

"Aerial Reflections"
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2004 P. A. Mack Award Winner

Thank you so much for this amazing award. I am awed by my predecessors: P. A. Mack himself, for which this award is named and who was its first recipient for his passionate advocacy of teaching at its best. We honored Tom Ehrlich, now a senior scholar at Carnegie, for both his vision and his commitment to college teaching. We were enchanted by Ken Gros Louis last year and his portrait of the prescient tutor who introduced his star pupil, John Keats, to a first reading of Chapman's Homer. Historian David Pace has inspired his colleagues' emulation as well as future critical thinkers by his transformations of freshman experiences. Like many colleagues in many disciplines, we have all been challenged by Craig Nelson, that incomparable provocateur whose contributions reach beyond the teaching of science to the science of teaching - possibly the earliest practitioner of the "scholarship of teaching and learning." And this evening we have all learned from the example of composer David Baker what it is that great teachers do. In accepting your generous award, I take my cue from Professor Baker's memories of his own most influential teacher - a person who moved his students to do "more than even they could imagine." How does one define a great teacher? David's phrase seems exactly right. As scholars wedded to our intellectual pursuits (what we wrongly call "the life of the mind" as if it were disembodied), we know the thrill of trajectory (what we feel at the height of our powers) as well as the inevitable frustration of learning our limits. Our best teachers, paradoxically, are those who are able to convince their students not to believe in their limits - to move to places that are "more than even they could imagine." In turn, this reminds me of an experience I had in one of my own classrooms last semester. For the past few years I have explored and taught "Children's Literature," a doubly-challenging course to teach because most of the students are future teachers themselves. It also requires members of the class - myself included - to read the assigned literature with a double consciousness: the mind of the child for whom the book was intended; the mind of the adult asked to reflect on the book's own magical or technical composition. Like novice dancers, teachers of teachers perform before mirrors. This doubleness provokes metaphor, and indeed I believe I have found an apt metaphor for David's evocative phrase in the pages of the 2004 Caldecott Medal winner -- an award the American Library Association presents to the best picture book of the year. This year's winner, by Mordicai Gerstein, is *The Man Who Walked Between the Two Towers*. Many adults would be familiar with the event Gerstein dramatizes through delightful paintings - one, a vertiginous central fold-out -- and a brief text: the audacious feat of French acrobat and aerialist Philippe Petit, who almost exactly thirty years ago, after years of thinking, dreaming, and practicing, walked a 131 foot tightrope strung between the south and north towers of the World Trade Center. And walked again. And bowed to the winds and danced! I have always been terribly afraid of heights. So afraid that as I write these words I can feel my heart pound, my stomach tighten, my knees buckle. Holding my breath, I hug the walls, edging around Hyatt Regency atriums. I keep my eyes closed when I drive over bridges. I also close my eyes tightly

