8-31-2009

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A Teacher Reflects on Seven Years in a Kansas City Alternative High School

by

Deborah Evaline Franks

FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LIBERAL STUDIES

SKIDMORE COLLEGE
August 2009
Advisors: Francois Bonneville, Martha Wiseman

THE MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAM IN LIBERAL STUDIES SKIDMORE COLLEGE
A Teacher Reflects on Seven Years in a Kansas City Alternative High School

1) Before the Final Year: Doubt
2) Before the Final Year: Clarity

3) How I Came to De La Salle

4) A Brief History of My Middle Years There
   A. 2004-2005
      1. September
      2. Shantel and Michael
      3. Field Trips
      4. At Home
      5. November
      6. Guns
   B. 2005-2006
      1. Preparing
      2. September: More Guns
      3. Livelihoods: Dominique
      4. Stepping Back: Adam

5) Penultimate Perspectives
   A. Parents and Babies
   B. Good on Paper
   C. Keyonia
   D. Fight
   E. Our Minds, Our Lives

7) Final Spring, 2008
   A. Stephen, Kurtiz, Amelia, Others
   B. Eric & Rochelle, Iman & Jim

8) One Year Later

9) Sources, with Annotated Suggested Bibliography
Abstract: A Teacher Reflects on Seven Years in a Kansas City Alternative High School

With an informed eye to the psychological, sociological, and institutional aspects of immediate events, the writer explores her seven years teaching in a school for disadvantaged urban youth living in a mid-sized Midwestern U.S. city. This work melds intensely personal memoir with perspectives to be had from current research, thus situating the personal in a wider social context. With this articulation came deep dissatisfaction with premises and practices on which the high school was based, and ultimately the writer decided to leave for an entirely different environment. At the conclusion is an annotated bibliography, offering the reader tools to evaluate the writer’s experiences as well as his or her own.
Before the Final Year

Doubt

I bend toward the computer screen, slumped, neck and shoulders aching from the poison of yesterday’s and last week’s and last night’s tensions caught there, to see if the student before me is working—hardly caring, but I’ve got to look busy, to them or to any unexpected visitors. I catch his Carhartt jacket’s stink of sweat and cigarettes and fried food and a small but distinctive shot of weed. At this last, an incongruent stab of hilarity reminds me of Kurtiz—or was it Iman?—saying all you teachers should go smoke one day, and then we’ll all have a good day for a change, and Sam and I had exchanged looks that said, ha, that would be a good day for us, too. For now, I want to be away, go away, get it done, check e-mail ten times an hour hoping something written there will change what is now or at least distract me from it, the shadow me here as required but disengaged. I can’t get away with putting my head down to sleep, as you all do, but I don’t want to be here, either.

A student slams a stack of books onto the table before me, and I flinch: I am not strong, I am weak, afraid. Or I am weak, taken by my anger, helpless to stop the automatic verbal shot in kind that I return. One millisecond push, and I am gone, over, past, in mid-reaction before I open my eyes to see.

A student’s dismissive glance in my direction and away, then proceeding with whatever action, being off-task or cursing or sleeping, I’d sought to correct, tells me: I am invisible. I hardly matter; I affect no consequence. I clench my teeth, jaw like ice and tongue an unhappy bulge onto the roof of my mouth. I have been clenching my teeth for four years now.
I’m defensive. I can’t listen: I have to explain: See, see, this is why I do this and that; I have my reasons; I am very smart. I’m too caught up in fearing for my own ego to listen, to my students, my boss, my daughter, my husband. I dismiss them at the same time I obsess over them.

I speak out, explain a better way, articulate the error in the current plan: I am contrary, excessively demanding and unsympathetic, a know-it-all, a bitch. Dismissively charitable words from my fellow teachers have an eye-roll embedded in them. I know it’s there. Or am I paranoid, too? Maybe they care too little to consider me at all.

My car’s the first out of the parking lot. I leave the unmarked papers, drink a beer, another, watch reruns. I’m indifferent and unmotivated.

Possessed by my anger, breath and heart snapping with my words, I am shrill, off the mark, and caustic. I make people want to walk away.

I have no presence, no command. Second-to-second demands (the phone, the boys arguing in the corner, the girl insulting me, the log book, the PA announcement—oh, and the lesson) require executive decisions I have no capacity to make. I suck at this job. The kids don’t like me, nor their parents. My bosses think I’m full of shit.

What good did I ever think I’d do these kids? What good have I done anybody? My marriage is kaput, and I’ve managed to fuck up my own kids, too. I have hardly any close friends. Really, what could I possibly be good at?

This is all true. Or some of this is true.

Four thirty-foot rows of fluorescent tubes make their own sort of shadow, resonating with the jangle at play in my nerves, overpowering the light coming in at the window, across the street from behind the Sisters’ quarters where a neighbor used to
sunbathe nude on her apartment roof, jarring the Sisters and the gawking teens, who were saved for a moment, until the staff scrambled to dutiful interference, from their quotidian schedules. There’s no view today, folks, just more of the same. Get back to it. I’ve got to get back to it, pay attention, engage with these children and give them what I can.

But I’m starting to think this city, this school, and this little room are not going to work for me.

Clarity

With summer almost here, the pond we’d put in the summer before was beginning to smell like lake water. My almost-ex-husband, “between jobs” and with time on his hands, had emptied and cleaned it in the course of landscaping the backyard, as we had intended when we first moved into the house in Kansas City’s Brookside neighborhood six years before. Dropping by every day or two from his studio apartment ten minutes away, he had planted columbines and rhodies, hostas and ferns, and occasional anemones and lilies, with a gorgeous boulder, limestone with a natural birdbath in one corner, and two lacy river birches and a rusty weeping Japanese maple overhanging the tiny waterfall. It was a pleasant fairyland, at least until the bugs and heat became too oppressive, a whole little delightful world he’d built. I had hoped the therapy of this good work would be a deeply felt revelation for him, a call to perspective and deliberate action, but I had learned not to expect that. He was soon to move to the east coast, further away from our life together, determined not to reopen doors he’d let slam closed.

Still, I was looking forward to early mornings with tea and the paper, or a book, nowhere to rush off to even if there was plenty to be accomplished. There are small
graces to be had anywhere, surely right there in the middle of Kansas City, far from the worst of places to be. Our house, built in 1915 with generous use of mahogany and three sturdy stories, was so pleasant and homey I don’t think I’ll ever live any place nicer, and the neighborhood was friendly and relatively safe. We’d come there hoping to save our marriage, to make a good five or ten years of the rest of our lives there. We’d chosen a house where our oldest child could feel welcome on holidays from college and our youngest find friends and have a yard to play in and where our parents would be happy to visit, satisfied with their children’s comforts and successes. But with those expectations dashed, I thought often of the humbler home in Vermont we’d left, state highway in front but field and stream behind—or anywhere I might look out to woods or hills, see stars instead of street lights, hear birdsong instead of sirens. I began to think I’d rather live alone in a double-wide away from everything than in that gracious suburban home.

One Sunday morning my radio alarm started up with the voice of Stanley Kunitz, the poet who had recently died at age 100. He talked of his own gardens, on Cape Cod, in which he had joyfully labored for more than thirty years, two years alone merely on fortifying the soil. His poems, of course, began to reflect what he’d learned there, as his life as a gardener became enmeshed with his life as a poet. I wished, how I wished, that my husband could throw over his profession and turn to these—poetry and gardening—the very things he’d wished to do when we were young. Kunitz sounded somber yet reverent. And then, still half-asleep, I remembered when I had heard his voice before: an online video clip of his reading of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “God’s Grandeur,” with its frank knowledge of the world’s “bleared” weariness yet its insistence on hidden grace. Outside the rain would fall, cleansing and nurturing the small hopeful plants, the trees’
expectant roots. Or I would water, granting showers spot by spot in small manmade torrents.

I spent mornings on the bench by the pond, before it was too warm, reading from Temple Grandin's *Animals in Translation* (2005). Our Abyssinians visited, rushing against my ankles, then my arms, occasionally mewing with cordial requests for attention and food. I was reading a section on basic emotions, from which human emotions have developed, and how in this respect people who are autistic like the author are in some ways more akin to animals. In Grandin’s view (with a fair amount of animal behavioral science to back it up), one of the core emotions, along with fear and rage and aggression for territory and food, is *seeking* behavior, wrapped up in curiosity and anticipation that are separate from desire for pleasure. I recognized this need. Having rejected fear and rage and resignation as not very pleasant or satisfying reactions to personal loss, I chose to enmesh myself in new pursuits: returning to school, changing careers, moving away.

I’d read, and thought, and read some more, and considered, gaining steadily on articulation of my frustrations. I knew that my job was a good job as far as it went and that no other would be satisfying in quite the same way. But I didn’t want to be there forever, or until retirement, or even much past 50. There were other things to do, other places to experience, and even, perhaps, others to love. My heart is unstable like everyone else’s, and certainly subject to others’ whims. My body will steadily become less and less reliable. My mind and imagination can at least take some of the sting out of these personal assaults and deficits as long as they last, keeping me exploring in the world, like Stanley Kunitz at work in his garden and on his poems. My losses are part of who I am, full of sadness, full of joy. There is no new life, no new start, no way to
simplify and resolve what I am into a story with a simple end. But at least I have a way to begin each day.

And so after this summer of “powerful emotions recollected in tranquility,” as Coleridge would have it, I began my final year at DeLaSalle. The questions I’d vaguely and haphazardly—or sometimes defensively or angrily or helplessly—been formulating throughout my time there pressed to the forefront of my consciousness, newly simplified and articulated: what kind of person was I, and what was my purpose as a teacher? The corollary questions, on which my answers depended, were: Who were my students, and what did they need? The worlds of experience both they and I brought to each day in the classroom, together with our school’s and communities’ expectations and perceptions as catalysts, resulted in relationships so complex that deciphering them called for a superhuman cognition. But I wanted to try.
How I Came to DeLaSalle

In 1990 I was a teacher in a psychiatric hospital in New Orleans. We helped adolescent patients move along towards their high school diplomas while their craziness or sadness or obsession was tended to elsewhere in the hospital by other staff. The hospital was not doing well despite what seemed to us on the teaching staff ploys to drain desperate families of their health insurance limits, so administrators were making cuts that came closer and closer to the school. “Get ready,” my principal warned.

A school district just outside the city, in Jefferson Parish, was recruiting teachers for a new drop-out prevention program. With federal money, they would institute special classes in Math and English, two academic areas that studies had ascertained were most crucial in retaining high schoolers. I’d begun to keep an eye out for a part-time job that would enable me to cut my hospital hours in half, saving my principal the trouble, so I applied and was hired.

Our classes would be based on the DeLaSalle Model, and before the semester began, Sister Roberta, the principal of DeLaSalle Education Center in Kansas City, Missouri, spent a day training us. We were guided through a massive handbook detailing individualized contracts and behavioral techniques and sold on the efficacy of schools willing to take the most troubled students and help them succeed. For the next year and a half, I taught students—all but one of them black—who had failed one of their core courses. I observed problems in the students, problems in myself, and problems in our host school, which housed nearly 3000 students, but I believed in the model. When one of my lucky colleagues got the chance to travel to DeLaSalle, she came back glowing as she told of students from a detention facility who sat attentively for their lessons and other
former drop-outs who interacted amiably with their teachers, and how Sister had bent to pick up a single gum wrapper from the quiet halls, saying, “Must be somebody new, who doesn’t understand yet how we do things here.” At around the same time, the New York Times published a brief article on the transformations taking place within DeLaSalle’s walls, proclaiming that there, “losers become winners,” graduating high school and overcoming prejudice and embarking on successful lives. I would love to know the real story, the whole story, of that DeLaSalle.

At the time I was a young mother and a young wife, still new to teaching, sure I knew what teenagers needed but unsure of why my students seemed so little impressed by what I had to offer. Karilina withdrew from the program after I refused to let her keep reference books on her desk during testing. Cherisse put her head down and refused to work, despite all the individualized choices I gave her. Laray picked the lock on the file cabinet and sprayed the fire extinguisher around the room when the sub stepped out one day. Kellup and Antwan cracked jokes compulsively while they were supposed to be reading—an in-class opportunity meant to save them from homework. Rodney commented once too often on the size of my booty.

I wasn’t sure what the disconnect was. Plenty of my friends and I had veered from the path of the studious during high school, even skipping class, or smoking in the woods, to see what how far we could stray from the rules without getting caught, but in class we would never have been openly rude or defiant: the worst deeds we were guilty of were neglecting our homework or chatting when we should have been listening. I had faith that once I’d found the right combination of assignments, and just the right things to do and say and show, I’d light the natural passion for learning in my students. After all, I was
smart and caring and passionate about my subject, so I knew I’d someday be a wonderful teacher, even if I wasn’t one yet. My special love for young people who’d seen hardships would grant me the magic to transform their lives.

Of course, I’d pondered the larger sociological issues of what school is for and what teachers should be. I’d fully prepared myself to stand up for students’ needs and rights, and I believed in education for all as the great equalizer and the surest means to enjoying one’s life. The nuts and bolts, the endless intricacies of wants and needs and responsibilities at work in an hour in a high school classroom, were still beyond me. I’ve come to believe they’re beyond a lot of other people as well—most alarmingly, those most active in the lives of our schools.

I came to DeLaSalle as a teacher in the fall of 2001: I had just that morning sent an e-mail following up on my first interview when news of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks reached the screens of local TV’s. We had moved to Kansas City the summer before, with my marriage troubled, my oldest child just off to college, and my youngest adjusting to life in a new city and school. I was trying to restart my career after several years as a homeschooling mom, and the want ad in the Kansas City Star for teachers at DeLaSalle seemed like a circle completed, an opportunity to start again and make some things right, as the move itself had represented to our family.

That first year at DeLaSalle I struggled with my old challenge, classroom management, which makes or breaks many a teacher. Some teachers have an immediate, instinctive knack for it, a presence that installs them as leader of the classroom from the moment they walk in. I do not have that gift, do not have it still, perhaps because I questioned everything I did, the why’s and how’s of every rule, of every assignment I
gave and every verbal interaction I had with students. And so as excited as I was to begin this job, as cheered by the supportive colleagues and committed to addressing each student’s private drama, I found the work a constant challenge, even as it rewarded me.

Midway through that year, we were all given copies of a slim volume by an academic named Helen Ashmore that had been published in our school print shop. Called *Undefeated: The Story of Godfrey Kobets and DeLaSalle Education Center*, it related, in very nearly gushing prose, the dynamic founding of a school with a noble purpose. The book was meant to confirm, in the school’s twenty-fifth year, what devotion and good intentions and single-minded charisma could do for a troubled population. A few people told me privately that Mr. Kobets had been known not only for his moving and shaking but for periodically antagonizing others with his blustery certainty, and I knew that after he’d died there had been administrative changes that had translated into turnovers in philosophy and staff. As with most private nonprofits, finances were a constant concern, and the middle school that DLS had opened just prior to my arrival bled the endowment until its closing in 2006. The Ashmore book tells nothing of the struggles and disagreements and conflicts of interest I came to know so well: the book pretty much boils everything down to Love and Will Conquer All. This is not that book.
September

It had happened again. The acoustics were horrible in my room, and I had trouble understanding everything onscreen myself, but there was enough comprehensible to question, puzzle, wonder, change, all the things I hoped my journalism students would do. So on the small screen, guns exploded, children died, anguished parents shrieked why, why, why, while Monique lolled her head on the desk, eyes half shut when I asked her four times to wake up; Mikilia actually complained that I had awakened her from her nap, screwing her mouth and eyes into disdain. Reggie and Sondra drew black ink designs on each other’s forearms, and Kilena attended to her makeup. Thaddeus, positioned right in front of the monitor, watched attentively and worked hard to answer the essay questions on his paper in front of him. Cornelius focused as his expert sketching of fantastic heroes allowed him, catching half of a speaker’s words and snapping to attention long enough to complain about what he’d heard, having missed the contrasting point that had come a moment earlier. Crystal, too, complained about what she’d observed in the documentary, but with a relevant point that proved she’d been engaged. Yet when I asked another student to stop his private conversation and pay attention, she rolled her eyes at me and huffed accusingly that I should not speak to any of them until I’ve earned their respect.

