I can’t recall the title of the only book I remember my mother reading to me as a child. The story was about Little Three Eyes, a girl who had an extra eye in the middle of her forehead. The eye, though useful (for it was visionary), made Little Three Eyes ugly, deformed, grotesque even. She was so very kind and good, but marked in this way, she was despised, treated with scorn, most especially by her family, made to feel shame for perhaps her greatest trait. I remember all the details that I could see then: my bed, my mother on a chair beside me, the big picture book, the chance to have my mother read to me, my mother and I together to know this story of a good, unappreciated child which – remarkably was my own story, the story I was longing for my mother to recognize in me. This was the power of reading when I was five.

I can remember these things well: How hard learning to read seemed to be. How badly I wanted it. How much I pushed and pushed, like I was trying to hoist a sack of rocks uphill. And how I thought the learning happened all-at-once: the day would come, I thought – and soon – that I would make it to the top of the hill and know the code. To me, it was that clear; one day you couldn’t read, the next day you could. There were only two ways of being.

And just like that, the day arrived. As I sat at the kitchen table with my Dick and Jane reader, I knew the code! I knew the word for each person on the page, their simple black-and-white image as paltry, as unimaginative and uninspiring as the story that they told. I read out loud, my index finger holding down each recognized word, then tracing the letters of the ones I would have to phonetically sound out: s-a-i-d. I could do it! Fireworks went off in my kitchen that day, the same fireworks set off the moment my daughter (and later my son) could point and say “Henry and Mudge . . .” You’re reading!!! Hip Hip Hooray!!!

As I see it now, what happens that moment when a child recognizes the word, then a group of words, then a whole sentence, and then says it, when a child does this for the very first time, struggling in the confusion of symbols, then stepping up into the clarity of knowing the sounds and meanings of those symbols, pushing and pushing up and up (knowing the effort, knowing the outcome), then stepping up into a whole new dimension, the world is forever changed and the child has the key.

The key is the gold; whatever else happens along a young reader’s journey may or may not contribute to the wealth.
My grade school recollections of “learning to read” come in two distinct shapes and times, each so clearly an example of how not to inspire learning and joy in reading. One was the first grade readers’ circles, and it has to do with the levels of performance by which the groups were formed, all the commotion about who was in which group, my opportunity to jump “up,” and – most importantly – the embarrassment I felt as I wondered then (as now) how it might feel to be placed into what was obvious to everyone as the “Low Groups.” Even today, some 40 years later, a contemporary of mine might say, “I was a poor reader in grade school,” and I can see their 1st grader’s shame, see how that grouping has marked them always. Wouldn’t it be far better to gather one big circle of readers, of levels of skill and understanding? Wouldn’t it be better to call each emerging reader a star?

Whenever I hear the term “basal reader,” I am back in the 3rd grade hurrying through the sequence of booklets and accompanying worksheets as a child who holds their nose and chomps through a clump of spinach to get to the chocolate cake. As I raced through the drudgery of each set of those nameless, faceless, bland basal readers, I might have learned a host of skills in spite of myself: vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, comprehension, analysis. Who can know? I know that – try as I might – I never arrived at the chocolate cake. I know that what I did not learn – what was left for me to discover on my own – was the most important lesson of all: the joy of reading.

The most wonderful childhood reading memories I have are almost entirely kinesthetic and are woven into a series of books that I am now shamed by as an adult: Bobsey Twins and Nancy Drew. You will know this series as formulaic, highly improbable, and poorly written. But as a grade-schooler, here is what I knew: the walk to the neighborhood library, the reverence I found and loved inside, the opportunity to choose and take my own books whenever I wanted, the accomplishment of the sequence of finishing one book and beginning a new, the way the books smelled, looked, fit into my hands so perfectly, the joy I felt when I had my book at home and – all alone – I sat up in bed and read, with great feeling, out loud. Forever after those early solitary afternoons, I have enjoyed such rich pleasure in reading, and in reading out loud, alone and with others.

A revolution in Children’s Literature has occurred since my beginnings. Little Three Eyes has been buried by an avalanche of extraordinary picture books, with illustrations so exquisite and situations so extraordinarily imaginative that anyone might choose to linger among the pages and then return as a daily ritual. Dick and Jane and Spot are antique characters now too, examples of how rudimentary our skills as educators were a half century ago. And basal readers are the point of comparison for all the progress educators have made in the latter half of the 20th Century integrating rich trade texts into the curricula. We have come to understand that the enjoyment of reading is the most important element of all. Joy is the thread I weave back through my childhood tapestry.