at "scenic outlooks" so I have only seen such tourist attractions in guidebooks. Hearing of Petit's feat (he had also pranced between the towers of Notre Dame cathedral and the pylons on the Sydney bridge) my first impulse was to shut out the pictures. In this context, it is probably obvious why I was so irresistibly moved by *The Man Who Walked Between The Two Towers*. And why I was giddy as the artist put me among the onlookers. Of course, most young readers, for whom this book is intended, would not know about this event; and those remembering the "two towers" would most likely remember their flaming aerial bombardment and their stunning and sickening collapse. *The Man Who Walked Between the Two Towers* is a "once upon a time" experience, leading young readers to 1974 Manhattan, and then revealing the process by which Petit laid his plans, enlisted friends, set up the equipment, strung the wire, and stepped out alone on an early August morning. The painting on the book cover shows only the acrobat's black slippers on the wire (less than an inch wide). Manhattan lies far below (1,350 feet to be exact) curving to match the shape of the astonished earth. Paging through Gerstein's pictures, I hold my breath at the sight of Petit, incredibly joyful, dancing in the air, as I shiver with fearful expectation. But I know any reader, child, adolescent, even an adult with acrophobic tendencies could hardly resist the soaring and playful conquest of the sky, the wind, the "impossible." In defiance of the entire New York constabulary, Petit the acrobat alights. Balancing an officer's cap on his nose, he agrees in front of an admiring audience to be "sentenced" to perform for the city's children in Central Park. A happy ending? The artist, our teacher, has one more surprise. The final image in the book brings us back to the reality of the post 9/11/01 Manhattan skyline. But visible to a reader's eye are the faint but indelible outlines of two towers, soaring beyond and above the flattened cityscape. Through this circuitous route, a text meant for schoolchildren, we are back to the original question - perhaps the most essential question, probing the mystery of teaching at its best. It is David Baker's question: What gives us the power to help our students see more than even they could imagine? Interestingly, while Gerstein had seen Philippe Petit performing at the sidewalk level many times - he was not present in Manhattan the day of the actual walk. Like scholars, he was forced to piece together the story of this event from archived newspaper stories and photos. and several written eye-witness accounts including one by Petit himself, *To Reach The Clouds* (2001). In the pages of Petit's memoir, written "posthumously" in the wake of 9/11, we learn another important lesson: Petit himself has always lived a double life, attaining a stance he characterizes as "half-poet, half-engineer." His fascinating memoir begins nine years before that August performance, on a day he first met and fell in love with the "WTC," then still under construction. For years he has carefully practiced his tightrope moves and aerialist art, the precision of rigging his apparatus, his painstaking study of field conditions, atmosphere, and altitude. He has already begun making numerous sketches of his daring plans (one scrawled on a plastered WTC stairwell wall.) But on this day, donning workman's garb, violating posted limits, he takes his first turn on the south tower roof. He has brought a friend along, a photographer, to begin the arduous work of visualizing his future "coup" - taking the imagination of the world by storm. But his first inward response as he looks down through the clouds toward the plaza far below, and across the yawning space

between the twin towers, is all-too familiar to me. "I am terrified. I am frozen with fear. I am paralyzed. This is impossible." Is this the end or a beginning? Impatient, the photographer waits. Petit steps to the roof's edge, willing one foot to step on the half-inch steel ledge below. He waves his arms for the camera (secretly ashamed that he is 'holding on' to the ledge rim with one strategically placed foot). Then he calls to his friend to throw him a workman's broom, catching it and balancing it on his forehead long enough to be captured on film. Just a few days later, the two imposters again find their way to the WTC roof, eluding construction guards, only to meet a hurricane-force gale: Petit clasps a steel pole and lets the wind wave his body like a flag - again, caught on film. The book goes on to chart the steady, systematic, studied preparation for the main event, as months stretch into years; Petit is alternatively ebullient and crestfallen, spirited and sober, as practice tests theory and plans are reconstituted and fine-tuned. The "coup" gains substance; height becomes familiar; risk becomes acceptable. Petit cajoles and invokes the gods of the wind and seeks to overturn the birds' dominion. One thing is clear: fear of the unknown in the presence of an overarching dream fuels both learning and desire. For me, taken together, both of these texts suggest in a powerful way the kind of teaching the Mack Award celebrates, and is also exemplified by all of you - faculty aware of the magnitude and magnificence of learning. *The Man Who Walked Between The Two Towers*, as a young reader's book, can only go so far into critical matters of technique, and subtle issues of style and finesse, although Mordicai Gerstein is careful to depict the backstage effort required for a soaring performance. In Petit's memoir, vision draws strength alternately from calculation, drawings, photographs, poems, detailed renderings, critiques, instructions, imprecations, and whispered prayers. Each new step whets the appetite for more and in so doing extends the limits of the possible. Through the power of learning, a singular human feat (never duplicated before 9/11, never to be duplicated afterward), realized in the physicality of the wire, the calculated risk of the walk, can even challenge the gods of war. The tightrope trajectory of learning makes us see more than even we could have imagined, reach inner and indestructible heights, and celebrate, with the exuberant joy of the dance, our shared work as teachers.