During the humanities classes, it was the usually demanding, aggravating second hour students who actually paid attention to the subtitled comedy we were watching, centered on another culture’s wedding customs. After ten minutes of complaints that this
movie had nothing to do with their lives, they were drawn into recognizable skirmishes between employees and employers, furtive lovers and police, parents and children, and the instantly sympathetic realization that people the world over use foul language, like sex, get unhappy. Then, ten minutes before class ended, the discussion degenerated again into protests: they had the right to speak and act as they liked in class—“Free Speech!”—and I had to turn the movie off and send one student to the office. Later, in conference with him and our vice principal, I offered an analogy: I would not have the right to come to his home and start talking trash in the name of “free speech,” since if I did he would have the right to tell me to leave. I explained that my classroom is like my home, and that the whole school, in fact, has its rules. “Do you understand?” Sean patiently asked him, supporting me, and the student agreed easily. The problem, I am sure, was not his misunderstanding of his rights and responsibilities, but his tendency to be easily tempted into inappropriate behavior for the sake of disruptions and attention.

I pushed away the thought that the first time I had seen this movie was with my husband, on our final trip together, a lovely, romantic, invigorating trip to a city I’d never visited before, and after a day of art museums and a pleasant dinner out we had shared the movie, enjoyed its charms and revelations. Now there was an e-mail waiting for me at lunchtime: he would be by as usual for his regular night to pick up our daughter. Soon, we would have to begin the paperwork, the official dissolution. What a waste. Such a waste.
Shantel and Michael

The following day, Shantel arrived at second hour with the same dark look as the day before, fists balled, head down, practically grunting in response to any question or comment from me or from others in the class. She refused my recommendation that she speak to her counselor, Brandee, saying that wouldn’t do her any good; I told her she needed to participate in class and act appropriately if she was going to stay in the room. And she did, watching our Indian movie as attentively as the day before, and only returned to the scowling and fist-balling at the end of the hour. “Are you okay?” I tried again as she left, after the rest of the class was already gone. “Oh, nothing, just my brother got shot sixteen times and died last night,” she snapped and stomped away. I gasped and called my Vice Principal of Discipline, Sean, telling him she needed help; he promised to immediately find her counselor and then find her. I told Sam, our social studies teacher across the hall, who was on the lookout for her, too.

Then I remembered a conversation I’d overheard between her and two others the week before, her first week in my class: they were lamenting, or boasting, about everyone they knew who’d gotten shot and when, why and by whom. She’d said her little cousin, five years old, had been shot in a drive-by at his home the summer before: she had been there and watched him fall dead. Then, it seemed that actually he had fallen into her arms and died. Then, more dramatic embellishment: Shantel had been dressed for the prom, in a lovely formal gown, and her little cousin’s blood had stained the white satin. I called Sean to tell him this. I saw Sam, who had talked to her and tried to get her to go to her counselor, and he said she had cried in his room about her brother’s death, but he was not surprised when I told him what I’d remembered. Which is sadder, a family in which such
things really happen, or a girl who feels the need to tell such stories? And of course the truth might be a little of each. It was a tragedy, however much was true, and I registered my opinion that Melanie, our mental health counselor, should be consulted.

A week later I was called down from my classroom to a conference with Michael and his aunt and uncle, with whom he lived. I knew his aunt as the receptionist at my daughter’s old school; many times, she was the kind, cheerful soul who kept watch while Amelia waited for me to pick her up early, either because she was sick or because she’d had a “meltdown,” before the testing and the meds. At the time I knew only that it was somehow better for Michael to live with the aunt and uncle. Later I learned his mother had been shot and killed at a club when he was just a little boy.

Michael was in trouble because of an incident a week earlier, during which he’d become angry in response to his counselor’s admonitions and slammed his fist against a chair hard enough to knock it down. Now we gathered to discuss his behavior in class, and I reported that nearly every day I had had to give him warnings about disrupting the class with sarcasm and inappropriate banter with other students. Then I reflected on his remarkable improvement since the year before: he had not once been rude to me personally, whereas before he had been so nearly every day. And he was working diligently on every assignment without complaint. He was more mature. His family confirmed that they had seen the same thing; the uncle wisely asserted that much of Michael’s behavior problem (the sarcasm, the challenging, the insults) was a matter of bad habit, and Michael was learning that he did not have to be a slave to those habits. His aunt told us they were proud of his advances and committed to sticking by him, and she
said twice that he needed to realize he was responsible for his own actions. We were going in the right direction; we wanted Michael to continue.

His counselor, Glenda, was a little harder on him: she went back to his failings, his tendency to challenge everything, often inappropriately: she demanded better. Someone mentioned that Michael had told other staff he didn’t like Glenda, and I wondered if she was harder on him because of this? Was she unfair? And then I thought of how hard she worked, how matter-of-factly insistent she was with every student who needed to improve, and I thought of my own inner struggles when students made public their dislike of me. She was all right, I concluded, in my swift internal assessment; she was fair as a person could be, on Michael’s side whether or not he realized it. And my mind flew to my own daughter, who had gotten herself into trouble more than once with her challenges and questions. This had in turn gotten me in trouble with her teacher more than once, because sometimes I saw her questioning as valid, and maybe this was why I was often sympathetic with Michael, too, so that he had sensed that appreciation and become kinder to me.

Sean meanwhile supported all of this with affirming, “We all know’s” and “Michael knows this.... “ Gayle asserted her principal’s right to conclude by directing Michael to a new in-school “Recovery” program with Mike Graham, the former parole officer who was at this point working as our orientation teacher. I was a little dubious that Michael’s actions warranted this consequence, although it was a step up from the after-school program he’d originally been assigned for the chair incident.

Later Michael told me that Glenda had confided to him that it was Gayle, not she, who’d recommended him for both alternative programs. This made me wonder about
Gayle’s feelings for Michael. I had been in two parent-teacher conferences a few weeks earlier in which students had accused me of playing favorites with Michael because he was white—in other words, accused me of racism. These incidents had been horrendously upsetting to me: I’d lost sleep, pondered responses, and wondered if I was in the wrong profession, doomed never to be accepted. Gayle and Sean had supported me both times, and surprisingly and thankfully, the parents in these two cases had seen through their children’s excuses and ordered them to behave themselves at school (such conferences don’t always go that well...). But here Michael was, still a behavior problem despite his improvements, and we had to be sure we did not treat him less severely than we did other students—so in our anxiety not to, did we end up treating him more severely? In this disciplinary case, an unspoken racial component figured, but such balancing acts in our responses occurred no matter the specific differences between the students. Each student and each incident had to be addressed uniquely, yet with respect for its effect among the rest of the school population, from students to families to other staff.

Field Trips

What a day. Shit. Forty-four kids and five staff from the HOT team attended the KC Rep’s production of *The Pirates of Penzance*, a Tuesday matinee. Forty of us behaved, if not admirably, at least acceptably, and the other nine made me so tense I had to come home and fix myself an old-fashioned to stop myself from yelling at my daughter. Four darling dears of sixteen or older swore they’d beat up the doofy little middle-school kids from the ‘burbs sitting in front of us for throwing paper wads in our direction. Most of the nine talked and cursed incessantly during the performance and
huffed rudely at me when I tried to shush them. The theatre educational liaison, with whom we were supposed to start a classroom drama program, hovered nearby, questioning my colleague Nick: What is the matter with these students? Some among this group also rustled food (which they knew they were forbidden) and slid over rows of seats while the play was in progress. This is the behavior of antagonistic eight-year-olds, I thought. I was sick of being embarrassed by these fools. I was making a list; some I would refuse to accompany on another field trip. At least, not for a while.

I used to read stuff like this, too, when I was an aspiring teacher. I was thrilled at the thought of the challenge of it all. It is a challenge to my emotions, to my heart, to my patience, to my intellect. It is a call to the fight for what is right, for what every child deserves, for a better world. But sometimes the children act like assholes you’d just as soon never lay eyes on again; sometimes life as a clerk at Walmart looks good (my apologies to those who know it’s not). Sometimes it is writing these words, with their clever remove and recollection in relative tranquility, that make the job bearable. Sometimes it is the prospect of summer vacation.

I see teachers turned consultants and published writers at educational conferences, I read others’ wise words about education, and I wonder, How much are they making? How long did they last in the classroom? A teacher/director I once worked for, a dynamic, inspiring woman who could teach basic fractions one minute and BC Calculus the next, all to emotionally disturbed children, with a warm calm that encouraged even the most eccentric or ill of her students, once confessed to her desire to throw it all over and wait tables at a donut shop. Another teacher I knew confided that
every fall, the night before school started would inevitably find her in the bathroom, throwing up. Sometimes it hardly seems worth it. Shit.

Maybe I am too lonely to be a teacher. I have passion, for my subject and for my students; I have the knowledge, I have the expertise. But my loneliness twists the way I relate to others, making me increasingly eccentric and pinched. I want too much; I need too much from others to simply give myself. The grief I quash to make it through the day comes out in awkward humor and bursts of fierceness, confusing children who need someone dependable and consistent and simple. I am supposed to be a model of all-can-be-okay, but my life has gone wrong. That may make me a better writer than teacher.

Columbus Day was another field trip day, this time to the Renaissance Festival an hour out of town, and this time I stayed behind. The list of who went and who stayed was being finalized as students and staff boarded the bus; no one had sent work for the students divided among those of us remaining; some students were angry at being put on the “no go” list, and no one had talked to them about the why’s and wherefores of being on it. One student—one whom I was most reluctant to keep behind, because I know he was capable of appreciating the cultural experience—confronted me, and I explained: it was the threatening comments he’d made about the annoying middle schoolers at the play, which made him untrustworthy on a field trip to a place where students from other schools would be. He asked why I didn’t like him—he had asked this before, but I think he knew it wasn’t true—and made a “psycho” face, reminding me of my own son, just a little bit older, who used to become “demon boy” with a glassy, crazed stare to tease his little sister.
Karen, our team’s science teacher, and I were just as glad not to be going. She feared those encounters with students from other schools, or between our kids and the actors and vendors; I feared kids disappearing or becoming lost or late and missing the bus back. Sam from across the hall, who’d led the group, had been taking kids on this trip for years and had never had a problem with students misbehaving or lost, although we did hear one year of a couple of students stealing. But he was self-assured and in his element, and I knew the day would go well for the most part. It would be fun; they would learn something about Renaissance culture without even trying. I did wish Sam had organized the details for students and staff staying, but then, whenever I tried to do the same, there wasn’t much response from other teachers. The details got away from us, and our very congenial team often forgot that those details were what kept us working well together. We were in danger of pissing each other off if we weren’t careful—as I was threatening to do with my nearly daily e-mails to them all, asking about the overlooked details.

I was afraid Karen was not going to stay past the year. She was not happy with classes of 15, mixed messages to staff and students about rules and expectations, students who treated us like dirt. She had spoken of moving to Canada with her partner and daughter; she was younger than I was and had other prospects, other goals.

I knew I had choices to make, too, but I felt bound by the seeming impossibility of finding a place where I could find a good job and a good school for my daughter, where housing was affordable, people friendly, and the neighborhoods safe—and where she could be near her father. Both he and I were feeling bound to Kansas City, a place we never would have chosen to spend the rest of our careers, even together, and so periodically we both were tempted to bolt—to run for the Vermont hills we missed so
much, live as best we could, homeschool a daughter who’d be better off running free with
the wolves, anyway, wouldn’t she? But we were not together, and our retirement funds
even then would only grant us about $400 a month if we continued working until we
were 65, and Amelia needed stability as much as she needed freedom, and so there we
were.

Working conditions were good enough at DeLaSalle to keep me from
complaining too much, I thought. But I knew if Karen left, and maybe Ron, our math
teacher, too, since it was his first year and he had been slammed with class sizes, and
Sam might search out an administrative job when he finished his master’s, and my friend
Jan was keeping her eye out at schools closer to her home—well, if they all left, their
replacements could change the mix dramatically. A similar exodus apparently had taken
place several years before, under another principal. Had Gayle considered all this when
she decreed the year’s round of changes? Consequences were seldom considered, and we
suffered for it and our students suffered for it. I wondered if DeLaSalle might be at the
start of its inevitable decline. Or maybe I was just being gloomy.

At Home

Two hours of math last night, one this morning, and my sobbing child was sent
packing to school so that I could come to work (late). What a headache I had. Second
hour, Amelia’s teacher called to say she had done twice as much math as she’d had to,
having gotten the assignment from the wrong person. Her teachers put her, exhausted
and unwilling, into the van for an all-day field trip to Topeka; I only hoped they would
not call me to come pick her up from there.
Long division was her trial. Shown concepts with money, or cuisenaire rods, or candy, she understood, but when it came to procedure, the complexities of which step when and what goes where and how many digits to bring down and when to stop and why, she was overwhelmed. She’d do one problem just fine, then get twisted up on the very next one, sure it was impossible; a whole page of these things filled her with despair. I’d been reduced to bullying and barking orders (“Just DO them”) so that I could get to work at all the following morning, knowing the bullying didn’t help her learn one bit.

Amelia at ten easily wrote better than nine-tenths of my high schoolers, so I tried to remind myself that writing is a multistep process overwhelming to many people, too. The complexities of grammar and spelling can seem like capricious gibberish, especially to someone whose parents do not speak standard English, or any English at all. It is hard to pin down what you’re doing right and wrong; no definition of a “complete sentence,” for instance, has ever seemed very useful to me: I know ‘em when I see ‘em. I try to promote fluency of ideas before formal writing skills—my students have things to say and need to feel that power of expression before they try to coax their thoughts into proper format. With Amelia, conversely, the adults in her life needed to shore up her confidence that she could understand how numbers work and how useful they could be.

Just before lunch that day, I met my fellow English teacher Jan’s son, the Marine just returned from Iraq who had come to tell students about his experience. Adopted from the Philippines when he was ten, he was dark-skinned, articulate, and polite, imposing in his self-confident demeanor despite his size, just over five feet tall and skinnier from having had “not much to eat lately but dirt,” as he joked. Jan had held up well for the nine months he’d been away, getting by on the occasional e-mail or satellite phone call, but
she’d confessed to those of us who ate lunch with her that when she’d received word that he was finally on his way from Germany to California, she had collapsed in tears of relief. Linda and Kathy and I, who with Jan called ourselves the Taco Belles for our standing Wednesday appointment, made a practice of steering clear of politics that year, avoiding criticism of the military or its Commander in Chief, or even lamenting the steady rise in the number of casualties there, although Jan herself commented quietly, “I’m not sure if we should have gone.” A month or so back I had discovered a web site with the names and demographics of each soldier killed in Iraq so far, and when one passed one’s browser over the name, a photograph appeared. I had found it very moving, very troubling and pointed, and had almost e-mailed the link to the staff, but then I’d thought: No. Jan.

Jan’s husband, along with her daughter and her husband and their little girl, Jan’s beloved first grandchild, had come, too. I thought how good it was for our students to see a loving family together. I was envious; I wished I had a happy family to show off. But then I remembered: Jan and her family had seen trouble, too.

At home, I read Amelia’s teacher Rebecca’s long note detailing Amelia’s demands on her time and her exasperation at Amelia’s not following explicit directions. What, did she think Amelia had put herself and her teachers and me through such agony on purpose? Time for TV and junk food and a nap. But I was already mentally composing a reply.
November

A few months later, Sam, my Social Studies teacher hall mate, was moved to Discovery, our orientation program for new students, so that Mike, the long-time Discovery teacher, could start the new Recovery program, which replaced BASE, which replaced DEP, all versions of in-school suspension. Would we stop here long enough to get this one right? A new Sam, a woman, replaced the old Sam as the social studies teacher. I was annoyed at stories of kids who claimed a half credit or even more from the old Sam in the one quarter we’d been in session that year. Glenda let slip her similar feelings: “If they could earn their credits that easily, no wonder he didn’t have behavior problems.”

