

Dialogue

Ellen Pearson

THIRTY THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLDS STORMED into my room. They chattered and waved their arms, oblivious, as usual, to my between-class presence and observance of their passion. "Man, he's such a jerk," Jared hissed to his huddled friends before they broke for their seats. "I can't believe he said that."

Oh dear, I thought, Mr. Lovell's at it again. I turned and briskly applied cleanser to the glass table of my overhead. I blocked out their anger, smiled at two girls still wildly gesturing near the door, and ran over my notes on metaphor.

As the bell rang, I flipped the overhead switch. It hummed beautifully. I'd fought the budget director all year for this projector. *I must have a minimal level of technology if I'm going to teach well,* I argued. To prove its value once it arrived, I'd used it every day for three weeks.

We resumed where we'd left off yesterday. A simple word—Snow—scrawled on the transparency, with space for me to jot in useful metaphors as the class offered them. We were going to construct a poem.

"Snow—blanket!" yelled Elaine.

"Snow—,—ice!" Jared didn't quite have the picture.

"Snow—sea of ice!" Kyle.

"Sea—fish!" Derek completely missed the boat. But his fish served as the catalyst the others needed.

"Gosh. Did you know that Mr. Lovell said we used to be fish!" demanded Jared.

"Yeah, but that's not half so bad as what he said before. He said we used to be monkeys! Gross!"

I took the bait. "Oh, you must be learning about evolution, huh?"

"Yes," piped up Elaine. "He's so stupid. Does he really think we're going to believe we used to be monkeys? Gross!"

I couldn't resist. "Well, actually, I think that's a bit inaccurate. We're much more closely related to pigs."

"Pigs! Gross!"

Oh, what about my metaphors? I thought. *This is supposed to be English.*

"Listen, Jared, class. Why are you so upset? It seems to me that Mr. Lovell's teaching you something useful. Why not just learn it and see if it makes sense?"

"But Ms. Pearson," said Jared. His voice rose high in earnestness. "It doesn't make any sense. It's wrong."

I envisioned angry phone calls to the school. *What is the English teacher doing talking to my child about evolution?* Heavy footsteps echoed in the hall as I imagined the school board showing up to investigate complaints of heresy. My voice took on an unaccustomed coaxing. "Listen. We've gotta get finished with these metaphors today. We have to write that poem by Thursday."

I looked around at my eighth graders. Every student leaned forward on her desk, staring at me with attention I'd seldom encountered, wanting to know what to think, how to express her anger, how to fight the threat of education. I took a deep breath. "Okay. But just for a minute. Jared, why do you say it's wrong?"

"Because. God created the world. Out of dust. It wasn't an accident." Almost everyone nodded in agreement. A minuscule minority appeared less resolute. From habit they leaned back slightly, now, assuming the masques of nonchalant indifference required to combat their friends' constant and careless referrals to religious normality.

"I see," I said, picturing very clearly the subpoena from the ACLU to appear in court, defend my mixing of church and state in the classroom. But I'd got an idea. I snapped off the overhead and the bright snow images illuminating my classroom dissolved.

"I have to be careful here. I don't want to get into a big religious discussion, but . . . Now, don't raise your hands, just think. If you believe in God, you naturally believe he created the world, and people, right?" Most of the heads nodded, rapid jerks up and down, almost rote. "If you don't know if you believe in God, I suppose you can imagine how those who do would feel strongly about their beliefs?" A few slower, hesitant nods. "Well, can you imagine a situation where it would be possible to believe in God and believe in evolution too?"

Their faces contracted, writhed, and turned in upon themselves. After a moment Jared said, "How, Ms. Pearson? How would that work?"

"Let me tell you. See, I know a man . . ." I began describing my father, the best and most fascinatingly complex study of religious understanding, liberal tolerance, and rigorous intellectuality that I know.

"I've known him for a long time," I said. "He's very, very religious. I guess he knows more about the Bible and how all the stories and poetry and messages work than anyone I've ever met. He goes to church all the time and that kind of stuff. But he's also a scientist. Every day he uses ideas taken from evolution when he studies plants and things. He says he

believes in both."

"Really?"

