

Being thankful is easy, being happy is a little harder, but being useful is the hardest thing of all. Or so it seems to me.

In my life, the three are tied together in some way: one leads to the other or two stand together producing the last, or, simply, the third derives from the second, which derives from the first. I have never been exactly certain which stands where. Other problems I have solved by getting them down on paper.

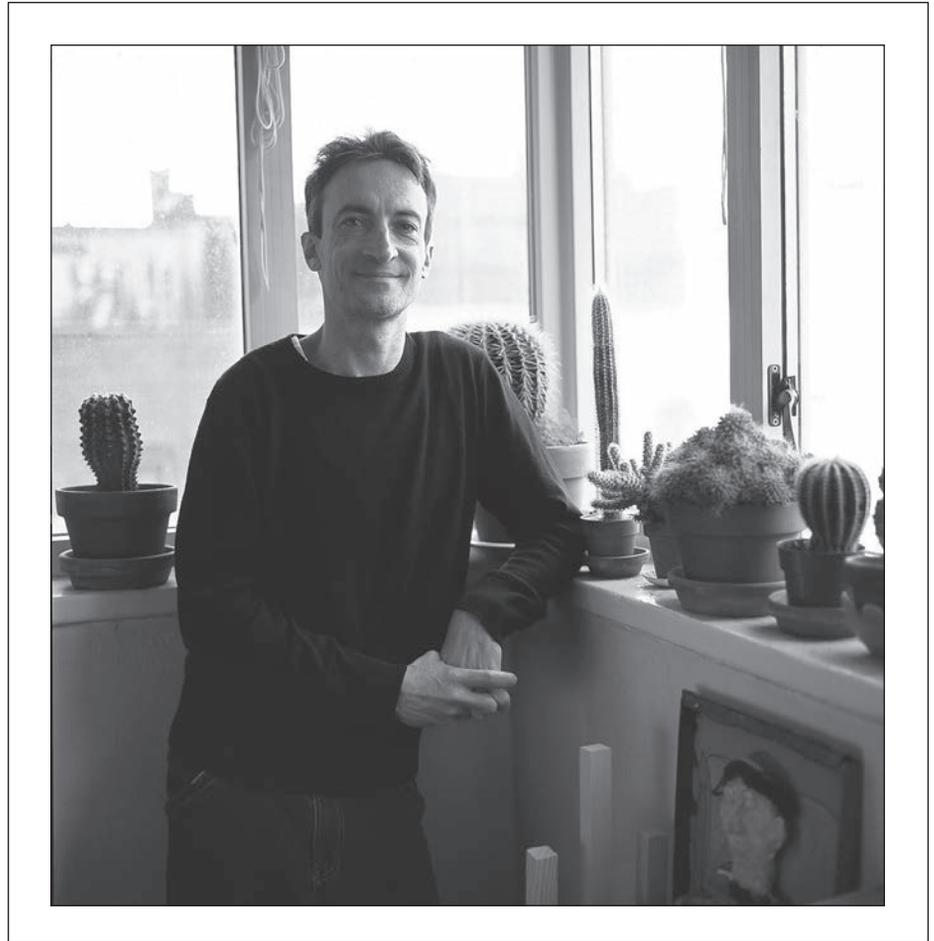
even, I plotted the thematic movement of Wagner's *Parsifal*, where $-x$ equals the subconscious, $+x$ equals the conscious, $-y$ equals faith, and $+y$ equals reason. Dull work, but I have rarely enjoyed myself more. However, I have never managed to draw precisely the relationship of usefulness, happiness, and thankfulness.

When I left college, I spent a year in a little town in the province of Hessen, Germany, working in a home for children with physical disabilities. I joined

Caldecott Medal Acceptance Speech

Of Charlie Parker...
and Other Successes

Chris Raschka



For instance, in a large ledger book, I have charts of time spent on projects and time expected to be spent on projects; graphs tabulating projects completed satisfactorily, needing improvement, or failing; diagrams depicting the relationships between hours spent drawing, reading, painting, or writing; income from each book plotted carefully against its brothers; and comparisons of outflow of cash on paper versus tubes of paint versus Chinese ink and so forth. Perhaps my favorite tool is the x and y axis—let x equal my ability and y my desire. Once,

the home as a volunteer, becoming one of four charged with the care of nine children ranging in age from twelve to seventeen. Our group, Gruppe Steppenwolf, had rooms on one half of one floor of a four-story dormitory. The coworkers were split into two pairs, alternating biweekly between the early and the late shift, the shifts overlapping in the afternoon. So you see that two workers were needed to get nine teenage children up, breakfasted, and out the door to school and, at the end of the day, dined, washed, and to bed. This was not

*Chris Raschka is the winner of the 2006 Caldecott Medal for *The Hello, Goodbye Window*, published by Hyperion Books for Children. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 25, 2006.*

impossible, as far as the physical care went, since only two children required complete help in rising, bathing, dressing, and so forth.

