and loafers. We all smoke Marlboro cigarettes and we knit – usually argyle socks for our boyfriends – and play bridge. Sometimes we study; and we get good grades because we are all the cream of the crop, the valedictorians and class presidents from our high schools all over the United States.

One of the girls in our dorm is not like the rest of us. She doesn't wear our uniform. She wears blue jeans instead of skirts, and she doesn't curl her hair or knit or play bridge. She doesn't date or go to fraternity parties and dances.

She's a smart girl, a good student, a pleasant enough person, but she is different, somehow alien, and that makes us uncomfortable. We react with a kind of mindless cruelty. We don't tease or toment her, but we do something worse; we ignore her. We pretend that she doesn't exist. In a small house of fourteen young women, we make one invisible.

Somehow, by shutting her out, we make ourselves feel comfortable, familiar, safe.

I think of her now and then as the years pass. Those thoughts – fleeting, but profoundly remorseful – enter the current of the river.

In the summer of 1979, I am sent by a magazine I am working for to an island off the coast of Maine to write an article about a painter who lives there alone. I spend a good deal of time with this man, and we talk a lot about color. It is clear to me that although I am a highly visual person – a person who sees

and appreciates form and composition and color – this man's capacity for seeing color goes far beyond mine.

I photograph him while I am there, and I keep a copy of his photograph for myself because there is something about his face – his eyes – which haunts me.

Later, I hear that he has become blind.

I think about him – his name is Carl Nelson – from time to time. His photograph hangs over my desk. I wonder what it was like for him to lose the colors about which he was so impassioned. Now and then I wish, in a whimsical way, that he could have somehow magically given me the capacity to see the way he did.

A little bubble begins, a little spurt, which will trickle into the river.

In 1989 I go to a small village in Germany to attend the wedding of one of my sons. In an ancient church, he marries his Margret in a ceremony conducted in a language I do not speak and cannot understand.

But one section of the service is in English. A woman stands in the balcony of that old stone church and sings the words from the Bible: where you go, I will go. Your people will be my people.

How small the world has become, I think, looking around the church at the many people who sit there wishing happiness to my son and his new wife – wishing it in their own language as I am wishing it in mine. We are all each other's people now, I find myself thinking.

Can you feel that this memory, too, is a stream that is now entering the river?

Another fragment, my father, nearing 90, is in a nursing home. My brother and I have hung family pictures on the walls of his room. During a visit, he and I are talking about the people in the pictures. One is my sister, my parents' first child, who died young of cancer. My father smiles, looking at her picture. "That's your sister," he says happily. "That's Helen."

Then he comments, a little puzzled, but not at all sad, " I can't remember exactly what happened to her."

We can forget pain, I think. And it is <u>comfortable</u> to do so.

But I also wonder briefly: is it safe to do that, to forget?

That uncertainty pours itself into the river of thought which will become the book.

1991. I am in an auditorium somewhere. I have spoken at length about my book, Number the Stars, which has been honored with the 1990 Newbery Medal. A woman raises her hand. When the turn for her question comes, she sighs very loudly and says, "Why do we have to tell this Holocaust thing over and over? Is it really necessary?"

I answer her as well as I can – quoting, in fact, my German daughter-in-law, who has said to me, "No one knows better than we Germans that we must tell this again and again."

But I think about her question – and my answer – a great deal. Wouldn't it, I think, playing Devil's Advocate to myself, make for a more comfortable world to forget the Holocaust? And I remember once again how comfortable, familiar and safe my parents had sought to make my childhood by shielding me from ELSEWHERE. But I remember, too, that my response had been to open the gate again and again. My instinct had been a child's attempt to see for myself what lay beyond the wall.

The thinking becomes another tributary into the river of thought that will create The Giver.

Here's another memory. I am sitting in a booth with my daughter in a little Beacon Hill pub where she and I often have lunch together. The television is on in the background, behind the bar, as it always is. She and I are talking. Suddenly I gesture to her. I say, "Shhhh" because I have heard a fragment of the news and I am startled, anxious, and want to hear the rest. Someone has walked into a fast-food place with an automatic weapon and randomly killed a number of people. My daughter stops talking and waits while I listen to the rest.

Then I relax. I say to her, in a relieved voice, "It's all right. It was in Oklahoma." (O perhaps it was Alabama. Or Indiana.)

She stares at me in amazement that I have said such a hideous thing.

How <u>comfortable</u> I made myself feel for a moment, by reducing my own realm of caring to my own familiar neighborhood. How safe I deluded myself into feeling.

I think about that, and it becomes a torrent that enters the flow of a river turbulent by now, and clogged with memories and thoughts and ideas that begin to mesh and intertwine. The river begins to seek a place to spill over.

When Jonas meets The Giver for the first time, and tries to comprehend what lies before him, he says, in confusion "I thought there was only us. I thought there was only now."

In beginning to write The giver I created – as I always do, in every book – a world that existed only in my imagination – the world of "only us, only now." I tried to make Jonas's world seem familiar, comfortable, and safe, and I tried to seduce the reader. I seduced myself along the way,. It did feel good, that world. I got rid of all the things I fear and dislike; all the violence, prejudice, poverty, and injustice, and I even threw in good manners as a way of life because I liked the idea of it.

