

Lots of class in room

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Robert Fulghum's book "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" has been on the bestseller list for months, and I finally got around to reading it.

I think he's right. People don't change dramatically, and I often think I'm dealing with the same folks I knew in kindergarten at Little Valley School. I even called my kindergarten teacher to make sure our recollections were the same.

Fulghum reminds us of the excitement of those early days and challenges us to "be aware of wonder," to be alert to all the little things that make life worth living.

Emma Jean Mader was my kindergarten teacher way back when both of us were a bit younger, and she spotted me on the ski hill last winter and told me to buy the book. I'd learn something, she said.

She was right (again). I did learn something. I learned that I often take things for granted, forget to look around, and I learned all over again why I love to read.

"Every day you had a story and sometimes two," Mrs. Mader said. That was a big part of her job back then, she said "I often read to you, and I often read poetry to you. If a kid doesn't find there's fun in books, how in the world are they going to learn to read?"

I can see that classroom even today. I loved to pull my blanket out of the coatroom for our afternoon nap. I always wanted to be early because I wanted a good spot so I could listen to the story Mrs. Mader, (Miss Sinclair back then), picked for the day.

But times have changed.

"I don't think any kindergartener now gets a blanket and takes a rest," she said.

Most of them, I suspect are accustomed to staying awake because of the training they receive in playschool. Leaving home for part of the day probably isn't the big deal it was 30 years ago.

Kindergarten was an introduction to a bigger world, one that we would enter sooner than we ever believed.

"You learned to follow a routine," Mrs. Mader said. "Everybody knew they had a place to put their boots and their mittens."

"Sometimes you had work to do. Usually there was a piece of free time and a piece of work time every day."

To tell the truth, it doesn't sound too different from my office today. The similarity is eerie, in fact.

"You never knew when to believe, and when not to," Mrs. Mader said. "You always tell the parents, "You don't believe Everything you hear and I won't believe everything I hear."

Kids, no doubt, have a hard time keeping everything straight. So do adults, to remember: When you hear something that doesn't ring true, check it out.

Students walked to school back then and teachers knew every child on the playground by name. I know that for a fact.

One of my classmates ran away from school nearly every day. Mrs. Mader tracked him down and brought him back: but after a while she lost that tracking spirit and decided to call his mother to warn that he was on his way home.

Much of life's journey starts in kindergarten, it seems. "In general, you can do sandbox at kindergarten appropriately, but sandbox at 16 isn't terribly appropriate," Mrs. Mader said. "My philosophy is you're going to go through these things."

Maybe we're still going through "these things" as a society. Teaching is an increasingly difficult profession, requiring more time and more commitment every year.

"I quit because I was so tired. I could see the needs being so great. I think I didn't lose all the enthusiasm that I had in the beginning, but I sure got tired," Mrs. Mader said.

There were plenty of lessons to be learned 30 years ago at Little Valley School. "I was still wide-eyed about kindergarten in that school," Mrs. Mader said.

I was wide-eyed, too, and maybe kindergarten taught us all an Awful lot.

"Children are wonderful teachers," she said, noting that she plans to work a bit at a playschool. "If you stop, you might as well fold your hands."