When I arrived, of these two I was given the responsibility for Jörn. My coworkers assured me that my job would not be difficult to learn as Jörn would tell me precisely—and they winked as they repeated “precisely”—what to do.

I saw Jörn on my first afternoon as he rolled down the wide tiled hallway in his electric wheelchair. He was a fourteen-year-old boy with dirty-blond hair, cut shaggily. He had clear blue eyes, an upturned nose, and a very sardonic mouth. In fact, he was much disliked by his dormmates for being a frequent taunter, dealing out wicked barbs to younger and older children alike. He was very round. He had a round head and a round torso. Each joint of each finger was round, and the small folds at the back of his neck were round. His toes were roundest of all, probably the result of never having been walked upon. Jörn saw to it that he was kept very clean and, as a result, he smelled good.

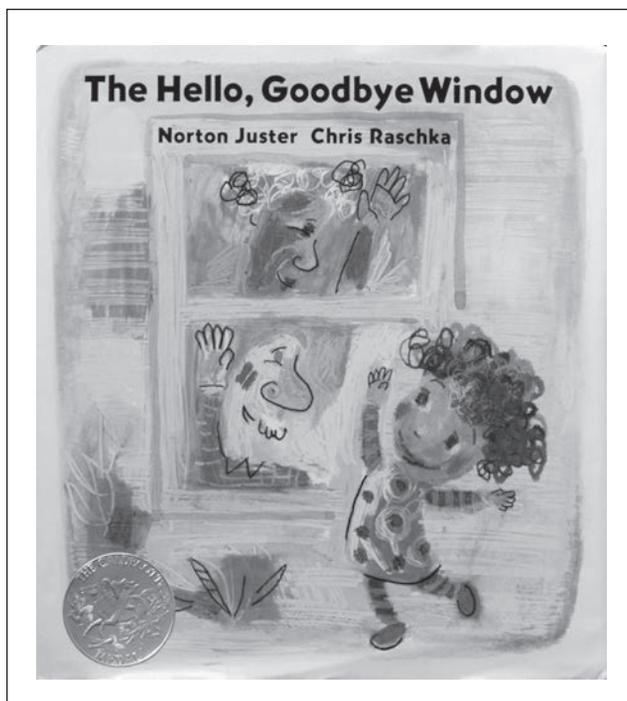
On my first morning rousing Jörn and his roommate Peter, I entered their room at 6:30. I gathered myself together and gently placed a hand first on Peter’s and then Jörn’s shoulder to wake them. Jörn groaned, and Peter slept on. Abruptly, Jörn called for his urine flask, which I stumbingly looked for in the half-light, then found. I stood expectantly beside his bed until Jörn said irritably, “Well, pull down my pants and stick it between my legs.” “Okay,” I said.

Then, following much precise instruction, I removed his pajama pants, *without* dropping his legs, pulled on his underpants, *carefully*, by gently rolling him toward me onto his right side, his great belly lolling, then to his left side, then back to his right side, tugging up his underpants as each side became free. Next I lifted him to a seated position *without* forgetting about his head, and pulled off his pajama top, then, select-

ing the correct pullover and T-shirt from his dresser, I pulled them down over his round head, *minding the ears*.

So the morning went, and all the while, after attentively receiving each instruction, I said, “Okay.” At last Jörn turned his blue eyes upon me and said through the slit of his mouth, “You are getting on my nerves with all of your *okays*.” And I said, “Okay.”

I determined then that the word I would use as a substitute anytime I felt the word *okay* bubbling up would be *mucus*. *Mucus*. *Mucus*, *mucus*. Jörn tried it. It



sounded like *moi-kooss*. This was agreeable to Jörn. Indeed, when I explained to Jörn precisely what *moi-kooss* meant, we became friends.

I spent a year with Jörn. I dressed him in the mornings. I bathed him. I learned to anticipate his melodiously trilled “Pinkeln,” which indicated a dash for the urine flask. I will never forget the special sound of the automated flask washers; I was so proud to know how to use them. By the second week I was lifting Jörn into and out of his electric wheelchair alone, Jörn in my arms like a great seventy-five-pound Jell-O mold. This was definitely against house rules and certainly dangerous to both of us, but we didn’t

care; we were too impatient to wait for the arrival of my coworker, too haughty to use the hydraulic lifter, and I never dropped him. In the afternoons, I sat with him and Peter, helping with their homework, doing my best to explain the proper use of negative numbers; supplying the answer to the question, What is the past participle of “to go,” or indicating, as well as I could, the difference between a *Phylum* and an *Order*.