One child has pointed out, in a letter, that the people in Jonas's world didn't even have to do dishes.

It was very, very tempting to leave it at that.

But I've never been a writer of fairy tales. And if I've learned anything through that river of memories, it is that we can't live in a walled world, in an "only us, only now" world where we are all the same and feel safe. We would have to sacrifice too much. The richness of color and diversity would disappear feelings for other humans would no longer be necessary. Choices would be obsolete.

And besides, I had ridden my bike Elsewhere as a child, and liked it there, but had never been brave enough to tell anyone about it. So it was time.

A letter that I've kept for a very long time is from a child who has read my book called Anastasia Krupnik. Her letter – she's a little girl named Paula from Louisville, Kentucky – says:

"I really like the book you wrote about Anastasia and her family because it made me laugh every time I read it. I especially liked when it said she didn't want to have a baby brother in the house because she had to clean up after him every time and change his diaper when her mother and father aren't home and she doesn't like to give him a bath and watch him all the time and put him to sleep every night while her mother goes to work…

Here's the fascinating thing: Nothing that the child describes actually happens in the book The child – as we all do – has brought her own life to a book. She has found a place, a place in the pages of a book, that shares her own frustration and feelings.

And the same thing is happening – as I hoped it would happen – with The Giver.

Those of you who hoped that I would stand here tonight and reveal the "true" ending, the "right" interpretation of the ending, will be disappointed. There isn't one. There's a right one for each of us, and it depends on our own beliefs, our own hopes.

Let me tell you a few endings which are the "right" endings for a few children out of the many who have written to me.

From a sixth grader: "I think that when they were traveling they were traveling in a circle. When they came to "Elsewhere" it was their old community, but they had accepted the memories and all the feelings that go along with it…"

From another: "…Jonas was kind of like Jesus because he took the pain for everyone else in the community so they wouldn't have to suffer. And, at the very end of the book, when Jonas and Gabe reached the place that they knew as Elsewhere, you described Elsewhere as if it were heaven."

And one more: "A lot of people I know would hate that ending, but not me. I loved it. Mainly because I got to make the book happy. I decided they made it. They made it to the past. I decided the past was our world, and the future was their world. It was parallel worlds."

Finally, from one seventh grade boy: "I was really surprised that they just died at the end. That was a bummer. You could of made them stay alive, I thought."

Very few find it a bumer. Most of the young readers who have written to me have perceived the magic of the circular journey. The truth that we go out and come back, and that what we come back to is changed, and so are we. Perhaps I have been traveling in a circle too. Things come together and become complete.

Here is what I've come back to:

The daughter who was with me and looked at me in horror the day I fell victim to thinking we were "only us, only now" (and that what happened in Oklahoma, or Alabama, or Indiana didn't matter) was the first person to read the manuscript of The Giver.

The college classmate who was "different" lives, last I heard, very happily in New Jersey with another woman who shares her life. I can only hope that she has forgiven those of us who were young in a more frightened and less enlightened time.

My son, and Margret, his German wife – the one who reminded me how important it is to tell our stories again and again, painful though they often are – now have a little girl who will be the receiver of all of their memories. Their daughter had crossed the Atlantic three times before she was six months old. Presumably my granddaughter will never be fearful of Elsewhere.

Carl Nelson, the man who lost colors but not the memory of them, is the face on the cover of this book. He died in 1989 but left a vibrant legacy of paintings. One hangs now in my home.

And I am especially happy to stand here tonight, on this platform with Allen Say because it truly brings my journey full circle. Allen was twelve yers old when I was. He lived in Shibuya, that alien Elsewhere that I went to as a child on a bicycle. He was one of the Other, the Different, the dark-eyed children in blue school uniforms, and I was too timid then to do more than stand at the edge of their school yard, smile shyly, and wonder what their lives were like.

Now I can say to Allen what I wish I could have said then: Watashi-no comodachi des'. Greetings, my friend.

I have been asked whether the Newbery Medal is, actually, an odd sort of burden in terms of the greater responsibility one feels. Whether one is paralyzed by it, fearful of being able to live up to the standards it represents.

For me the opposite has been true. I think the 1990 Newbery freed me to risk failure.

Other people took that risk with me, of course, One was my editor, Walter Lorraine, who has never to my knowledge been afraid to take a chance. Walter cares more about what a book has to say than he does about whether he can turn it into a stuffed animal or a calendar or a movie.

The Newbery Committee was gutsy too. There would have been safer books. More comfortable books. More familiar books. They took a trip beyond the realm of sameness, with this one, and I think they should be very p0roud of that.

And all of you, as well. Let me say something to those of you here who do such dangerous work.

The man that I named The Giver passed along to the boy knowledge, history, meories, color, pain, laughter, love, and truth. Every time you place a book in the hands of a child, you do the same thing.

It is very risky.

But each time a child opens a book, he pushes open the gate that separates him from Elsewhere. It gives him choices. It gives him freedom.

Those are magnificent, wonderfully unsafe things.

I have been greatly honored by you now, two times. It is impossible to express my gratitude for that. Perhaps the only way, really, is to return to Boston, to my office, to my desk, and to go back to work in hopes that whatever I do next will justify the faith in me that this medal represents.

There are other rivers flowing.