

**“MRS. ELY”**  
By Jean Stephenson

I am reading Ken Robinson’s new book “Out of Our Minds”, and sincerely believe that anyone who is concerned about the future of our education system or getting a job, or our economy, should run right out and get a copy. Robinson thoroughly discusses in very readable prose the need for drastic changes in the way our kids are educated and the way corporations must grow their businesses in order for us to keep up with the new way of life that the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought us into. Radical ideas, but all making perfect sense. We aren’t in the horse and buggy age anymore but we are operating as though we are, which Robinson says directly leads us into the sorry mess we are in, politically and economically.

His warnings triggered some very old memories from early school days. I had been promoted ahead of my playmates three times until I found myself entering into 4<sup>th</sup> grade at age ten. My new teacher, Mrs. Ely, turned out to be way ahead of her time in her teaching methods and subject matter, but she was also rumored to be a fire-breathing ogre.

Shivering with fear, I had opened the classroom door for the first time to face this wicked witch only to be immediately fascinated by the things she could teach me.... I was totally captivated by the extra classes she taught besides “readin’ writin’ and arithmetic”. I became a teacher’s pet, assigned to calm the fears of other students terrified of this large lordly woman, whose only odd quirk was that she was an old lady who continually smelled of stale coffee, wore printed silk dresses on her generous figure, and topped by a very obvious brown wig.

Every afternoon Mrs. Ely opened doors to the wonders of the French language, opera, and period furniture. After all the legally required subjects were well covered in the mornings, we ate our bag lunches in a roomful of long tables then went back to the classroom to hear the strains of opera being played on an old-time crank-up machine. This was always followed by a test to identify an aria we’d heard the day before. Next a French word spelling test. And finally we would work on putting together our personal scrapbooks of photos of many individual styles of period furniture.

This latter knowledge was with me when I was just ten years old and my grandmother took me to Sloane’s, a fancy shop selling fine furniture, to select a new end table. “Oh, look, Grandma, here’s a Duncan Fyfe table,” I would chortle

excitedly..."and look at the Hepplewhite chair legs on this other one, just like in my scrapbook!" As an adult working artist I have never again heard quite such astonished comments of admiration as I did from those salespeople.

Mrs. Ely is the one teacher I find it impossible to forget for.gosh, on the verge of eighty years! So, what can we do to inspire a system that brings about such a lifetime full of curiosity and wonder at the world around us? I suggest you read Ken Robinson's book.

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