And Nick, our reading teacher who’d just gotten married, would be away on a Caribbean honeymoon, so he had divvied up his kids, a few to me each hour. Fifth hour, Dominique and Ray refused to do the work he’d left, claimed they’d done it, claimed it couldn’t be done, claimed they were “grown” and didn’t have to do what I said. I pissed Ray off by telling him not to be “dense” when he refused my helpful hint that “keen” is in the dictionary even if “keenest” is not. Both complained that they hated being in my class: in Nick’s class, they got to chill or play on the computer whenever they wanted!

Now I was pissed at Nick. Fifth hour students distributed petitions that I be fired – how dare I make them work when other teachers didn’t? A former student came to me in the hall, saying he’d heard Sean had decreed I would be fired if they could gather fifteen student signatures on that petition.
By this point, I was amused. Crystal, who’d actually defended me of late, sidled by to say, cheerfully, “I don’t really mean anything by it, Debbie; we’re just trying to see how far we can take this before we get kicked out of school!” That same week, early statistics gathered after the November 2 election were published, indicating that only one out of ten 18 to 24 year olds had exercised his or her right to vote. Obviously, they had more important things to do—like trying to get themselves expelled. Four more years!

The weekend before that, I’d visited the hills of Vermont to see our 20-year-old, Gabriel, our goofy but quick but serious but love-besotted but full of wry humor son, somehow in his niche at tiny Marlboro College. I met his friends, girlfriend, and advisor, who was also parent of one of Gabe’s classmates, and wished I’d had time to ask, Will my son be able to find a job when he graduates? We had driven around the tiny town of Marlboro and attended a concert of contemporary Vietnamese music performed by international students on western and eastern instruments. I had spent one night with my husband’s sister and her family in their house in small-town northern Mass., where neither streetlight nor sirens spoiled the quiet dark. I’d had a cheerful evening and dinner with an old friend in the Upper Connecticut River Valley and suffered the pain of revisiting old haunts, which I’d avoided for three and a half years. Driving by our old house in Hartland, Vermont, I’d seen our next-door neighbors, taking their morning walk together as they had done since Earl retired and faced that little incident with his heart. He and Nancy looked a bit older, but they were still together. I thought, Damn, he took me to the Midwest and dumped me.

I returned home to the Earwax Matter. A parent confided to me that another parent had confided to her that her child had told her that when my daughter sucked her
fingers at school, she was made to stick her fingers deep into her ears and then suck them off. All was confirmed by my daughter, and with Rebecca by the other parent. I stewed and railed but decided Amelia’s father should be the one to express displeasure this time, which he’s better able to do in a firm but low-key manner. Rebecca protested to all that this was a joke, a funny way kids like to be reminded, but our daughter clearly felt she had no choice in the matter, so we said, “No.” Then all parents involved in the talk were handed bullshit about the inappropriateness of discussing such things among themselves; “privacy issues” were even mentioned, despite the fact that we, parents of the child in question, had been left ignorant of the method used. Again, I stewed and fumed and wanted my child the hell out of that school, but my husband reminded me: a change now could hurt Amelia even more than Rebecca’s silly wrong-headedness. So I simmered down and made nice, sending a note reassuring Rebecca that we hadn’t wanted to make a big deal out of Earwax, but asserting that the parents’ talk was appropriate and even good for the school and helpful for her, since she was otherwise without oversight, and since these two other parents did, actually, adore her. She answered appreciatively and admitted that she was hypersensitive about talk, having seen other “small” issues erupt into full-blown scandal due to talk between parents. Small? I could only imagine.

I could also imagine having a few beers with Rebecca. She was fun; she had an innocence that helped her appreciate that of the children; she was full of ideas and curiosity and she loved, loved, loved to travel, whether across country by car or abroad. She had suggested lavender as a remedy for Amelia’s frequent sleep problems, having used it herself and for her children: she told me of a trip to Mexico several years before during which she’d awoken every night and read herself Ciderhouse Rules for hours,
worsening her propensity to insomnia. These things endeared her to me. But when I thought Earwax, and her defensiveness and failure to apologize, I thought of how I must guard my child from her. I also thought: if ever she reads this, she might well lash out, crumble, get out of teaching, and become a writer/consultant—and maybe be happier for it. Or was I talking about myself?

Devin, the student I’d wished could go on the Ren. Fest field trip, shit-talking, blustering, dismissive, and often rapping, interpreted a Shakespearian sonnet with pointed understanding, with passion and effort and instructive originality. His reading and writing skills were certainly below grade level, but there were depths to him, feelings and acuity that tormented him. He fell to the dogma that says a man’s gotta be tough, gotta fuck women and fight men, can’t show the strengths of kindness or happiness. His short story project for my class was an interesting blend of realistic cynicism and romantic innocence, in which young lovers go off to separate colleges and then betray each other. When I read it, I was heartened to see he’d considered teens’ going off to college as a norm.

One day we read a poem in our textbook from the Vedas of India, and students sniggered over photographs of round-breasted temple frescoes on the page. Devin made some comment about that crazy Indian writing that tells about freaky sex, and I told him that he was thinking of the Kama Sutra; I was surprised that he even knew of its existence, wondering if there was some current, corrupted pop culture reference to it. The next day I asked him what he’d done to his hand, which was wrapped in an Ace bandage, and he made the universal gesture for male masturbation, joking that he’d done a little too much. Of course, this was a totally inappropriate joke to make in front of a teacher, one
that many a day I would’ve reacted to with an immediate write-up and a call to the office. But this day I was lighthearted, my guard down, and so I responded equally inappropriately, given my station: I burst out laughing, and laughingly sent him on his way, saying, “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that.”

**Guns**

One sixth hour on a Winter Wednesday, with classes about to end at noon and an off-site meeting for teachers to look forward to after lunch, Dexter was paged to the office. I thought it must be about the frequent absences I’d written him up for recently and waved him on; we were in the middle of a Socratic Seminar. Nearly five minutes later he returned, taking his coat off and hanging it on his chair. “Man, it is hot in those halls,” he made a big show of explaining before leaving again, and my bullshit detector went off immediately. I wondered how to alert the office without making my suspicions obvious to the class. Fortunately, just then Sean called to find out why Dexter was taking so long, so I explained how he’d just come back to leave his coat. Glenda arrived soon after, asked if Dexter had left anything else, and went away with the coat and a brisk “thank you” when I said no. Weed again, I was sure.

But next morning when I arrived, all students were being directed to the basement cafeteria, where their coats were taken and they were wanded before they came up to class. It hadn’t been weed, but a gun. Staff and students had all been called at home, with a few unintentional oversights including me, and offered the choice of staying at home while the incident was investigated. No one on the staff accepted the offer, and really, we were concerned but hardly terrified. Doubtless, it was not the first handgun on the
DeLaSalle campus, and Dexter’s story that he’d needed it for protection from someone on the outside was believable. We could hardly stay at home over every possible threat out there, or we’d never come to school. But it was decided: like other district schools, we must have metal detectors. I had seen a swift progression in security since I’d begun working here, since we’d only begun having police officers as security guards within the previous year. Our officer couldn’t be everywhere, and as one of our maintenance workers pointed out, if someone really wanted to get a gun in there, they could have done so through a window or a back door with the help of an accomplice. But the accepted wisdom was that with an officer and a detector, we now had at least a credible deterrent.

I thought of Ronald, the previous year, kicked out a second and final time for vaguely threatening phone calls to staff (the message on my own voicemail had been a low, sinister croon, “Debbie, Debbie, Debbie. We all know what a bitch you are.”). His first dismissal had been for misbehavior in the class and for his admission that he’d developed a Columbine-type plan for wreaking havoc at the school. He’d been remanded for psychiatric care and, incredibly, been readmitted to school after, our administration later realized, he’d refused to go, a scary oversight. I thought of so many others who had all been kept or recycled repeatedly despite their complete inability to follow social norms and wondered, Would we need the metal detectors if we sent these lost souls to a more secure setting? As we all pondered what prevention measures were realistic, students grumbled about the necessity of storing their coats for the day, and our sixth hour classes were shortened by a third to give students time to collect their belongings. The board approved the money for the metal detectors, but they would take two weeks to install.
I forgot about it all for the weekend, and then Monday came. A swiftly made sign on the back door where staff members entered called teachers to the library at 7:30, before the start of classes. Rushing down the hall to collect my roll and paper from the mailroom, I was stopped by Linda. “Did you hear?” she asked, concern in her voice.

“Oh, no, it’s not good news, is it?” I asked.

“Jason L. has been shot,” she explained quickly.

“Shit,” I blurted out, although I seldom cursed at school and never around Linda, and braced myself, “Is he dead?”

“No, he’s going to live,” she continued, her matter-of-fact tone comforting. It reminded me of my father, or other good doctors I’ve encountered, who will tell it to you straight and so absolve you of fear, no matter how devastating the news. “He was leaving a club; they shot him in the back. Right now he’s paralyzed, and they don’t know if he’ll walk again, but he’s going to live.”

There were no more complaints about coats that day, and the kids were subdued, Even those who didn’t know Jason had heard of him or sensed from other students and teachers that we were in mourning, no matter his prognosis. How could a boy with a heart so true have gotten into such a mess?

The year before, Jason and I must have ended up in Sean’s office four or five times to hash things out. He was a compulsive talker in class, frequently interrupting or just distracting me as I tried to give the class directions. Worse, he would become resistant or hostile if I redirected him for such a disruption. He was sure I was picking on him, making a big deal out of nothing, never cutting him any slack. It’s true, I wasn’t sure how to deal with a behavior problem that seemed often to be truly out of his control, but
bringing it to his attention seemed a reasonable thing to do, and I certainly did nothing to earn his rudeness or anger.

“Debbie’s not out to get you, Jason,” Sean would patiently rail, as Jason fumed and pouted. The problem never went away, but it eased, giving me the opportunity to spend more time praising Jason for the hard work and thoughtfulness he put in to each assignment. His notebook entries were mature and thoughtful and longer than what I required; reading sheets were thoroughly done, and when I handed work back for corrections or additions, he made minimum fuss. In the halls he was funny and loud, strutting and hailing all those he knew, even as he gave a nervous duck of his head that told me he was a little on the shy side, after all. Gradually, we began greeting each other with real affection, so when he decided to call me “Li’l Debbie,” I would grin, not offended.

Others on the staff and I had recommended him for the joint community college program, so with the new year’s reorganization into academies, I had stopped being his Language Arts teacher. But he continued greeting me, sidling by with that characteristic duck of his head and a “’Sup, L’il Debbie?” whenever he went by my room. It is such a pleasure to be able to have only happy encounters with a human being, with no need to call them on their transgressions or argue with them about their actions. I did not know he was hanging with the wrong crowd outside of school, making foolish decisions late at night when he should have been home in bed or watching TV or talking with true friends or family.

A week after he was shot, I visited him in the hospital, where he was surrounded by a passel of older sisters; his mom, having been there all night, had just gone home to
sleep. He was alert and friendly, and he said he had been treated well. Everyone was encouraged by the tingling he felt in his lower body, but seven days into things, I found reports of movement in only two toes to be discouraging. I stayed long enough to watch him take lung therapy, breathing through a tube. I told him we were thinking of him and would visit in Columbia, three hours away, at the rehab center where they were talking of transferring him. It was not the time to recommend that he do some soul-searching, and looking around at his concerned family, I realized there was probably no need.

Most disturbing while I visited, surprisingly, was the hospital directive that no one touch him, for fear of infection. I wanted so much to give him a big hug, even a smooch on the forehead, something he would never have tolerated at school but that he might have welcomed given the circumstances. The only way I could touch him, however, would have been to scrub and don a gown, and I thought that would make me even more removed from him. So I stood beside his bed and smiled and tried to make small talk, not my forte or his, and left before the hour was out.

A month later one of my colleagues visited Jason at home and found him frighteningly gaunt. There had been no improvement in his body, and his mind was beginning to struggle with his realization of physical helplessness. He was capable of doing schoolwork by then, but he’d attempted little.

By May, still wheelchair-bound, Jason had visited the school and was even given permission to “roll” (his alternative to “walking”) at graduation, although his diploma would be retained until he’d actually completed the work. He arrived at graduation fattened up again and in great spirits, and we assigned a student to push him up the aisle and stand by him during the ceremony. When the class was brought together for a group
photo, he, along with several of the other young men, threw up their neighborhood signs, those hand gestures of personal cool and assured belonging. My friend Jan, annoyed with the others, found herself downright shocked at Jason’s renewed reliance on this means of proclaiming who he was, and she was blunt: “Don’t you know better? This is what got you into that chair!” she shamed. Finally, all the students accommodated the photographer with formal, dignified poses, and another year was done. Graduates hurried out with their families or with friends to after-parties, none of which, I prayed, would be on the morning news. I left alone, pleased to be in my quiet car, and made my way down the highway and home to relieve my husband, who would drive to his apartment while I put our daughter to bed.

In my own solitary bed, I found myself day dreaming about the solitary vacation I’d taken two summers before, a healing removal from everything I knew. I thought, I want to go to Tucson again. I want to see the airplane graveyard and the dry cave I didn’t have time to see before. I want to dip in the serene pool at Christine and Dennis’s B&B, wake early and write for hours before my beautiful breakfast, walk carefully beside the exotic desert flora at sunset, the gentle tattoo of skittering quail a projection of my imagination’s delicate searching. I want this time of contorted anguish and impenetrable puzzles to ease. I want to be happy, at ease in life, as it seemed I must have been before Kansas City, wasn’t I?

Instead, a few weeks I found myself in Italy, celebrating with my husband’s family his mother’s eightieth birthday, with the challenges of sharing and coordinating and conflict that any family reunion, especially one involving separated spouses, entails. Lush countryside, a spectacular villa, and communal dinners that went long and late, full
of good food, good wine, and plenty of laughter, all reminded me of how little my world was like my students.’

One day I was in Florence alone. I wandered past and through churches hundreds of years old. At a market by the Santa Maria Novello, I bought watercolors by a Florence Art Institute graduate; my favorite was a silhouette of Pinnochio at a window with Figaro, looking out upon the city streets and the laundry on the line, already a real boy in his wistfulness. I saw the David, who surprised me with his outsized stature and touched me with his humanity at the same time I realized he was really an old friend, only known from books before but with whom I already had a dear relationship. My family would be able to see these things another day, I knew. So I found myself fantasizing about ways to share such things, such a world and such a life, with my students.
Preparing

In the final week of the summer, my principal Gayle requested I meet with two professors from a nearby university who were to consult with us on implementing Differentiated Learning Strategies, or D.L., whereby students with different backgrounds, skill and knowledge levels, and learning styles are accommodated in processes leading them towards similar education goals. Or at least that’s the current party line. I had been designated “in-house consultant,” so with our consultants I would be planning faculty workshops for the first half of the year. The two were amiable and sympathetic, but one arrived fifteen minutes late and spent half the time on her cell phone, and the other, who gave grandfatherly advice as to the best way to present information and involve staff, seemed uncritical of the notion that they were asking me to present myself to my fellow teachers as an authority. When I told them I was considering what to pursue a master’s in, they promoted their own courses, sure the study of education had changed since the 80’s when I’d gotten my teaching certificate, and confident that they were offering something newly exciting and useful. Privately, I was keenly dubious. Then one professor suggested that perhaps my administration had given this assignment because they saw my potential as an administrator, and that having this on my resume would help me to move in that direction. They were former principals, so I didn’t say: I would like administering in a school only slightly less than being the President of the United States, which I would like as much as a hole in the head. Too complex (and so demanding frequent over-simplification to satisfy one’s public), too many people to answer to, and too much self-
and school-marketing required. I wondered in passing if my principal did see me more suited to such a job, safely away from classroom contact with the students?

We briefly discussed a midyear celebration of teacher accomplishments in this area, with sharing, prizes, general good cheer. I pointed out that it would be beneficial to hear of teachers’ failures as well as successes, since we invariably learn much from them. Dr. H—helpfully suggested that I call these “challenges” instead of failures, so as not to start us down a path of commiseration, and his instincts for the pitfalls of group dynamics are right. But I realized later that this language, this marketing of a strategy, this, yes, propaganda, then circumvents our ability to criticize it. It is assumed we will assume this approach to education is the best, and even if I agree that it probably is, I am loathe to cheerlead it.

