

EXCERPT from *The Elephant in the Classroom*  
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**INTRODUCTION: Blindsided.**

*The kids who wanted to be somebody.* This is the story of a girl named Emily and her friend Jaylen. It's a story that begins in school classrooms all across our country. What happens there often leads to discouragement, unhappiness, and an unfulfilled life. Emily (not her real name) is a "good girl." Good, because of her strength, integrity, and emotional warmth. She didn't know her father, but her mother sometimes showed her pictures of a man with a broken body playing a piano in a dingy barroom. Her mother also kept the Purple Heart he had received in the Afghanistan war. She told Emily that her father was *somebody*. Emily always wanted to be somebody too — just like her father.

Emily started school with a smile on her face. Teachers at her church-school liked her, and she did well in public kindergarten and first grade. But she had reading problems in the second grade, and her smile started to fade. Emily tried to pay attention, obeyed her teachers' rules, and studied harder than most of the kids in her class. Her mother wanted more than anything for Emily to attend college, because no one in the family had made it that far.

Emily kept plugging away in elementary school, spending two hours studying every day, even on Saturdays. Her mother helped her with reading when she got time off from her job as a waitress. Emily managed to attain a 2.5 grade point average, but when she encountered classes in biology and chemistry in middle school, her grades plummeted. World history wasn't easy, either.

**Nice counselor.**

The counselor at her school suggested that Emily might enjoy some career options such as studying to be a veterinarian's assistant or an assistant nurse working in a hospital. This excited Emily because she loved animals and enjoyed babysitting for the little girls down the street. She hoped she could get good grades again — and be somebody. Her mother was unsure about

career studies, because she was set on Julie going to college but knew Emily was unhappy. Perhaps these courses would put that beautiful smile back on her face. Emily could think about college later.

Emily signed up for the veterinarian and nursing courses, but then something unfortunate happened. Emily and her mother were informed that Emily's academic grades weren't high enough for acceptance into the career programs. That didn't make sense to Emily and her mother, but the counselor said it was a state law and Emily would need to improve her grades and pass the world history exam before she would have sufficient time to take career courses. Emily had failed the world history test five times and just couldn't seem to remember the dates and events from so long ago.

When Emily was in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the counselor discovered a new program that would accept her, even if she couldn't pass the world history exam. This career program was part-time at another school across town and that school would be happy to give her a chance. Emily was excited and her mother saw an immediate, positive change in her personality. The school system did not provide transportation to the new program, however, and Emily's mother couldn't afford a car, so Emily couldn't go. She kept trying and studied even harder but still got poor grades. Emily eventually gave up and dropped out of school. She found someone who thought she was special and became pregnant.

### **Without hope.**

Emily is still a "good girl," only now she's a young adult without much hope for the future and is a burden to society. Emily's story is not unique. She represents the *majority* of school children in our public schools. You see, Emily was never cut out for college. Her mother didn't read to her as a young child and she didn't like academics. Emily's working memory was poor and she suffered from a short attention span.

We are facing enormous problems in this country. The purpose of this book is to expose a great American myth and help us find the elephant in the classroom. *The myth is that all Americans are equal in terms of talent and skills.* The best thing about this myth is that it represents a great American Dream. In America, anyone can make it to the top with sacrifice and hard work.

Yes, we Americans are a nifty lot. We can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. In this way, it's a good myth. A myth that gives us hope. A myth that makes us proud. Who says everyone can't be a Harvard PhD? Who says everyone can't be an astronaut? Who says everyone can't win the Nobel Peace Prize? Who says everyone can't win a gold medal at the Olympics? *And who says not everyone should go to college?*

I do.

And once most Americans think this through, they will agree that the odds of accomplishing any of these things are pretty daunting, including college, or at least *real* colleges that haven't lowered their standards. The universal desire to reach the summit of a college education reminds me of General George Pickett's infantry charge at Gettysburg, an action that hastened the end of the United States Civil War. Amassing troops and sending them up a hill into murderous gunfire, without a special plan, led to horrendous casualties. Yes, the Confederate general, Robert E. Lee, was the war's greatest tactician, but he made a tragic mistake at Gettysburg.

And what about Emily's friend, Jaylen (not his real name)? Should he have attended college? His parents and teachers thought so. Jaylen earned high scores on achievement tests and carried a 4.0 grade average into his senior year in high school. This sounded well and good, but when the *average* grade for all students was 3.6, and student grades didn't rank him against classmates, and achievement tests didn't compare him to national norms, it was difficult to know just where he stood academically.

Not all of his classes were challenging either, and he shared several classes with Emily, who he occasionally helped with her homework. He wanted to please his parents, who had not attended college, and he knew they were hurt and disappointed when Jaylen's older brother dropped out of school.

As it turns out, Jaylen had all four of the elephant's sturdy legs that are necessary for college: *academic ability, motivation, self-control, and the ability to focus*. He was vice-president of the student council and was named to the National Honor Society. His grades and honors led him to an academic scholarship at a small liberal arts college.

But when he got to college that fall, something shocking happened. Jaylen was told that he lacked basic skills in writing and mathematics. As a result, counselors enrolled him in remedial classes. Jaylen's parents were dismayed. An honors student needed special help? This created additional financial burdens for his parents, and it took Jaylen five years to graduate from college.

How would recognizing the elephant change things? Students such as Jaylen, who are capable of abstract academic learning, would operate in a much more challenging and competitive environment, leading to satisfactory college preparation without leaving their neighborhood school. Students such as Emily would begin full-time career courses in middle school or high school without concern about high-stakes state or federal achievement testing. They would study and train in a rich, creative environment where they would earn occupational certificates, nationally-recognized industry certifications, and apprenticeships. Career training that would lead to well-paying positions in the workforce.

This realization would also affect other areas such as dropout rates, school testing, bullying, and behavior problems, etc.

*Those who ignore the elephant do so at their own peril.* This is especially true of our elephant. While she seems destined to breaking up furniture, she'd really like to get out of the room and help us out. She is closest to the action and she may give us advice from time-to-time.

Without including this reality in any formulation of education and learning, we distort our perception of what is true, real, and important. We must render the elephant visible in order to rescue Emily, Jaylen, and other vulnerable students; young Americans with hopes and dreams and special talents.

That is what this book seeks to do. And believe it or not, we're not going to blame the teachers. And we're not going to blame the teachers' union, or the curriculum. We're not even going to blame the parents.

Hmm. Who's left?