"Sure. But smart as he is, sometimes people still get mad at him. They think those two ideas are totally opposite and won't work. But he thinks they support each other. He teaches school, just like Mr. Lovell, and—"

"But Mr. Lovell is an atheist!" Gasps from around the room.

"Well, I guess he is different in that respect. Of course, that's Mr. Lovell's right, isn't it?"

"But not to force it on us!"

"That's true. Maybe he feels it's his duty, though, to show you about an idea that works and helps people."

"What?"

"Well, that's how this scientist looks at it. When people get mad at him, he tries not to let it bother him. He just tells them, 'It doesn't really matter, does it, whether it's completely true? The tools it gives to science make it useful.'"

I'd finally connected, it seemed. "Oh, I know what you mean!" Amy, solemn during the dialogue, suddenly became animated. "Like, I think Mr. Lovell was saying they use evolution to make new plants, make them better and so there's more, more—like food for people."

"Um-hum. And from what I understand, it goes even further than that. Can you think of ways?"

"I don't know," said Mike, looking puzzled. "Would it work on animals?"

"You mean like making clones?" Jared looked very concerned.

"No, well," said Mike. "Just like . . . making the cows bigger, stuff like that?"

"Somewhere in the book it said it's used with medicine." Elaine hesitated. "But I don't see how that works."

We talked briefly about things like skin grafts and beta cell production. I wished I knew more, but they took my fragmented recollections as fact. Suddenly Kyle grinned. "So when you take insulin for your diabetes, Ms. Pearson, you become part pig!"

"Thanks, Kyle. I guess you're right."

"But they don't have any proof." Jared still struggled with threatening intangibles.

"Yeah, stupid. But they do too. Remember all those fossils and stuff?"

"Yeah, but no one knows how old they are."

"Ms. Pearson, what's that called when they test things to see how old they are?"

"Carbon dating!" Elaine blurted before I could think.

"Yeah, but my dad says that's just a hoax," argued Jared.

"Come off it, Jared." Kyle scowled. "Your dad calls everything he

doesn't agree with a hoax."

"Okay, okay . . . But I still don't believe I used to be a monkey."

I broke in. "Does—"

"Baboon! He said we were baboons, and that we used to have gills!" Amy remembered. Everyone was upset again.

"Well," I said. "Does it really matter?"

"What do you mean?" Jared was still with us.

"Think. When you stand in front of the mirror, Jared, just stare straight into it at yourself. What do you see?"

"Just me, but—"

"Okay, and when you look at your parents, or grandparents, when you talk to them, what do you see? Who do you hear?"

"This is stupid, Ms. Pearson."

"I know! See, I'm not really trying to take Mr. Lovell's side or anything. It just seems he's trying to teach you something that's interesting. Just because you learn it doesn't mean you have to believe all of it, but you could try being patient, see if anything he says makes sense. Even if you hate what he says, you can still say you learned it, right?"

"Yeah, I guess so . . ."

I walked over to Jared and patted him on the shoulder. "Don't worry, nobody thinks you're a baboon." Then I bent over to pick some imaginary lice from his head. Everyone laughed. The bell rang.

I received no angry phone calls that night. *Maybe I handled it okay*, I decided. It was kind of fun. More fun than the metaphors.

But the next day I was back to the serious work. "We've got to make up for lost time," I announced before the bell even rang. But they were still in the evolutionary mode.

"Ms. Pearson," said Jared, calmer than yesterday. "You never told us. Do you believe in evolution? I mean, all of it, like we used to be baboons an' stuff?"

Well, I thought. *I'll just keep this short*. But how to answer? They'd already discovered I'm a Democrat. Would the knowledge that I'm also a passive disciple of Darwin totally destroy their faith in me as a good person, someone they could trust?

"Yes," I said. "From what I understand, it makes a lot of sense."

They stared at me in silence, except for Jared. He set his jaw and picked at the metal binder of his notebook; he glared at his fluttering fingers as if too angry to look up. Elaine sat back in her chair. Her long, curly hair swept over her shoulder and she stroked it absent-mindedly, a little smile flickering around her eyes. Kyle looked impressed, like he had just heard something deliciously evil. I stood by my overhead, poised to help my students write a poem about snow. I waited, and finally Kyle said, "Ms. Pearson, what do you think about gays?"