And with that, it hit me. I was not meant to be in this profession. At least, I was not meant to be in this part of it. I was too much of an intellectual, too much of a critic; I was better at writing about this job than doing it. My attitude puts off my students and my colleagues, no matter how much I might love them individually. And I am too abrupt, too impatient, too prone to snap instead of accept if I am crossed by proud ignorance or disrespect. For too many of these kids, my personal expectation that they act and learn decently was too much pressure, more an affront than an encouragement—especially coming from a middle-aged white woman—and my personal challenges, the affronts I was facing at home with my family, seemed to be keeping me from mellowing.

What of the students who did respond well to me? What of Devin and Iman, who got my jokes and did my work? What of Shameka, who crossed me every step of the way and was angry every time I expected more of her, but who asked me to her Senior
presentation, saying, not “I realize now how much you cared, and I care about you now, too,” but “Your class was my hardest, and I passed it!” What of Derrick, who cursed what he was sure were my efforts to fail him, then weeks later apologized and flashed me a smile as beautiful as any I’ve seen when he’d succeeded? I ached to think of not having them, or students like them, in my life, and I was troubled to think that the same peculiarities that hamper my teaching simultaneously offer students something unique and valuable.

But even in my tiny school we were expected to devote ourselves to district and state and national expectations. As in the teacher training courses I took so long ago, I had to adhere to minimum standards of academic achievement and of behavior, and a certain homogenization was the result. Those who deviated too much—and it appears I did—were not understood or desired; I was more a liability than an asset, and I began feeling as though I couldn’t change much more than I already had. Maybe the truth is that I wouldn’t have wanted to. The compassion and patience of Buddha I would seek, but not if they came at the expense of clear sight and speech.

*September; More Guns*

It was good to see my colleagues again when we returned for professional development days in mid-August. In our annual all-sites meeting, we were told about the grand new Vision for our institution. We would, after the requisite study, seek $10 million to expand and improve our physical plant. Administrators spoke openly of finding a donor interested in having his or her name on a shiny new building. I found this a troublingly cynical tactic: would no one want to help our children unless they could
trumpet their charity by doing so? The nonprofit truism that nice new buildings will in turn bring more funding for operating expenses is just as troubling. I fear we have become a self-perpetuating machine, and no one who is part of it is capable of stepping back and asking questions about what is right or what is best. I was, I realized, a child of privilege even to speak of such things. How many people in the world have the power to design their livelihood around to their own philosophies?

I could barely sleep the night before the kids returned to class. But the day and even the week turned out fine, with my classes moderate in size, and I was happy to see so many old faces. The artificial freedom of having told myself I would leave at the end of that year or the next helped me keep a calm demeanor, and at this point in the year, many of my students were genuinely glad to be back. The first time I saw Iman, she told me dismissively that she’d received my postcard from Italy but that her little brother had torn it up. I slumped. “Not really,” she grinned. “I have it taped to my dresser mirror at home.” I rallied.

At home, I was enjoying another rare sense of freedom. My daughter was in a new school, where she had encouraging teachers but little homework. She had a squabble with one student that continued into the next week, threatening to become a rivalry, but an older student brought the problem to a counselor, who called both girls in and hashed it out with them. Her drama teacher told her she was a “genius” for her play ideas. She was still seeing her best friend from the previous year every week or two. She was happy. Thank God in heaven, she was happy.

Sam and Karen and I began our joint project on Hurricane Katrina, which had just occurred. Karen covered the science: flora and fauna, watersheds and brackish water, and
erosion and the engineering concerns of topography. Sam discussed disasters and the scope of this one, health, social breakdowns, economic implications, government responsibilities or lack thereof—although she had a distinctly bias against the Bush Administration slant I found bordering on the inappropriate. I noticed a carefully designed graphic organizer on the branches of government posted in her room; then I noticed it had a grammatical mistake. Should I have said anything? Hell, no. I did my best to introduce cultural ideas such as Cajun and Creole folklore and customs, Mardi Gras, some music the kids laughed at (although they danced along anyway), and food. One night I spent nearly three hours and forty bucks making a huge batch of jambalaya from scratch, and the next day our first class devoured it eagerly and gratefully. Then our second group of students acted like such a bunch of pills that both Sam and I, furious, decided to split them up and forget the food, which we shared with faculty at our potluck lunch instead. The potluck was a United Way fundraiser, a pleasant event until I became annoyed to hear from a colleague from another site that she was required to come to our site, almost half an hour away from her regular workplace, and that she felt pressured to give to United Way although she had other charities she preferred to give to. Okay, I had a bad attitude. How did someone like me get in this profession? Was I just a spoiled malcontent? A bitter almost-divorcee?

A few weeks later, Victor and Marques were arrested for murder. In separate incidents, they were along for the ride—and quite possibly had their fingers on the triggers—when groups of young men decided to exact revenge, or take what they coveted, or just prove their manhood to those in the car with them. An avid and vocal opponent of the death penalty and of trying juveniles as adults, a mother who grieved for
the parents of Dylan and Eric as much as for those of the innocents at Columbine, I was a little surprised by my own reaction: I was furious. I didn’t want to visit Victor in prison; maybe he should rot there! And I wanted to publicly correct Gayle, my principal, when she repeated her usual advice to the young people gathered in our gym: don’t throw away your life! Think of your future! You have more important things to focus on! Of course this is all true, but I was dismayed that she did not add: taking a human life is wrong. All life is precious. We are all sinners, and even if those people murdered were the biggest jerks alive, they did not deserve to die. This madness of bravado and forcing shows of respect from others helps no one, and leads on, I realized, to conflicts that last for centuries. What gain, what nobility or peace, what solution, have the Palestinians and Israelis wrought with an attitude that must have begun on similar grounds, so long, long ago? Mothers and fathers and children weep and die, and young men die or die inside, forcing themselves to perpetuate the horror in the name of honor. Kansas City was going downhill fast, our murder rate skyrocketing (the kids were fond of calling it “KC—Killa City” that year), and too many of those in the neighborhoods where the violence was endemic pressed their lips firmly together and refused to tell what they knew.

I was pissed at Tanya, too. She was a friend of Victor and obviously upset, but she expressed her distress with incessant, self-centered chatter about the incident, going on and on with how knowledgeable she was about it all. When she began to relay to the class that she knew Victor had snitched on the others who were in the car with him, I told her to stop talking, now, and I sent a note to her counselor and Sean about it. I had to admit, I was developing a dislike for this girl, who was often rude to me and to others, and who seemed to like to stir up trouble between people. I reminded myself that she
some pretty deep-seated insecurities to get her kicks this way, but knowing
elp: I was fed up with her. Now she’d taken up with Kris, an amiable, sleepy
guy who was knowledgeable and skillful enough to do the college prep work on the
Liberal Arts team but unmotivated to do so. I immediately suspected that she was using
him.

Livelihoods; Dominique

I returned to a habit of checking page two—the crime reports—of the Metro
section in the local paper. It seemed quite possible someone I knew might appear in them.
International news assaulted me on all sides as well. Mudsides hit Guatemala, a massive
earthquake slammed Pakistan. I thought, What’s next? San Francisco fallen into a hellish
chasm, vigilantes controlling New Orleans, then New York, Washington, a Chinese
bomb, and then another, the sun obscured, my son and daughter homeless, hungry,
diseased? I was grasping at hope, at feeling and beauty, trying to force these into the
hands and hearts of my own children and of these young people who were for a little bit
of their lives my children, saying, there is another way, there is, if only you know to
make it so.

Near Christmas, Gayle and Ruthie, her vice-principal of instruction, politely
deployed my offer to implement the Differentiated Learning Rally encouraged by the
consulting professors. Instead, with a new grant, DeLaSalle was bringing in Sue K., a
consultant of unknown educational pedigree, to observe teachers in single-session class
visits, make judgments, and devise training accordingly. Actually, Sue seemed genuinely
warm and non-judgmental. But somewhere along the line I got the word that as “in-house
D.L. consultant” my assistance was needed for her next training session: could I make sure teachers brought scissors and glue sticks for a little hands-on activity? I cringed.

Before spring break, the news came that half the middle school faculty was being let go. They received no notice until the morning they were asked to immediately pack their things and exit, upsetting those of us left behind. We were suddenly reminded of the tenuousness of our own positions with DeLaSalle, the lack of compassion betraying an attitude towards all of us that was deeply troubling. The disruption to the professional staff’s lives was only matched by the emotional assault on their students. We were supposed to be teaching these young people that they were valued and that our personal relationships with them mattered to us, yet suddenly they and we were reduced to budget items that must be abruptly eliminated.

The “perp walk” those asked to leave were forced to endure only further demeaned them. The miniscule chance that some of those let go would have inflicted a loss on the school by taking or damaging property in retaliation was far outweighed by our resulting loss of our trust in our bosses. We had joined the Corporate America that has adopted an unfortunate stance of disrespect towards those who are responsible for its successes: pink slips are handed out the day before Christmas; security guards escort people away from offices and longtime coworkers; others, frightened of being similarly downsized, are intimidated into silence. Whether or not this modus operandi is necessary for anyone is at best debatable, and the toll this business model is having on our American way of life is only beginning to be acknowledged. Worse, we were not Sprint or Applebee’s or Ford: we were a relatively small nonprofit institution where personal relationships were paramount and where our “customers” were neither the KCMO School
District nor the donors to whom we marketed ourselves but our students, who did not pay us a dime. Although intended to preserve our institution, the layoffs violated our mission.

I had a dream of going back to G.P. Elementary, where we had carried out our Katrina project, and it was a near-nightmare: we were preparing science experiments to carry out with the younger kids, and we were late, and we didn’t know where our busses were (had I forgotten to order them?). My daughter, in real life a lover of kitchen chemistry and unplotted cooking experiments, was mixing gallons of brown goop and spilled it all over the floor. Just then, a call came in for me. It was one of the third grade teachers, and she was bitchy and demanding. She said they were expecting us to arrive soon but that for our session the following week they would need us to arrive by 7 a.m. In the dream, somehow I was concerned but nonplussed. I told her I’d have to see if we would be able to get transportation that early. But I woke up seething, and in a still-irrational state I imagined how I should have told her we’d require cappuccino and croissants when we arrived. In the next night’s sleep, towards dawn, a board member announced that more layoffs were on the way but that she knew we would stay cheerful and keep those lovely big smiles on our faces. In the dream I was disgusted and immediately told Gayle the woman had insulted us with her patronizing attitude. This time I woke up thinking: Michelle, who teaches English over at the middle school, has seniority over me by half a year.

Meanwhile, my husband’s job was on the rocks, his administrators harassing him in a transparent effort to either repel him or provoke cause for dismissal. The fifteen-year mortgage on the five-bedroom house where I still lived with our daughter was suddenly untenable. I thought, I should embrace poverty, as we’d both imagined doing just out of
college. There were some tiny houses in Waldo that didn’t look bad. He needed his own larger space anyway, as our daughter was wearying of the back-and-forth and would appreciate her own rooms in both houses. Yes, two two-bedroom houses we should be able to afford.

One day Cheryl, our Americorps volunteer, presented an activity on homelessness. The kids were probably no more off the mark than I was in their preconceptions; they understand about mental illness and drug and alcohol abuse, but most of us were not prepared for the fact that widowhood and leaving the armed forces are risk factors, or that the average homeless person in Kansas City is a 14-year-old boy. Then Dominique, a sweet but ornery boy of sixteen with a propensity for interesting philosophical arguments as to why my assignments were worthless, took umbrage at something another student said and railed at him that he didn’t know what he was talking about before storming out and slamming the door.

A year earlier, Dominique had joined a group of students and a counselor in Aspen, Colorado for leadership and conflict-resolution training and various outdoor adventures in the mountains. He’d come back saying, “That’s where I want to live. In a little house up in those pine trees. Up where it’s quiet.” He was, it turns out, struggling with homelessness himself, one occasional refuge being a drug house where an addicted parent spent time. He was often absent, and his counselor told me Dominique had recently returned after being gone several days saying, “There’s money to be made; I can’t be wasting all my time at school.” He returned the day after he’d left my room so abruptly, but his attendance began to dwindle, and the following fall he did not re-enroll. I feared the worst until a friend of his mentioned he had transferred to another alternative
school, which reassured me somewhat but left me hoping, hoping but never knowing,
Would he graduate? Would he find a home?

*Stepping Back; Adam*

I didn’t know what we could do about it all. I didn’t know how to tell kids it would all be okay, they could make their dreams come true, be anything they wanted to be: these conclusions seemed not only uncertain, but unlikely, and I began to suspect we were disingenuous in our encouragements. Children who will not read a book or complete homework will not become doctors or lawyers unless they change, and I was less and less sure I could help them to do that.

Besides, our kids seemed to have a hard time even staying physically safe, putting themselves in harm’s way so often they seemed to have a death wish, romanticizing their beliefs that they weren’t going to survive their teenage years. Once, after a one-upmanship discussion of who’d lost more friends or family to violence, I became so exasperated that I asked my class, “How many people do you think I’ve lost that way? None! Zero! Do you think your friends are worth any less than mine are?” They assured me they were powerless to affect such changes in their neighborhoods: it was just the way things were. I grasped for words but could not see how to lead them towards my own conclusion, that their acceptance assured them of losing more people they loved.

I began to distance myself from the frustration by reading and pondering and trying to grasp how the culture around me had come to such self-destruction. The web of influences and motivations is not simple, but there are some basic principles involved, I found. Most of us are familiar with concepts of fight or flight. With undeniably animal
bases for our emotional responses, we’ve retained this sense of defensive choices in
reaction to threats. Our civilizations teach us to subsume these choices to the social
contract: caught in the press of a holiday crowd at Disney World, for example, we might
seek respite with a drink and an unclaimed table, or resort to jokes about our place among
the masses, rather than run shrieking from the place or punch the next stranger who
brushes against us. The stress can make our hearts pound more rapidly and increase our
cortisol and adrenaline secretion (Sapolsky, 2004), but we rarely die or throw ourselves
into worse jeopardy with our responses—that is, unless we are Victor or Dexter or
Dominique, without the safeguards, without the mainstream social finesse.

A little further along the scale of socially approved responses, en masse we
declare wars and train soldiers, usually young men, to fight them, to know when to attack
and when to retreat or, more commonly, to obey orders from superiors to do either. Since
9/11 we have resumed pushing young men towards becoming socially approved
Warriors, but with cautions that acknowledge last time: many veterans of the Vietnam
War are still being treated for their emotional scars, and there is a growing realization that
even those from older wars bear invisible traumas that have shadowed their lives for
decades. So our social needs to protect territory and to seek peace compete continuously.
We promote in our soldiers honor, camaraderie, and determination to win at the same
time we attempt to protect and heal individuals from what they’ve suffered, what they’ve
done, and, as we’ve finally begun to appreciate its importance, what they’ve witnessed
(Brookmeyer, Heinrach, & Schwab-Stone, 2005 ).

Without the larger social approval, support systems, or promise of compensation
awarded our nation’s armed forces, children and young men and women who spend time
on urban streets are also prone to this post traumatic stress disorder (Gorman-Smith, D. & Tolan, P.H., 2003). They’re frequently called to defend themselves or hide from aggression or retaliation, to either directly confront or avoid the neighborhood enemies around them. They maintain their own social order, sometimes resisting social attachments and other times bowing to established rules and codes of honor practiced in their communities, most often involving mistrust of outsiders such as police. But this sort of order seems to insist on violence without articulating even a hope of transcending it, the inchoate instincts for revenge solidified without any ameliorating awareness of history or psychology.