Often, when Jörn was sitting on the toilet or tormenting some child in the opposite wing, I sat and wondered about him, gazing at his collection of posters on the wall above his bed, mostly of the rock band KISS. An assortment of these arrived each month in his teen magazines, and when one was deemed worthy, we removed it, with infinite care, from its center staples. Then, taking off my shoes, I climbed onto his bed and stuck it with pink wall gum to a critically chosen spot.

One particular afternoon, sitting next to Jörn as he puzzled out some piece of homework, I realized that all my years of education had exactly prepared me to do this work; that at this moment in my life, I was perfectly useful. And I could not help noticing that I was profoundly happy, probably as happy as I have ever been.

A few years later I was very unhappy. I had just gotten married, but this was not the reason. Lydie and I were on our way to Liberia in the Peace Corps, but a number of complications, including an imminent civil war, detoured us to St. Croix in the Caribbean. We began a job there that made us both very unhappy. In fact, we felt less than useless.

Our job was a good job, a job of service, but a job also of extreme stress. To put it too briefly, we were responsible for nine orphaned or foster children, aged three to twelve—beautiful children, but children who had already endured more than we ever could. Perhaps our feelings of uselessness came from the knowledge of our own guilt and entanglement in

New World history, the ills of slavery and its racism reaching across the generations to trip us. We, the descendants of the slave-owning race, fresh-faced, happy, healthy, well-fed, thrilled by an adventure in the islands; the children, the descendants of the enslaved race, dirty-faced, unhappy, unhealthy, unfed, caught already by the woundedness of the islands. We did what we could.

Thankfully, we were given some time off, seemingly scant, but in hours and minutes, one-third of our time was our own. The work schedule followed a three-week cycle: three days on, two days off, three days on, two days off, four days on, one day off, four days on, then two days off before beginning again. (We learned a couple of years ago that the Vista Volunteers who now form the staff changed this schedule to seven days on 8 A.M. to 8 P.M., then seven days on 8 P.M. to 8 A.M.—in other words, every day on for twelve hours—which they find much easier, which tells me that if that schedule is better than our old one, then my memory of grueling days must not be far wrong.)

A particularity of the old schedule was that the work shift began and ended at 2 P.M. with a briefing of the new workers. Thus, during the dreaded and so-called four-one-four, the offgoing workers had exactly from the end of the meeting, sometime after 2 P.M. on a Sunday afternoon, to 2 P.M. on the following Monday afternoon to do whatever was necessary to heal themselves from the past four days and prepare themselves for the next four.

But this leads me from my point. My point is that I was unhappy. And Lydie was unhappy. In an effort to find an antidote, we turned to what had brought us together in the first place—painting. I can remember my father saying to us as we left for Detroit and then the plane south to the Caribbean, “I’m sure you’ll find a lot to paint.” And we did.

As our turn on a Sunday afternoon came, and we faced our scant twenty-four hours to ourselves, we asked ourselves, Where to? We answered, Out, out—open spaces are needed, air, sun, breezes. So thinking, we climbed into one of the

little cars kept for off-hour use and, quite literally, headed for the hills.

One afternoon, we found ourselves in the beautiful Danish colonial town of Christiansted on the other side of the island. We parked the car on a steep side street of charming, if dilapidated, Victorian gingerbread houses, tilting telephone poles, and much populated by great numbers of frightened stray dogs. We gathered up our big watercolor blocks, pencils, and X-Acto blades and simply walked out of town, uphill. Soon the red tin or tile roofs lay wrinkled below us, the overall yellow of the house walls peeking out between them and beneath the green of the palms, themselves revealed by the glory of the scarlet flamboyant trees in bloom. Should we stop here? No, a little further up; we wanted the island to ourselves. The

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air became clearer, the breeze stronger, and the whole of the town sat below us, cupped by the piercing blues of the Caribbean sky and sea.

We sat down on rocks among acacia trees, cooled by that perfumed breeze of mangos and rot, listening to and watching the life of the town, and drawing. The hours passed. At last, backs and knees creaking, we gathered our things, walked down the cooling hill and drove back to the west side of the island. There, from the brick steps of a tumble-down house not far from the apartment where we stayed, we again watched the life of a town, this time the poor town of Frederiksted, lit up by the horizontal rays of the setting sun in yellows and greens to stop all speech.