The similarities of these young people’s PTSD to that of combat veterans means the same psychological mechanisms and self-protective responses apply. Damage is cumulative: the more trauma experienced, in both degree and quantity, the more severe the reactions are likely to be. Flashbacks to the precipitating trauma are the reaction most publicized, but these may be less common and less damaging than other symptoms. Undue and unwarranted physical reactions to perceived threats, whether from sudden noises or movements or benign touches, manifest themselves in the mirror-image violence of jerks, shouts, and unpremeditated physical attacks. Many sufferers dissociate, becoming emotionally numb or inappropriately intellectual even in safe, loving situations; intimate relationships pay a heavy toll, or may be lost altogether (Diseth, 2005; Brookmeyer, Heinrach, & Schwab-Stone, 2005). Many students I encountered at DeLaSalle never smiled, would not look anyone in the eyes, and spoke gruffly and threateningly, yet with time would reveal a tender side-- a love of puppies or small children, an amazement at the stars or curiosity about a foreign land, perhaps—that they
did not know how regularly to share with other human beings or translate into healthy pursuits. Much of this inability came from the modeling of parents and peers, of course, but that itself was a sort of cultural response to hardships and violence in their communities.

Protective factors, too, are cumulative. There’s no magic medicine to ensure a vet or a teen will go on to live a normal, happy life. Insurance comes from a random complexity of sources, from the luck of genetics and family to the supports that the rest of us can consciously provide. Intelligence—as quantified by I.Q.—correlates positively with healthy recovery, as does a temperament that measures ordinary stresses lightly (Handbook, 2001; Macklin et al., 1998). Relationships with family and friends may protect teenagers from disabling reactions to trauma, but for those with emotionally unhealthy parents or peers, maintaining distance may actually be protective until a time when a young person is able to deliberately choose wholesome company (Wyman, 2003). Prosocial cognition, a tendency to have faith in the social contract and people’s generally benign intentions, may appear dangerously naive as a modus operandi in some milieux, but actually there’s evidence that those young people who retain this attitude despite harrowing circumstances are more likely to go on to have happy, healthy lives (Mastin, Obradovich, & Burt, 2003). Externally imposed social supports such as mentors may help but sometimes seem to hurt: I would speculate that a young person who’s learned not to rely on those around him might be prone to test any friendship offered, and then react even more self-destructively if it turns out to be based only on social artifice. Teachers are notably less effective in supporting teens than parents and peers (Reinemann & Teeter Ellison, 2008), yet where teachers offer the only available positive influence,
this may be some protection. Opportunities to exercise and reinforce their own internal
locus of control, that sense of personal ability to effect change in their own lives and in
the world, buffer teens’ reactions to violence they cannot control, or at least offer them a
more truthful balance between what is possible and what isn’t (Hamilton & Hamilton,
2006; Bolger & Patterson, 2003; Wyman, 2003). If your friend or your mother has been
assaulted or killed, grief and helplessness might threaten to engulf you, but the chance to
engage in a simple act such as building a stool or helping a disabled person prepare a
meal might restore small but important beliefs in your own power.

As these examples demonstrate, the nuances of human development and healing
resist easy study or solutions. When young people’s personal experiences and
dysfunctional cultures clash so decidedly with what the more fortunate among us see as
norms of living, it can be impossible for us to persuade them that they need to change
their lives. If they suddenly transform themselves, they put themselves at physical risk of
being treated as traitors by their “homies”; they also risk the internal conflict of seeing
themselves as having betrayed their cultural, family, and neighborhood roots. For this
reason, one of the most important source of inspiration and comfort for conflicted teens is
the example of role models who have been through what they have, young men and
women who have seen or been part of violence yet gone on to choose other ways of
living (Reinemann & Teeter-Ellison, 2008; but see a cautionary view in Perkins, 2004).
Those of us who can’t offer ourselves as such examples might still impart kindness and
information and problem-solving skills, and so at least an inkling of a wider, richer, and
kinder world (Sandler et al., 2003). But having to conform such offerings to the
requirements of public funding and job descriptions means our influence is limited.
Sometimes it’s a wonder anyone gets out unscathed, but they do. Although no social mechanism or good intention by itself saves anyone, there is good in the world, and if we’re willing to continually and insistently expose at-risk youth to that good in all its richness, without trivializing or denying the pulls on them from the violence in their lives, we may at least open them to the freedom and the power to resist it.

But one we lost forever. Adam Daniels was shot dead in the course of an ongoing gang dispute that our students seemed, in retrospect, to know a lot about. I didn’t know him, although I knew his way of moving in the halls, a sort of lope that came with an easy, shy smile, his silhouette at the end of the hall as he entered other classrooms. I knew his friends, most of the Latino students, who frequently mentioned him in conversation with each other. I knew from the other teachers his reputation as a student: he was a kid with potential—that is, one who’d acted on his potential more than most students we had, a kid worth challenging, worth offering college-prep academics and enriching field trips (he would not cause problems in public), able to focus energy, effort and time on assignments, like the scale model White House he carefully constructed from architectural model materials. When he was gone, his family presented the model to the school to be placed in the library, where it gathers dust but still reminds those of us who remember what happened of the future we’ve all lost in him.

I knew nothing of the gang activity he was involved in, but Brother Alan Parham did. Brother Alan, a Christian Brother who came to us in my fourth year, had soon become one of my allies in calling for more rigorous academics and standards of courtesy. Although he’d grown up in the United States and English was his first language, his mother was Colombian and his father Belizean, so he’d mastered Spanish
and soon become the primary mediator and translator for our Latino families, Mexican and Honduran and others, whose numbers at DeLaSalle were rising at the time. Besides teaching a full course load, he was frequently busy translating for harried, worried parents and advocating for bone-headed but good-hearted girls and boys who flirted with danger and immersed themselves in drama with a frightening regularity. Unlike our black students whose rivalries largely hinged on neighborhood or family disputes, the Latino youth were more likely to be caught up in formalized gang activity with the West Side Locos and the Southside boys, to be “jumped” in, to not only holler numbers or throw up the finger combinations that signaled their alliances but also to be tatted with them or wear their colors. As with others of our students, sometimes it was the affable ones who were most likely to be lured into this lifestyle.

Brother Alan knew Adam, and he grieved with Adam’s young friends and with his family in the days following his shooting. He helped us pray when we all lit candles in his memory in our gym, our usually noisy students reverently gripping the paper holders and eyeing the dripping wax. He called the Latin students together frequently in the weeks following Adam’s death, joining the call for all the young people there to put aside hatreds and resentments and instincts for revenge and decide for Life. As befitted his calling, he lent us all a strength and acceptance I’ve found comforting, yet he’s written me, “I will never get over losing Adam Daniels. I feel that he started to see a way out through education, but was too embroiled in gang activity, needed more time to break free. I guess that heartbreak was part of life at DeLaSalle, but I am a stronger person for it!” Myself, I can’t say that I am stronger for such tragedies, but wiser, yes.
Penultimate Perspectives

*Parents and Babies*

Typical of our graduates were Charles and Shanquilla, who visited many times after graduating, seeming to have few other places to go. In his second year as a senior, after years of our cajoling him through whatever had held him back, whether fear of the future or sheer laziness, Charles, by this time 20, had finally decided that he really wanted to finish high school and begun working at a more or less normal pace in his courses, which meant double time for him. This he continued despite the drama of his personal life, in which an old girlfriend with whom he’d had a brief reconciliation had turned up pregnant, upsetting his DLS girlfriend Shanquilla, a proclaimed virgin, a hardworking student, and a fairly bright girl who wanted to go to college. She’d broken it off with Charles briefly but then decided, “We love each other too much.” Within a few months, Shanquilla was pregnant, too, and Charles had split with his other “baby mama”; by the following fall, five months after they had graduated and less than a year after Charles’s first child was born, Shanquilla delivered her baby.

Just after Charles’s first baby was born, he had arrived at school with baby pictures, tiny snapshots of a wrinkle-faced infant with a pink hair band askew on her head, and passed them around. He was a proud, sheepish papa—especially sheepish as none of the rest of us had known before that very day about the other girl or the pregnancy. I tried to keep my mouth from falling open and mildly praised the tiny girl, congratulating him. One of my other students, John, a quiet young man who seemed perpetually bemused by the daily dramas around him, eventually asked, “What does Shanquilla say about this?”
“Oh, she’s just fine with it,” he assured us. “She was at the hospital right after Ariana was born. She held her and changed her diaper and everything.” John and I exchanged looks: is Shanquilla crazier than we ever could have thought? There had been the gloomy malingering the year before, the collapse in the hall when she claimed she was faint and couldn’t breathe, the pouty refusals to respond when people spoke to her on a “bad” day, but this? We’d thought her self-respect and self-confidence stronger.

A few days later, when Shanquilla was in class, I pointedly repeated Charles’s assertion about her good relationship with his child, but Shanquilla laughed and said she’d never been near that baby, that hospital, or that other girl—“Do you think I’m crazy?” John and I looked at each other again and could not stop shaking our heads, wondering which of them was scrambling to keep his or her world afloat with fantasy. What dream of a future could these children have? If not of college or work, what, the lottery? Then I remembered Charles’s claim a few months earlier that he had been admitted to one of the state universities, effective as soon as he graduated, where he’d be given a full basketball scholarship for as long as they could keep him before he went on to the NBA. This he’d told us as fact, although DLS had cancelled its season twice for fights on the court, and although Charles read and wrote at about the sixth grade level.

The fall after they graduated, news came that Shanquilla’s baby had been born, and when he was a few weeks old she came to show him off. My heart fell when I saw him. This baby did not seem to have awakened from the sleep of the womb, struggling against the light as though confusion at being alive had persisted beyond the time it does for most infants. His head was tiny for his body, and it lolled to one side even when S. held it supportively. Something was wrong, but I couldn’t challenge or advise her,
leaving that to the pediatricians she promised she was taking him to for regular checkups. I asked Francie, our art teacher, later that day if she’d seen the baby, and she lowered her voice and asked, “What’s wrong with him?” Shanquilla and Charles continued bragging as though they’d noticed nothing amiss, holding onto their vision of the happy, healthy new family, on its way to something easily superior to the stable, steady middle-class existence they were vaguely aware I and other teachers enjoyed. I saw Charles’s sister, a cashier at Target, around the same time, and she told me that he was still not working. I was not sure what we’d done for him, whether all that patience had helped him at least achieve a minimal education or encouraged the sloth or indecision that so far had led him only to irresponsible parenthood.

It was all a juggle and a conjure, and as hard as it will be for students with real prospects for college to maintain their dreams, how will Shanquilla and Charles, with so much less, survive on theirs? I don’t know what our smiling nods and welcoming arms, bearing curriculum maps and manila diplomas with bright gold seals, really did for them. We avoided reality as much as our students did, in our work and maybe in our personal lives as well. We framed ourselves as saviors, or at least “facilitators” to salvation, without investigating where our children really were and where they were going with our help.

When I was a teenager, back in the 70s, most of my cadre was sexually active, but almost no one had a baby. It was a rite of passage for young, hip women who considered themselves mature enough to have sex to visit the Free Clinic for an exam and birth control, usually the pill. Some girls’ parents actually arranged their doctors’ visits, and some girls went too far too fast and had abortions, but I believe both these occurrences
were rare among the teenaged girls with whom I drank wine, smoked pot and looked for opportunities to flirt and gain what we considered normal experience. A little behind the curve, I didn’t make my own clinic visit until I called at my college health service, having had a pregnancy scare after only the second time I had had intercourse. “Are you sexually active?” the nurse asked when I requested contraceptives, and I remember wracking my brain with how to answer: not familiar with the terminology, I couldn’t imagine: how much sex was considered “active”?

I was horrified at my own stupidity at allowing myself to be vulnerable to a pregnancy, remembering the only girl I’d known when I was in high school who’d gone to a “Home” for unwed mothers to give her baby up for adoption. We had always laughed at the local TV commercials reminding us of this alternative: a desperate-looking girl at a pay phone implored, “I’m pregnant! Can you help me?” In answer, a kind but coolly professional switchboard operator informed, “Yes, we can help you.” The camera would return us to the girl, sitting sorrowfully in the shadows with her head down and hands in her lap, then looking up at the camera and stretching a hand towards it beseeching. “In this time of need, remember Methodist Mission Home,” the narrator intoned mournfully before fade-out. It was so similar to all the ads we’d seen for funeral homes that we’d imitate them, the shamed grief and the condescending charity, even as we suspected an unplanned pregnancy would be as tragic as the ads implied for most of our families and so for ourselves. Convinced that our parents’ moral abhorrence of premarital sex was a mistake, we were nevertheless unwilling to try their love and patience by bringing them unwanted grandchildren. What we did in private was our own
business, we believed, but babies were an unavoidably public matter, despite any confidentiality of clinics or homes.

At DeLaSalle, the number of pregnant and mothering students seemed to burgeon with every year I taught there. Percentages (which were not tracked) would have told us little, as it wasn’t clear how much our childcare center drew those with children to enroll at the school in the first place or how much its existence encouraged students already enrolled to pursue or accept or at minimum fail to avoid pregnancy. Past some initial embarrassment or private family crisis, most of our young mothers and many of the fathers would speak of their impending parenthood with pride. Some of these students’ parents bravely took on all the responsibilities of raising a new child in the family, but seldom did the teens themselves hesitate to call on government services for healthcare and nutritional needs. One teacher overheard students offering advice to another on how she could have childcare expenses reimbursed if she wanted to go to a party without her child. The childcare center’s mandatory parenting classes were something to be endured, as was school itself: most of our students seemed remarkably incompetent to parent, to succeed themselves, or even to make the connections between how and why delaying parenthood would be possible or preferable.

Of course, there were exceptions to this rule. Sierra, one young mother, was a feisty and independent-minded young woman who regularly exasperated and amused me. She used to tell me she was going to take me to the mall. “Those clothes you wearin’—you need help,” she’d explain.

“This is what ‘old’ people wear,” I’d joke with her. ”And besides, if we go to the mall, who’s paying?” She’d shake her head in mock disgust. A couple of times we ended
up in the office with Sean, together with Sierra’s mother, a weary looking single mom who worked as a chef and was reportedly an alcoholic. We’d review the fact that yes, S. did have to do the assigned work, and no, she could not leave class on any whim. She would smirk and toss her head, but when we prodded she’d agree that she wanted to do whatever it took to graduate. Most days, she was committed to her work, completing assignments carefully and keeping herself at a remove from the teenaged social experiments around her. One month she wrote a nine-paged typewritten horror story for class, working and reworking the details and correcting errors long after her classmates had called it a day with a couple of pages.

Once, in an unusual foray into banter with other girls, Sierra wrinkled her nose and offered, “It’s disgusting for anyone over thirty to have sex.” Overhearing, I laughed but kept to myself my observation that quite a few people over seventy would be sorry to hear this news, not to mention the thirty-five-year-olds. I suppose her own sexual experiences had not been fulfilling, and the resulting birth of her baby boy had done nothing to redeem the act in her mind. Her little boy, Philip, was nearly two, and she dressed him neatly each day in a tiny oxford shirt and elastic-waist jeans. One day I held him for her at an assembly while she retrieved his diaper bag from day care. Plopped into my lap, he twisted around to look at me quizzically but then snuggled back into my arms and took in the visiting dancers, young, uncertain teenagers from another alternative school pulsing acrobatically to the African beats their teachers had trained them in. I tapped my feet in time to give him a rhythmic jostling and resisted the urge to kiss the soft top of his head, not wanting to take liberties. He was a sweet kid, generally well behaved, and Sierra followed every prescription our day-care directors gave her, reading
him books daily, conversing with him, and taking him to the pediatrician for regular
checkups and vaccinations. But one day she asked Kathy, my friend and another of the
social studies teachers, did she think it was too late to give him up for adoption? After all,
Sierra was still only seventeen.

Maurice and Stephanie used to play footsies in my class. The shy smiles they
ventured when near each other were the closest things to romance I ever saw at
DeLaSalle, as they beamed and blushed and gradually worked their way into outright
snuggles and lap-sitting I had to put a stop to. Maurice was handsome, bright, and
charming, unusually well-spoken and socially adept for my students, and on track to
graduate at seventeen. Stephanie was responsible, polite, and thoughtful. I still own a
photograph she made in Francie’s after-school photo club, which was sponsored by the
metropolitan anti-drug tax. It’s a self-portrait of her dark silhouette before a bank of
windows, her lean hips canted gracefully while purposeful arms and hands, elbows
uplifted, steady the camera before her face.

But then Maurice stopped turning in assignments, and then he stopped coming to
school regularly. When he came to school at all, he would skip class, lie about his
whereabouts to his teachers, and smart off to them when they questioned him or tried to
get him to work. He’d had it with being told what to do: he had his own increasingly
complicated life to manage now, a whole world of matters outside the school walls as
well as within them. He ended up in the in-school suspension program, where he
alternated between frequent absences and feverish attempts to salvage his on-time
graduation. Finally, and unremarkably, Stephanie announced her pregnancy. It turned out
that Maurice was trying to make as much money as possible—how, we were never
entirely sure—before the baby was born. Although she was a year younger, Stephanie
ended up rushing her credits and graduating ahead of him. Maurice would follow soon,
they were sure, and as planned, the following spring, after their baby’s birth, he
“walked.” They were in love, and they were planning to marry. But before they could,
and before either could land reliable work, Stephanie was pregnant again.

Tasha, tiny and energetic and with an energetically filthy mouth that regularly
landed her in Sean or Gayle’s office, found herself pregnant by a boy who’d dropped out
the year before, and then she gave birth prematurely at seven months. Her infant girl
spent six weeks in the NICU in a nest of tubes and wires and then went home to the
Section 8 housing Tasha shared with a friend. Once the baby got a little bigger, our day
care accepted her, and her careworker learned to handle the special monitoring the baby
still needed daily. But barely six months later, Tasha dropped out, and a year after that
the news came that Tasha had been arrested and her daughter hospitalized, in intensive
care again, after ingesting a portion of crack cocaine left on her mother’s coffee table.

And Regina, who’d been raped by a cousin but believed what happened in
families was no one else’s business, was pregnant by the boyfriend whose family she
now lived with. And Lovie, whose hyperreligious mother’s and grandmother’s vigilance
had somehow failed, got pregnant by her former boyfriend. And Atrina had baby number
two just twelve hours before graduation and arrived, a triumphant superstar, in a
wheelchair to collect her diploma with the rest of the class. Just over a year later, she had
a third. Areana, six months along and in a rage over Sam’s order that she stop cursing in
class, refused to leave and ended up handcuffed and removed by our security officer—
then threatened, with her mom, to file charges, with the argument that pregnant women
should not be expected to act rationally. Rakeisha’s mom threatened to file charges because her daughter’s counselor, Brandee, hearing rumors of the girl’s pregnancy, asked Rakeisha if they were true, and Rakeisha and her mother framed the questioning as harassment. (One result was that our administrators admonished Brandee not to ask such questions in the future). Lana, smart as a whip, graduated high school, passed several community college courses, and was made manager of a clothing store during the time she had her two children and married their father, but she confided to some teachers that her husband did not believe in using birth control, and with the second child she had to drop out of school.

Only Sierra admitted she was sorry for what she’d done, and only Tanya, who loved her baby but also, judging from her talk, loved sex, spoke proudly of wearing a Depo Provera patch and being responsible. “It’s a big job,” she preached. “And I love little Darian, but I am NOT ready to have another one. You’re crazy if you don’t use something—I was crazy once, but once was enough!” She was the only student in seven years I ever heard encourage other girls to use birth control, and teachers were discouraged from discussing—more accurately, forbidden to discuss-- the matter at all. So I sympathized when, the Friday before Mother’s Day, as our administration distributed roses and coupons and door prizes to the student mothers, Sam grumbled, “Why aren’t they giving flowers to the girls who haven’t gotten pregnant?”

As it turns out, getting pregnant young when you have an uncertain future makes evolutionary sense. Procreate early and often! and that way, even without the support of a partner or a stable economy, someone is liable to survive (Rossano, 2003). The hankerings to parent are as little considered as the sex drive itself: satisfy that itch, couple
and pant and part, and later on the baby, oh sweet cooing babe! will be there for you regardless of any resources, financial or emotional, you have or don’t to care for him.

Section 8 housing was good enough for Mom, so it’s fine for Mama’s child, and if she hasn’t gotten her diploma, a job, good childcare, or a co-parent, well, it couldn’t really make that much difference, could it? Teenagers can mimic the “delayed gratification” admonitions of those around them with their words and even their intentions (Jaccard, 2009), but the less modeling of responsible behavior they see and experience by those closest to them, and the less recognition they receive for their own families, cultures, experiences, and personalities, the less pressing it will seem to follow the norms touted by educators and social workers, so that these less mature and self-aware desires control their actions.

As we might expect, studies that survey attempts to reduce teen pregnancy don’t find much more success in sex education programs that focus on birth control information than in those that strictly teach abstinence, so DeLaSalle’s failure to provide contraceptive advice for its students was not the critical factor in its girls’ rising pregnancy rate. What’s culturally accepted, whether in teens’ home neighborhoods or within their peer culture, trumps any externally devised format for social engineering. Add to the mix some young people’s desperate attempt to find what they see but have never known as a normal family life, with reliable love and care within and respect from the outside, and the lure of babies means even those without the usual teen disease of irresponsibility often end up with them. One recently touted prospect for curbing teen pregnancies is based on an economic appeal. Teen pregnancies have reportedly been cut when adolescent girls are taught economic independence and the math of delayed
gratification: with increased time before a first child and between children come the maturity, education, and job experience that translate into a higher standard of living throughout life. Teenaged girls can, apparently, hear and understand this information and so determine for themselves a better future than mere prohibitions or judgmental prescriptions would contrive (www.thenationalcampaign.org, “What Works 2009).

Programs deemed successful by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy (NCPTP) generally rely on three or more strategies to foster healthy attitudes and behaviors in teens, including visualizing adult careers for themselves, finding opportunities for peer and adult relationships, compassionate case management by knowledgeable adults, cultural awareness and pride, and frank, thorough information on sex and birth control (NCPTP, 2009). DeLaSalle attempted to provide career education and relationships with responsible adults, but beyond canned appeals to “self-respect” (and little acknowledgment of teenaged girls’ sexuality), there was no thoughtful, organized approach to reducing pregnancies.

It’s difficult, however, even for the determined with no political predispositions to know just what works, or how, when, or why. Statistics for “successful” programs usually show slight improvements in several areas of behavior for teen participants but simultaneous decreases in at least one other area. Co-curricular athletic participation, for example, was found to help teen girls avoid pregnancy but possibly encourage teen boys to become parents (Sabo et al., 1999), and many programs deter unprotected sex within the first six months after their completion, and so overall, but after that find that sexual activity returns to previous norms (Card, 1999). Developing relationships marked by open communication is generally acknowledged as a means of helping teens grow up
healthy and make wise decisions, but sometimes it is parent-child dynamics that are seen as holding more sway, sometimes relationships with peer mentors, and sometimes the presence of professionals who are in a position to monitor teens.

As the NCPTP reports, studies usually look at small numbers within a certain population, limited controls (to prevent cross-influences from other programs, for instance) and a general scarcity of duplication (2009). People argue that preventing even one unwanted pregnancy is a success, but when public moneys and passions are in the offing, the debate can become fractious. As usual in such debates, anyone can manipulate the statistics into evidence for his argument. The competing ratios and deciles reflect the fact that, as with any matter of human upbringing, each teenager is different, each teen’s life on a unique trajectory influenced by a million factors.

As adults, we can’t all agree what our goals are for teenagers: that they refrain from all sex? from sexual intercourse? from unprotected sex? from unplanned pregnancy? All we may be able to agree is that all children deserve good parents—and that few teenagers have the resources to be the best. Our own experiences and what we’ve seen happen to young parents and their children inform this belief and establish it as a crucial one for us to impart. Decisions about which pregnancy prevention programs to fund must begin with a look at how well each program allows for teens to be seen as whole human beings who need Truth with a capital T: they want to know who they are and need to understand what their lives and their children’s lives can be, and how choosing when to become a parent affects all of these. Programs that mimic the milieu of a healthy, enriched lifestyle, with all its complexity of self-awareness, supportive relationships, and opportunities to shape their own lives, are harder to define and study,
but extrapolating from findings of simpler programs show us that in the long run these holistic programs are those that will go furthest in changing the culture of teen pregnancy.

Down the block in my prosperous middle-class neighborhood lived a cheerful Catholic family with three lovely blonde daughters. They attended one of the nearby parochial schools, where they participated in sports and theatre and fundraising, for which they’d appear at my door twice a year selling flower bulbs and garbage bags. Their parents took them camping nearly every weekend in summer, to Chiefs’ games on Sundays in fall, and shuttled them to their array of extracurriculars in between. When Amelia was small, they’d baby-sit for us, and later they became reliable pet-sitters.

One spring day the oldest turned up pregnant, and their loving but shell-shocked father broke the news at an Easter potluck another neighbor was hosting. “Give that man another beer,” our host commanded sympathetically: parents and former teens all, we knew any of us could end up in his shoes. His daughter’s dismayed beau was several years older, and there was no talk of marriage, but he and his family wanted to raise the child. Our neighbors, however, insisted on adoption, debating only whether open or closed was better. To this, our other neighbors from across the street had resounding advice: “Open is the way to go.” Their own two children had regular contact with their respective adolescent birth mothers but enjoyed the stability, luxuries, and abundant love of two middle-class, middle-aged, college-educated parents who had the time, money, and perspective to share their advantages.

I found myself explaining this concept to Khadijah, another mother-to-be, just weeks before her maternity leave was to begin. Khadijah had a temper that other girls had
found notoriously easy to manipulate with catty comments, but she’d come a long way in learning to keep herself from reacting, and she was usually sweet and hard working. Her home life had seen some upheavals, but she had support, particularly from a grandmother whose message on her answering machine always gave me solace when I reached it: “Please leave us a message, and I hope you’ll have a blessed day,” she’d recorded, a standard greeting in those parts except for the warm inflections that made me believe she really meant this good will for whoever called, as she did for her boneheaded, good-hearted granddaughter. I’ll confess I also liked Khadijah because she was fond of telling me I was one of the best teachers she’d ever had.

Khadijah was frankly baffled when I explained about my neighbor’s daughter, her counterpart in the ‘burbs, healthy and moneyed and part of an intact family. “But why doesn’t she want her baby?” she pressed. “Why doesn’t her family keep it?” I explained the party line: it’s hard on everyone for teenagers to be good parents. But later I found myself thinking about the differences in their circumstances and the unquestioning acceptance of the “right” way to do things on either side, and I wondered, why indeed? The answers are complicated, the intentions nearly always honorable, and yet the long-term consequences of giving a baby up, as for keeping one, deserve continual reassessment.

And now my own daughter has reached puberty, high school, and her first, tentative romantic relationships with boys, all in a time when the average age of first sexual experiences has dropped to sixteen (Lefkowitz & Gillen, 2006). I joke that we will have to lock her in her room until she’s twenty-five, but in reality I keep an eye out and talk about abstinence and condoms. “Yeah, I know, I know about all that,” she assures
me impatiently, but I repeat, any occasion I have, in case the time comes when she has to make quick decisions and welcomes that internally ready repertoire of choices. I can only hope she really does know, because beyond that, the choices will not and should not be easy.

*Good on Paper*

Well, it sounded very nice. It probably looked good, too: “...enjoying a close relationship with the local university”; “working in tandem to create opportunities for aspiring teachers, complementing our mission of creating opportunities for youth.” A mutually beneficial alliance, surely.

But the head of the department had called our principal mid-day on a Friday to say that she “needed” a graduate student to start the following Monday at 7:30 a.m. It was a day we would also be welcoming 45 new students, most of them freshmen, into our classrooms, where we would be expected to integrate them into the mixed-grade classes that we had already been teaching for two weeks. Worse, we were expected to have this young teacher “shadow” a regular student to all her classes for the day. Perhaps the teacher would be attractive and hip and the student would find it a thrill and a privilege to be with her. But—drag a teacher around for the whole day? It could just as easily be just that, a total drag. I would have said no to the whole thing, myself.

Or maybe I would have asked pointed questions: Why did you not call us two weeks ago—or last summer? Or last spring? How could we do this without inconveniencing teachers and students? In her willingness to ally our name with a
(locally) big-name college, our principal had decided our own needs were a lesser priority.

Maybe I was overreacting. After all, this wouldn’t necessarily be much of an inconvenience, and it might have turned out to be a real help to us all. Part of my skepticism came from my experience the year before supervising a student teacher from the same university. I was lucky in to be assigned someone who was genuinely helpful, dedicated, and aware, if unseasoned. But throughout the term I’d noticed that the university education department he represented was not in good shape. John, too, was hoisted upon me with minimal notice or explanation, and when his duties changed from observing to teaching, I received no information about requirements for either of us. Eventually I received a link to an online handbook with deadlines a semester old: clearly nothing had been updated. Several times John was subjected to new or altered requirements or notices of mandatory meetings at the last minute. And after his time with me ended, I received a letter asking me to resubmit the information I’d originally provided so that they could process my stipend. On second look, I realized it was a form letter: apparently they’d lost everyone’s info, social security numbers and all.

So, why would we want to ally ourselves with a distinctly unprofessional department that exhibited ignorance of or disrespect for teachers and schools? It all looks good on paper, like the As we’re bound, it turns out, to give our student teachers unless they are child molesters or chronically absent or otherwise blatantly incompetent. There was no gradation possible for evaluating a teacher in an early stage of development, I found out. The were either an “A” or an “F.” It seemed to me we were pulling the whole profession down—or keeping it where it was—when we said yes to these sorts of
arrangements. I could see this easily from where I was. Could my principal? I was increasingly frustrated by her short-term view of our school’s and our students’ needs, making things look good while letting deeper problems slide.

More difficult to address, both in my own mind and with any word or action, was my dear friend Jan’s complicity with the expectations. “I’ll pray for you: that’s my way, my tradition,” Jan had told me, two years into my time at DeLaSalle. I had called her aside before classes started for the day, having determined that it was time for others to know, to tell her my husband and I had separated. I’d tried to say it matter-of-factly, but the truth was still too new, and I’d begun crying. Her arms went immediately around me, and I knew she understood as much as anyone could.

It seems right to start any description of Jan with her prayers, because she’s deliberately put her Christian faith in the center of her life, her family, and her work, which she sees as her mission. Jan does not assault nonbelievers with her virtue; she is not intolerant, suspicious, or judgmental. To her, Christian belief means Christian charity and kindness, honestly and selflessly given. She is in her 50s, small and plain but with a welcoming smile perpetually flowering in her eyes. Her promise to pray for me was both an explanation and an offer. “Thank you,” I honestly replied, putting aside our differences of belief—or rather seeing how they were the same.

I knew Jan could understand much about the pain of a shattered marriage, because within the first few weeks of our meeting, she’d described how she came to teaching in her forties after an unexpected divorce. She had been married young to a Navy chaplain with whom she’d traveled the world, living in Florida, Rhode Island, Hawaii, and the Philippines, where they’d adopted two dark young boys who were nearly the same age as
their blond daughter. The boys ate Jan’s simple cooking as though it was the last food on earth, with antiparasitics became healthy and strong although they remained small and wiry, and woke the neighborhood at 7 a.m. their first snowy morning in Rhode Island, hurtling themselves through the cold, odd stuff with delight. They taught their sister some Tagalog, in which the three siblings share jokes to this day.

With their children almost grown, Jan’s husband retired from the military and they returned to Kansas City, where he became assistant pastor at a Nazarene church and Jan started college. One day she drove to church to meet her husband for lunch and instead found there the other pastors and deacons, holding a letter for her. “He asked us to give it to you,” they said. “He wanted us to be with you.” The letter explained that her husband was leaving the church, and he was leaving Jan. His beliefs in both his church and his married life, his letter revealed, had been unstable for a long time: he had a second life that he’d now decided to make his first. They’d been married more than twenty years, and now within four months the paperwork was done, no dialogue and no counseling, although she’d offered them. He cut ties with their children, too.

Her world knocked out from under her with little warning, Jan not only survived but thrived. She moved back in with her mother, finished her degree, and started teaching. She returned to her childhood church, another home for her, and there met Frank, also divorced and middle-aged, decent, reliable, honorable, and with the same gentle humor I saw Jan use daily with her students. They’ve been married for nearly a decade now, and together they visit their children and grandchildren nearby whenever they’re able.
“I found out, what’s true is still true,” she’d told me comfortingly on that day, as I tried to compose myself before the kids came into my class.