After the sun had plunged below the horizon, remarkably speedily, the way it does in the tropics, we turned the lights on, and the various chameleons and

cockroaches watched us as we painted late into the night, painting the scenes we had observed in the afternoon—painting not, however, in the colors of the Caribbean, but in emulation of their glory, we used the purples and oranges and greens of the *fauves* we loved so much and for a time produced paintings remarkably alike.

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A year and a half later, I faced a decision. I perched on the proverbial horns of a dilemma. It was four in the morning. I sat in the family room of my in-laws’

house in the town of the university where I was expected to attend the first day of orientation for that year’s matriculating medical school students.

You see my dilemma. Was I to seek usefulness by becoming a doctor, looking for the happiness that I know comes with usefulness? Or should I continue to paint, happy now, though useless, knowing that uselessness might one day end my happiness, going beyond uselessness to become selfishness, pointlessness, good-for-nothingness?

As you know, I chose to paint.

Let me talk about thankfulness. I was extremely thankful to open this letter dated July 3, 1991.

Dear Chris,

Thank you for *CHARLIE PARKER*. I quite love it, but need to talk with

you—or should I say: I quite love it and want to talk to you.

Please call me (collect is okay) . . .

Thanks.

Sincerely,

Richard W. Jackson, Editor

I remain ever thankful for Dick's wit, guidance, company, and wisdom.

Of course I am thankful that Norton Juster and Michael di Capua, our editor, together had the idea to invite me to illustrate Norton's wonderful text for *The Hello, Goodbye Window*. Their combined good humor, great experience, and will continue to delight me. Furthermore, I thank everyone at Hyperion, you who are here and you who stayed in New York; your expertise is everything this book required.

And I thank every editor I have worked with, every art director, every designer, in fact, everyone working in all of the several houses I have published with. I thank everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone. I thank you all.

Thank you.

But I say thank you a bit sheepishly. Why? Because I know that you do not really do the work you do for me, particularly. I know this. I am not dumb. If you are good at what you do, and I know you are, then you write, edit, and design books because it is what you like to do; you do it not for me but for yourselves.

I would feel equally foolish saying, "Thank you for eating that delicious oyster po' boy."

"Thank you for curling up with that Agatha Christie novel."

"Thank you for getting ten hours of sleep."

Or you to me, "Thank you for each day, nine to five, winter, spring, summer, and fall, fifty weeks of every year, day in and day out, painting hippos."

It just doesn't sound right.

No, I want to thank someone else.

I have in mind one person I would like to thank, and I hope she does not mind if I invest in her all the thanks I would express to all of you.

It was like this. You remember that lovely letter from Richard Jackson. *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* was published a year later. It received mixed reviews; some glowing, some damning. Nevertheless, I was invited to read my book at a neighborhood bookstore (now driven out of business by the Barnes & Noble that opened a block away, prompting one friend to lament, "Now where will we go to be ridiculed and condescended to by the sales staff?") It was that kind of bookstore.) Still, someone there read my book, found me, and invited me to do a *story time*.

I had never done a *story time*.

I was willing, however, so at eleven o'clock on a Sunday morning in late fall, I wandered the nine blocks to the store. My audience consisted of a two- and four-year-old brother and sister, and another girl, also about four. My memory is a bit hazy, but certainly one of them toddled and mumbled, the other two spoke, and I remember leggings and a fair amount of stripes. I know the parents were not much in evidence, probably taking a breather in the self-help section. The toddler sat in my lap.

There was one more person in the audience, a rather taller person, but she only comes into focus later, as my attention was fixed, at that moment, at about knee level. As I had only one book to my name, I brought others along to read, including *Little Fur Family*.

I brought *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop*, of course, and its reading went very well. On the second time around the children "bopped" when I told them to "bop" and "boomba-ed" when I asked them to "boomba." The four-year-olds wanted to know about the cat. The toddler toddled.

So the morning went merrily.

After the appropriate half-hour spell, the

parents returned to gather their children, giving me a passing smile as they rooted in their baby bags for bagels.

Someone approached me; an elegant woman in blue, silver-haired and bangled.

She spoke quickly and with a bit of a pleasant twang that I could not quite place. She said to me, "I can't believe you're here."

I smiled blankly.

"Why not?" I said.

She clarified. "I was in town last night to hear Wayne Shorter," or perhaps it was another jazz personage. She went on, "And I just saw this book, and I couldn't believe my eyes, and then I look in the paper, and I see you're going to be reading here, and I was going to go home last night but I just had to stay over to see you this morning. I can't believe you're here."