“What’s good is good?” I’d asked, ready to believe her answer. She nodded. This core belief, and the childhood stability of readily available home and love and education I’d enjoyed without question, would surely see me through my personal tragedies as I dealt with children who haven’t had half as much on any score.

At least, so I would have thought. But my skepticism about the nature of the cosmos extends to my uncertainty in dealing with other human beings. I find it hard to rely on Truth or foresee Justice for myself or for others. Jan is patient with students as I am not. I know from private conversations that she’s no saint: she, too, feels hurt and impatient and confused and even angry. But her self-confidence and determination, informed by her faith, provide her with a font of generosity I don’t yet have. She is, for one, unafraid of students’ rejection or ridicule, generously offering love with every demand and communication.

The first year I taught with her, Jan related what had happened the day before the Christmas holidays, when she was to be gone for a six-week medical leave. At the end of each class she’d announced, half-joking, that everyone needed to give her a hug before they left, since she wouldn’t see them for a while. Tough, indifferent, and sarcastic, these adolescent thug wanna-be’s, every last one of them, lined up to hug her close, and to receive the hug from her they’d learned was a true reflection of her feelings. So when my frustrations, temper, or feelings of helplessness threatened to undo me, I tried to think of Jan and how she never stopped offering compassion.
The year before my final year, Jan was appointed Vice-Principal of Curriculum and Instruction, in charge of overseeing staff development and course content. I was initially excited to have someone like Jan who understood classroom challenges and worried about the rigor of our requirements in a position to effect real change. But one reason Gayle and Jim had chosen her for this position was that endlessly positive outlook, and there are, it turns out, drawbacks to such a demeanor. The first sign of trouble in our new professional relationship came as we organized a special trip for the whole school to the movies, where we would have a theatre to ourselves and see an advanced screening of *Freedom Writers*; Erin Gruwell, author of the book it’s based on and with whom Jan and Karen had worked, would join the students for lunch. Everyone was excited, but administrators made decisions about the procedures for the day that were impractical at best and potentially a source of unnecessary staff-student conflict. So I wrote Jan an e-mail in response to hers, trying to suggest changes without appearing curmudgeonly:

Thanks for all the info! However, to be perfectly honest, I cannot imagine how we will sit with our second-hour classes once there—unless we are dismissed from busses by class one by one and assigned seats. Is that really worth it? I understand not having snacks if we trashed the place last time, but if we make it too regimented kids might balk and misbehave more. It might work better if we have a limited area where they're allowed to sit and all spread ourselves around as we do in the gym. I'm just trying to be practical—I'm very happy to sit with them but don't know how to keep them with me once they see their friends!

Jan’s response, reiterating the plan, was cheerful as always:

...We just keep trying to do things for the students, hoping that they will ‘get it’ and do as we ask. ... If we are anything at DLS, it is flexible, and we will remain so on November 28. I guess, as a disclaimer, I will admit that this won't be easy, we'll have some problems (let's call them challenges), and all may not go as planned, but we'll try to do it anyway because we are determined to make this the ‘Best Year Yet’ for our students.
“Best Year Yet” was the current administrative slogan for our yearly goals. My friend had sent me propaganda.

In the end, without any further notification, my own plan was adopted—perhaps others or even Jan herself had reassessed the matter after all—but I was left feeling that I would not be heard if my ideas were inconvenient to administrative priorities, perspectives, or party line. Jan had seemed to join the thoughtless bandwagon mentality of credit rewards, the rally to bribe students to better attendance with treats and recreational activities, and the search for ways to promote our image through everything from hall displays to public service announcements without regard for the truth of the substance behind them. I was disappointed, and given Jan’s importance in inspiring me to hang tough, I became more deeply disillusioned with this whole educational endeavor.

Our principal Gayle, for all the mistakes I’d seen her make, made many of those hasty, ill considered decisions under pressures of her own, such as trying to fill unexpected teaching vacancies before school started for the year and sometimes having to refill them within a week or month when someone immediately quit or had to be removed. She had to meet at moment’s notice with students’ parents or board members or the press, phone our other sites in the juvenile detention facilities several times a day and visit weekly, insure accreditation was in order and appease the district or competing principals, and welcome unexpected visitors who might affect our reputation or our financing. Some decisions were arbitrary and faulty because they had to be made, and no one could decide all of them correctly. I knew she’d appointed Jan as a helper and supporter and even confidante, and to make it through her day, she might, as I had when I began there, have needed Jan’s positive outlook more than she needed anyone’s critical
educational inquiry.

Often, neither could see beyond the paperwork to what was really happening: To meet the Missouri State Show-Me Standards I was required to, among other things, give students practice in recognizing voice and point-of-view in literature, assessing the verity of nonfiction works, and expressing themselves in writing formally and informally. It didn’t matter whether students could do any of this on their own, or whether the reading samples they analyzed were written above elementary school level, or whether they were able to transfer the skill from an example studied in the classroom to an unfamiliar one. It didn’t matter if the student had to be coached, wheedled, and prompted through every step of writing an essay and never, ever had attempted to write one on his own.

In my yearly professional portfolio for my school, I had to have evidence of collaborating with my colleagues, of using the school-sanctioned discipline strategies in my classroom, and of using a scoring rubric on my students’ writing exercises. It didn’t matter if the exchanged e-mails for a group project resulted in a dismal failure of an activity, if the preferred discipline methods didn’t change kids’ behavior, or if the writing sample was either from the brightest student or from one who could not possibly have completed the assignment by himself. If this evidence was there (along with another long list of items), I would ace the portfolio rubric and be passed for another year.

For each of my quarterly course outlines, I needed to include our three literacy strategies, Graphic Organizers, the 5-Step Writing Process with a scoring rubric, and Socratic Seminars, a group reading and discussion bearing little resemblance to anything Socratic. I also had to establish requirements differentiated according to students’ backgrounds and abilities; include some sort of activity that prepared students for the
state assessment tests; and insure content was aligned with the Show-Me Standards and the course title and goals. It was of no concern if this scripted list of assignments took no more than 3 weeks for a hard-working student to complete or if the knowledge and skills required were high school level or anywhere near it. What we actually taught and how much work we required and what level of proficiency was necessary to pass were never compared to what was taught at any other school. If I could show on paper that I was aligned to the Show-Me Standards and the DeLaSalle strategies, the rest—the reality—didn’t matter.

To graduate from high school in Missouri, students must earn three credits in mathematics, four in language arts, and three each in social studies and science, among others. In practice, it does not matter if they receive one year’s credit for one-half year’s work, having done no homework and taken no tests, or if the work accomplished is equivalent to that earned by a fifth- or sixth-grader in another school. Presumably, a student could show awareness of human anatomy by labeling the head, feet, arms, and legs on a diagram. Students at my alternative school had actually been offered study skills credit—elective academic credit that appeared on their transcripts and counted towards graduation—for showing up at school nine days out of ten, a practice that would have gotten most of us, their teachers, fired rather than rewarded.

At my school, for each course students passed they completed at least one portfolio caption, a form detailing the student’s reflections on the process and the finished work and how a sample of work fulfilled a course requirement. These forms and their accompanying assignments had to look good, sound good, and have no errors or smudges, so that outsiders who reviewed them would be satisfied with them as evidence
of our high expectations. This requirement was considered met even if the completed
work—and the one-page portfolio caption, which could take days of class time to
perfect—were done with the teacher’s constant help, so that it was impossible to discern
how much the student had accomplished by completing the assignment. I wondered
whether the reviewers ever realized this or thought to ask.

My school required students to pass an eighth-grade reading proficiency test—
they used the widely trusted Woodcock-Johnson—before they graduated, although the
state did not require even this much for graduation. It was therefore insignificant whether
the student reached this reading level in their freshman year or in their final month as a
senior who had completed all their high school credits working at a middle-school level.
It didn’t matter if every one of their language arts courses except the one-fourth-year-for-
full-year-credit Senior Seminar course had been satisfied through remedial reading
courses (and these were for general diplomas, not the “modified” diplomas that some
Special Ed students received in Missouri). Students reading four and five and six levels
below grade level were not tested for learning disabilities unless they were juniors or
seniors and it was feared they wouldn’t reach that eighth-grade level before graduation.
Once that was reached, they could graduate, regardless of whether they’d zipped through
four years’ worth of school in three while working at a fifth or sixth grade level. Our
students took a math proficiency test, but a teacher might coach them through problems
like converting fractions to percentages, and their government proficiency test was
sometimes taken open-book. These students received their diplomas. We counted them as
our successes.
I’d hoped Jan could become my educational as well as personal leader. But how could she? She was drowning in the paperwork like the rest of us: checking for those required papers in each teacher’s portfolio, checking the schedule for professional development hours here at school and away, checking those caption sheets and their attached work for accuracy and relevance and credit slips for completeness and signing off on them before they were officially recorded on transcripts. And the meetings: the Best Year Yet monthly retreats and the meetings with Gayle and Julie to revamp requirements for graduation in accordance with new district, state and federal regulations and the weekly meetings with teachers to review all these changes and remind us of upcoming events or deadlines and the ongoing meetings with new teachers to show them how to record a student credit, enter a daily log entry, or develop a course contract or outline.

With all this, Jan barely had time to hug a child or even much opportunity to learn their names any more, and those are things that, for her, would come before stopping to think about whether we should be offering our students something different academically. After all, she had a life, a family, children and now grandchildren, Hope and Conner, to tend to and laugh with and hug, and once a year a single week with Frank at the Lake of the Ozarks or on a Caribbean cruise or burying her toes in the warm sands of Coronado. I know that, in those dearly bought moments, she smiled, gave God unabashed thanks for His bounty, and brought her joy with her right back to DLS, ready to try again. She did what she could.

None of this critical look at academic oversights is meant to suggest that my colleagues or I contentedly distributed subject-area coloring books or padded students’
credits. The effects were more subtle. Students avoided the teachers with more stringent requirements; they sought other teachers or the PLATO “credit recovery” computer program, the content of which was no more monitored than our own but which seemed to give students credits at a remarkably swift pace. The teacher whose students earned their credits at the end of each quarter received more support from students and administrators than teachers like me whose students typically took long after the deadline to finish, despite the fact that students could do no work three days out of four in both classes and earn credit in one but not the other. I couldn’t know if I was a good teacher. How would anyone know? How could I be compared to others without looking not only at my papers—my class methods, my sample evidence, my students’ graduation rates—but what I actually expected of them? No one judged me, either in a classroom observation or a performance review, with any of this in mind. We required lots of hoop-jumping and form filling and list checking, but little student education.

My administration did worry about the state assessment tests, the MAP, which covered science and math in tenth grade and language arts in eleventh and which the local district was constantly on us to improve because of No Child Left Behind dictates. It was not unusual for none of our students to reach the “Proficiency” level on these tests. None. So we counted an increase in “Nearing Proficiencies” as a gain, regardless of whether or not this was statistically insignificant due to our small numbers and changing population. We talked among ourselves and with our board about how this population didn’t test well, how a one-day test couldn’t show what people knew, how the tests and scoring of them were arbitrary—all to some extent true, but for what group of teenagers is it not? In any case, neither we nor the state of Missouri required the kids to achieve a
certain level on the MAP to graduate. Each student took each test no more than once, and
some of the best students not at all, as they figured out how to rev the system and jump
from sophomore to senior status within a handful of months. Most of our students spent
their high school days plodding or speeding through credits by doing middle-school level
work. Of course, as a result they did not reach high school proficiency in much of
anything. But we counted the credits they’d earned with us, counted them as graduates,
counted them successes and ourselves successful.

My questions and criticisms, and those of several like-minded colleagues at DLS,
were increasingly dismissed or outright discouraged by our administrators: at one point
Gayle told a group of teachers that she felt like we were “her children acting up in
public” when we’d brought problems to their attention. Earlier on in my tenure I’d felt
appreciated and respected, but towards the end I wondered, have things changed, or have
I become more observant? I guess I’d supposed that nonprofit organizations operated in
some rarified air of an unending generosity that translates into absolute graciousness
between employers and employees. The supposition is probably the trap.

One example of misconception versus reality is the “perp walk,” the summary
dismissal of employees who are made to leave immediately, possessions in tow, as
occurred at DeLaSalle shortly before it announced the closing of its middle school
program. Often administrators or security personnel supervise these firings. A friend of
mine who had been with another Kansas City nonprofit organization for twenty years
described how she had been escorted away soon after one of its facilities had closed,
having moments before been convinced her job was safe from layoffs because of her
seniority. “They do it to humiliate you!” she was sure, and while just as surely no
company would ever admit to such a motive, they could hardly deny that such is the
effect. It’s an accepted business strategy in America, and the non-profits have adopted it
without acknowledging how its disrespect for people conflicts with their stated missions.

During the year before he moved to the East Coast, my husband and his boss had
failed to see eye to eye on the direction their non-profit organization should take; in
particular, he objected to decisions he saw as being made in the interest of maintaining
the organization itself, but at the expense of its largely indigent clientele. After several
attempts, he had concluded there was no reconciliation to be found, so he’d written a
letter of resignation, summarizing his concerns and giving a date several months in the
future by which he planned to leave. Since he was the only one in his profession at this
organization, it had seemed only fair—to it and to its clients—to allow time for a
replacement to be found and a transition made.

Instead, six hours after he submitted the letter, he was escorted out of the
building. His performance reviews had always been satisfactory, and there was no
accusation now that he’d done anything wrong, but since he was an “at -will” employee,
his employers had the contractual right to cut him with no notice. No allowances were
made for him to contact his clients; other staff members were warned not to talk to him.
The boss wrote a letter to his clients saying only that he had left, leaving the impression
that he had abruptly done so of his own volition, essentially abandoning them. The first
time I saw him after the dismissal, he was shell-shocked, and this was followed with grief
and anger at the severing of professional ties and the way in which he’d been treated.
Lawyers worked out the details of public statements and compensation in the succeeding
weeks. His livelihood—and with it my own and our children’s—became an uncertainty
for a time, but more threatening to me was this realization that my employer probably considered me something separate from itself, something expendable.

This disconnect between honorable, generous intentions and actual practice is rife in the nonprofit community. Mission statements, essentially marketing statements devised to push the organization’s public persona, simplify intents and strategies to the point where they may have little to do with practical goals and everyday operations (Schein, 2004). At DeLaSalle, our slogan for much of my time there was “The Door to Opportunity,” with little examination of what doors or what opportunities we were or should be offering. The primary energies of those higher up in the DLS administration, particularly those who had been there for some time, became focused on the organization’s perpetuation: its bottom line, its reputation, its self-congratulation. As in many nonprofits, norms of internal culture, such as the way meetings are run or short-term goals are established or internal discipline is carried out, are based on accepted formulas that don’t necessarily pay mind to the particulars of people’s responsibilities and personalities. Frequently at DLS, staff were shuffled into new positions and new programs without their input or willingness, and business strategies inappropriate for a school (such as offering teachers bonuses for higher attendance in their classes) were utilized at the suggestion of well-meaning board members who didn’t understand their unsuitability to a school context.

Worse is when those who make the decisions and evaluations believe their own rhetoric, fooling themselves into thinking they are following “best practice” (the current buzzwords), unaware of what they are missing or how their narrowed perspective may be causing more damage than good (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). It’s an organizational pitfall
built on an egotistical one: we all want to think we’re doing good, part of something
good, and wise in the ways of doing good. In our mental scramble to shore up our
emotional, intellectual, and financial feelings of security in our workplaces, here with the
added “burden” of conviction that we walk higher moral ground than do for-profit
groups, we may be more vulnerable to the human tendency to avoid questions and clear
sight. So at DeLaSalle, the graduation ceremonies were a time of rejoicing, but in our
determination to view positively ourselves and our students, we avoided seeing what each
of our graduates had actually achieved.