What could I say? Nothing.

She said, "How did you write that book?"

I still did not know what to say, but I know I said something, for we spoke several minutes, and then, with a rustle of coats and scarves and well-wishes, she left.

I gazed after her. I knew that she mentioned she used to live in the city, now lived on Long Island, shared a place on 90th Street (my own street), and came in for concerts. I believe her husband was a pilot. I think she worked with books. I guessed she was into bookstores, libraries, schools, and lots and lots of jazz.

But I did not catch her name.

Her name is Karen Breen.

I mention this story not because it might be amusing, but because it is essential. I know now from many sources that Karen spent the next few weeks describing my book, reading my book, presenting my book to whomever she could make stand

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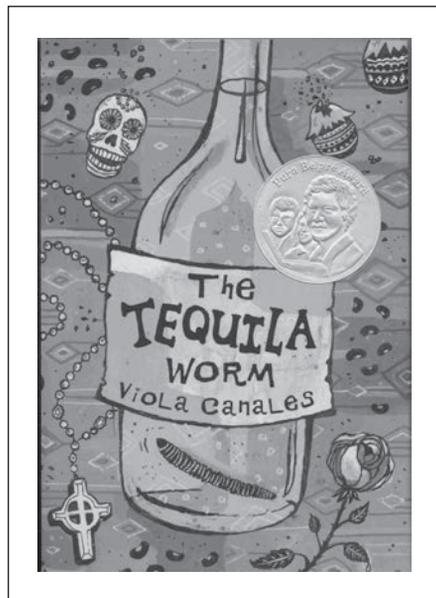
The truth is we are one family. And this truth is at the very soul of Pura Belpré's vision, I believe: how through the telling and the sharing of stories—everyone's stories—we come to see how we're really all in this together.

evil eye with a chicken egg, when the town's doctors couldn't.

The family name of Sofia, the heroine in my novel, is Casas, which means houses, or homes, in Spanish. In the book, Sofia only comes to appreciate the true riches of *her* home, when she finally leaves it, her barrio, *her world*, to attend a faraway boarding school on scholarship. There, she experiences taunting and racism, but she also discovers a new world of fabulous books, friends, and teachers, who help broaden her understanding of the wider world, of her own culture, and ultimately, of *herself*.

Over and over, as I've spoken to people who've read *The Tequila Worm*, I've kept hearing—from young and old, male and female, Latinos and others—how they too want to become part of Sofia's family, her home, which they find welcoming with warmth, wonder, and meaning. They long to sit at her family's table, to enjoy her Mama's delicious enchiladas and crispy *buñuelos*, but especially to partake in the telling of stories after-

wards, at the *sobremesa*, while drinking cup after cup of frothy Mexican chocolate, and reconnecting as a family.



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In a time when far too many think we should be erecting bigger and bigger walls to close our borders, it is literature that inspires us to build broader bridges instead—ones that open our eyes, our minds, our hearts. And in a time when a prominent person can dare suggest that people who have lost their homes to the horrors of Katrina are actually better off living on the artificial turf of the Astrodome, it is literature that we turn to—to remind us of the importance of remaining rooted in real communities, rich with the mystery, warmth, and magic of music, food, family, and cultural traditions, as well as those stories that can illuminate and strengthen our souls. For it's now time to begin building that beautiful, brilliant forever home, for *all of us*, together.

Yes, thank you, Pura Belpré for this. And thank you all. 🍷

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still for it, regardless of age or desire. She pushed, she shoved, she cajoled on behalf of that book. I have heard many times of her remarkable persuasion at that year's Notables meeting.

I know that if Karen had not spoken then, there, I would not be speaking here, now. I have no doubt that one little thing has led to another thing and another thing until it is a big thing. I am sure it happens this way all the time—one person has an enthusiasm for one book, thereby creating success or failure.

You may say, "Well, someone else

could have come along and discovered that book."

Yes, perhaps. But that is not what happened. What happened was that Karen Breen liked my first book, gave it a start in the world of librarians—the most important world for children's books—and made my career.

I know Karen is not the only person to do this. Of course not. You all have or you all will for my books and for many others. So I thank all of you. I thank all of you, with special thanks to all of the members of the Caldecott Committee.

So now, finally, I must finish this discussion. It is inconclusive, as it is only anecdotal. Still, I can say that over the years my happiness levels for painting have remained steadily high. My usefulness levels go up and down but now, with this award, are at a peak. I assert, and I hope it is clear, that my thankfulness to all of you is off the charts.

I know I am happy. You are telling me I am useful. And for that I am very, very thankful.

Thank you. 🍷