In 2008, J. Ward wrote of her experiences working in a San Francisco area LGBT
health organization. The organization prided itself on the compassionate, knowledgeable
care it offered and on its diverse—by race and by sexual orientation—staff, which might
have been assumed to make any sort of clientele feel welcome and comfortable. Yet its
unexamined methods for hiring and training staff and for appealing to donors marked it
as a white, middle-class organization that assumed white, straight values: it held
monogamy and parenthood as the norms in personal life and depended on carefully
defined criteria and quantities, a numbers game, to evaluate its success in the community.
Its assumptions were not true by a long shot, and friction among staff and a difficulty
attracting a cross section of clientele from the community were the results. This
organizational disconnect mirrors those in other organizations where missions and actions
have gone too long unexamined, such as well-meaning food banks that undercut more
established and well organized groups’ abilities to attract funding, or volunteer tourism in
which travelers spend thousands of dollars for their own two-week experience when the
same amount might have kept a family of four in food, clothing, and books for the
children for a year. To be sure, sometimes such competing goals can have beneficial long-term results, but people are usually reluctant to examine all aspects of their actions and compare them honestly with their stated aims.

One source of this disconnect, I would venture, is the distance that often stands between administrators and workers. When they don’t regularly talk with their staff about what goes on day to day and its relation to the organizational goals, directors acquire or perpetuate their own rosy perspective. In fact, there’s a good argument for having administrators actually work in the various positions they oversee, at least for a week or two, so that they better understand how different departments work together and their actual effectiveness in promoting their aims—one practice frequently found in successful for-profit organizations (Schein, 2004). The goals themselves need regular re-evaluation, out of respect for changing communities and cultural expectations: for instance, energies and resources devoted to preparing students for college might in some areas of the country be better spent preparing them for vocations, or a capital campaign to expand facilities might be better devoted to services provided in clients’ homes.

Probably the most difficult honesty would be realizing that an organization’s existence has outlived its usefulness, that it would be better restructured and completely transformed, if not absorbed into another nonprofit or into a state agency. The conflict of interest between the desire to perpetuate one’s livelihood and passion and the need to look critically and openly at the truth of one’s organization is nearly insurmountable for most of us. One test for an organization’s viability may be the compassion it exhibits towards its dedicated staff: if those with the power to make decisions cannot deal with their employees humanely, chances are the organization is also not addressing its clients’
problems effectively, and so it may be at the logical end of its life and mission. I don’t know if DeLaSalle had reached such a point, but my employers, most of whom had been there for many years, scrambled to avoid considering the possibility and so set themselves up for dangerous blind spots in the daily running of the organization and in their planning for the future.

At our mid-winter all-sites faculty meeting in my final year, our director and principal screened a film they hoped would inspire and revitalize us for the long haul to the end of the school year. They’d been so moved by it, our director Jim said as he introduced it, that they really wanted to share it with the rest of us. What followed was a business leadership promo piece featuring a gifted conductor who offered classes and workshops in choral and orchestral arrangements, some for community members and some for aspiring professional musicians. The community members came to sing completely by choice, bringing or making friends, delighted at every moment with this joyful teacher and grateful for the instruction he respectfully provided them. The music school graduate students, under near-constant pressures to prove themselves in time to land gigs and jobs, were grateful for the teacher’s decision to give everyone an “A” before the semester had even begun, so that the focus would be on the music instead of the competition. One young cellist was close to tears as she explained, after a class in which the teacher had patiently walked her through a movement while her classmates listened eagerly, “He’s helped me to remember why I practiced five hours a day all through high school and college! It wasn’t because my parents made me, it was because I loved the music!”
As we watched, the teachers close to me and I exchanged looks. I’d had two students that year alone who’d had themselves removed from my English class because they took exception to my requirement that they read books, even though, following DLS’s discouragement of homework, I offered them class time in which to do it. Our students were nothing like those on the screen.

That very night, flipping channels in my nightly ritual to find sleep, I happened upon a BBC program called “Ramsay’s Nightmare Kitchens.” A successful chef takes on failing restaurants and rehabs them, from the menu to the dining room to the chef’s management of the kitchen. That night Ramsay had intruded himself into a small-town establishment resting on its laurels of twenty years before. The place was hemorrhaging money, thousands every week, and the owner feared she’d have to close. The decor had not been updated in a decade. The menu’s trademark soup was now regularly being made with purchased tins of dehydrated stock. The chef and his assistants, demoralized and uninterested, rolled in each day close to noon to begin their perfunctory tasks.

Ramsay began the overhaul immediately, and he wasn’t especially nice about it. He was openly contemptuous of the food, the wait service, and the work ethic he witnessed. At one point, he had the head chef prepare what he considered a signature dish, something the chef would be willing to serve proudly at the upcoming grand reopening. The chef set about preparing a stuffed and sauced whole fish he’d learned to make while in the army. It was elaborate and scrumptious looking. But as he served Ramsay the dish, they both realized he’d forgotten to scale the fish. Ramsay took one bite, made a face, and said, unmistakably despite the network bleeping, “This tastes like shit.”
I would not advocate such harshness towards children of any age, but there’s something to be said for telling the truth. One spring, the guilt clouded me for weeks, until I called in a couple of my seniors. Iman had been with us since middle school and in my classes for two years. She had a dismissive, argumentative attitude and long had been known as a "hall walker," taking it on herself to engage in what she viewed as legitimate business or pleasure in the middle of class time, without permission. Her determined individualism led her to reject both the club-wear camis and leggings the girls snuck under their khakis, coordinated with their plastic hoop earrings and stacked bracelets, and the three-sizes-too-large polos and trousers favored by the boys and some of the more masculine girls: she wore uniform pants with an oxford shirt, untucked in perpetual defiance of regulations but otherwise unremarkable, and her hair was almost never braided or coiffed but in a simple ponytail. We had recently found her guilty of plagiarism on an assignment she could easily have completed herself, and she’d gotten in even worse trouble by joking about it—it was apparently carried out with another student on a lark. She may even have been responsible for my cell phone that had come up missing the year before: there was a hint of the covert about her, the side-wise smile and look, a bit of trouble that might be troubled in part at the notion of wanting a teacher’s approval. But she was smart; her voice had a peculiar mixture of articulation and small-town Missouri, a lazy sound, but her words were astutely humorous, regularly expressing her brief evaluations of me and other students with a bemused tolerance, whether at an appropriate time or not. Her parents never showed up for parent-teacher conferences, but given Iman’s skill level they must have been fairly literate. She could be a pain in the ass, but I loved her.
Johnny and I had had problems from the first year he arrived. I believe he was one of the first students I had who actually registered his arguments with me in terms of my being “White,” and after being sent to the office for both rude disruptions and racism, he admitted he’d been expelled from his previous school for threatening and cursing a white teacher. We had a couple of other run-ins that involved my color, and I made it pretty clear each time that he’d be immediately sent to Sean if he brought that factor into the discussion. But I thought—or hoped—this was more of a compulsion, like Tourette’s, and with time these incidents dwindled. More often he was just angry—at being corrected, at being required to do or not do things, at the injustice of a world in which someone beside him was directing the class. No surprise that when I had students represent themselves using symbols on a poster, his was full of photos of himself, looking cool, looking goofy, with his girlfriend, with his homies. But tucked near the bottom was one of his mom, whom I’d met and knew was both working full time and trying to earn college credits, and his “Pops,” who’d died in prison in California of a heart ailment when Johnny was only ten.

Pretty early on, I’d let both Johnny and Iman know I recognized they were smart and capable, and so I wouldn’t be letting them slide. Both had taken the ACTs, unusual for my students, and knew their scores were not high enough to be admitted to the four-year state schools, so neither complained when I started ramping up my expectations, giving them college-prep vocabulary exercises and longer, more detailed essays to write. Occasionally they’d balk and say I was unfair: “I just want to get my credit and get out of here.... “ But generally they seemed to appreciate my recognition that they should go to college, so they persisted in my version of sorta-kind college-prep assignments.
But I imparted these expectations too late. Iman and Johnny should have been doing this kind of work—I should have been requiring it—from day one. They were not ready to do well in college. All the struggles a first-generation college student must face, from financial strategizing to culture shock, would only be that much more difficult with an inadequate academic background, which remains one of the chief reasons students who start college often do not finish (Hamilton & Hamilton, in Arnett & Tanner, 2006). I had to admit this to them. This was surely not a school-sanctioned admission, as we were regularly tooting our own horn by proclaiming the number of students we’d ushered into the local community college (for which—see “speeding” above—students receive double high school credit towards graduation even for the below-college level remedial courses). But I told Johnny and Iman now that as our graduates, they would be entering the game behind. “Get academic help,” I advised. “Get tutors—they’re free. Get help budgeting your time. There are academic and minority support centers on campus—find them. Use them. The first couple of years will be hard. You won’t be able to party as much as you’d like.

“But yes, you do belong in college. Yes, you should go,” I pleaded. “You can make it—you have what it takes inside.” They nodded, taking me seriously, no fools themselves about the education they’d received. I think they appreciated my candor and encouragement. Iman even responded quietly, “You know, I always wondered if I’d be the sort of person who would go to college and then end up dropping out.” Now she understood explicitly why this so often happens, and what she might do, in action and in attitude, to prevent it. I did the right thing in talking to them, but this was not a conversation I left feeling satisfied. I shouldn’t have had to have it in the first place.
Johnny left for California soon after graduation to spend time with his paternal grandma and some cousins he hadn’t seen for years. We didn’t hear whether he made it back to town in time to enroll in community college, as he’d planned. I hope his reunion was good, a chance to flesh out more of his identity and to make peace with the memories of the father he’d lost. More, I hope it was free of the distractions and temptations that would turn him away from college and towards his old anger.

Iman wrote me a two-line e-mail in early June announcing she’d been admitted to one of the state’s historically black colleges, known as HBCs. I wrote back gushing with pleasure and advice, reminding her to seek out the academic support center, asking questions about majors and dorms. Her response, another two lines, began, “Man, that’s the longest e-mail I ever got. I started not to read it.” In September a third e-mail of two lines informed me that she’d ended up enrolling in a branch of the state university, instead. And a few weeks after that, she sent an attachment, an essay she’d written for English 101 that had received a “B.”

The essay’s grammatical errors were disturbingly frequent—but I reflected that this at least meant she’d written the thing herself. The structure was fairly sound, the purpose coherent, although I could take no credit for any of that, since her speech and writing were fairly capable when she came to me, and her current professor or tutor might have worked some wonders. But the content was a gift: a description of how her high school English teacher had pushed her to do better, and how the teacher’s classroom discussions of human rights abuses around the world had given her new insight into and compassion for lives far from her own.
This might have been a convenient way to satisfy an assigned formula. It might have been easy flattery, both for my benefit and for the new teacher’s. It might even have been recompense for that cell phone. But it made me feel good—or, I should say, better. I wrote back to thank her, remarking that as teachers, much as parents, we often don’t know if anyone’s listening or not. “We are, even if you don’t know it,” she replied reassuringly. I can only hope that someone else is, too. But it won’t be enough to get anyone through college, and fuck the paperwork, we should all have been doing so much more, and expecting so much more, all along. We’d placed our faith in making our own papers look good, without looking at what was underneath or what would come after.

Keyonia

All this perspective on my institution was still more or less inchoate, below the surface of my daily musings, but my head was in a bad place. The September glow had worn thin after barely a month; the inspiration I drew from my favorite students and my closest colleagues’ laughter did not dispel the emotional weariness I fought hourly. I willed myself up and dressed each morning and on my ten-minute drive to school turned my CD player louder in denial of the day to come, letting The Scissor Sisters’ “Take Your Mama Home” or the Modern Lovers’ “Pablo Picasso” insist there was more to the world, more to me, a sly and wry humor that saw and celebrated people’s quirks without fawning over them. This attitude gave me distance and refuge, but it did not help me directly face what I needed to do each day, especially not a parent teacher conference day, when we were asked to teach our regular hours, have a soup and sandwich in the cafeteria after students left at 2:45, and join our teams in the library from 3:30 to 6:30 to
meet with parents. And so I was not prepared in any way for my meeting with Keyonia’s mother.

It was the way she did it: she set me up. After sharing a conversation with Shatyra, her daughter’s counselor, that was scattered with airy laughter, although I could not hear its content, she slid into the seat before me with that smug smile I saw mirrored daily in her daughter.

“You made it back!” I said, welcoming her, referring to the conference in Sean’s office she’d been called to the previous week. “Well, I said I would,” she shrugged, still smiling. “So, how is she doing?”

I chose. “I think things are better now that she’s switched classes,” I began.

“She’s getting her work done; no major problems.”

“Umm-hmm,” Keyonia’s mother looked at me sideways. “What about the other day?”

“The other day?” I was confused.

“Yesterday, or it might have been Tuesday. You told her she needed to see her counselor and go home.”

“What? I don’t remember.”

“Umm-hmm.” Another sideways look. “She was sick, and you told her she couldn’t stay in class.”

No, I didn’t remember the particular incident, but it’s a common occurrence: a student puts his or her head on the desk and refuses to work, which is against school rules, then claims illness when I stop by to remind them. “If she was sick, it’s true, I
would send her to her counselor to see about going home,” I told Mom, on the defensive by now.

“She has asthma. It was her asthma acting up, now that the weather’s changing.”

She was accusing by now, and I panicked for a moment. Asthma? She does?

“She does? I didn’t know. Does she use an inhaler?” I tried to remember.

“No, I haven’t had time to get her one yet,” replied Mom, now defensive herself.

“But it bothers her throat. You said she’d have to leave class if she made that sound again.”

Now I remembered: it was not an asthmatic’s alarming wheezing I’d forgotten about, but the little throat sound someone with postnasal drip sometimes makes to “scratch.” Except Keyonia does nothing in a little way: she is big, loud, unaware of others.

Yes, when she’d started making the sound in the middle of Sustained Silent Reading, a routine Tuesday and Thursday event, I’d asked her to stop or step outside, or, if she was so ill she could do neither, go see her counselor. I was not persecuting a disabled child but trying to maintain classroom decorum and, primarily, peace, so that others could read. I hadn’t meant to make it a big deal—just as I hadn’t wanted, tonight, to make a big deal of the twenty-five other annoying and inappropriate actions Keyonia had indulged in since our earlier conference over more serious infractions, ordering me to “Get out of my face” when I told her to stop using the N word in class, then the following day complaining, “I’ve had enough of this shit,” walking out, and slamming the door when I told her to lower her voice.
I told Mom, with as much calm as I could muster but with my jaw tight and, now, with an admittedly officious manner, my face turning red, that I needed Keyonia to step in the hall with her sounds rather than disturb class. “When she has asthma?” her mom answered, incredulous. “Yes,” I said firmly, stopping myself from continuing: Your daughter doesn’t know how to behave, not in public, not at school. Your daughter is selfish. Your daughter wants to take her troubles out on other people, and because I’m a teacher, or because I’m a white teacher, I’m an easy target. You are enabling her to do this. You are how she got this way. No, I’m not going to allow a teenager to act like a jerk in my class, whether she’s talking to me like I’m dirt or disrupting the class environment I work so hard to preserve in a school where chaos is a constant undercurrent and expectations for civil behavior are so far below societal standards. She has asthma? Maybe so. If she had celiac disease, would it be okay for her to fart in class, or in church, say, in the middle of a prayer or a wedding, even if she could help it and wait? If she had a yeast infection, should I let her sit there and scratch in front of everyone? No, I’d ask her to step outside, or if she’s really hurting, go home. Go home.

“Is there anything else?” the mom huffed.

“No, apparently not.” I waved her away, my anger unhidden.

She moved to the next teacher at the next table, but I was riled, roiled, steamed, hot. My day—my week—had been ruined, and I was truly grateful that the next parent at my table was the mother of a delightful, hard-working young woman about whom I could give a wonderful report. Within the hour, parent conferences were over.

When I got home, I had to walk around the block. I pumped my arms and legs, encouraging my heart and blood, breathing in the welcome cold by the light of the street.
lights, feeling some of the tightness turned to kinesthetic energy and then exhaled. I reasoned that it was either this or drink two glasses of wine, and I’m trying to cut down, since, November 1 though it was, the school year was wearing on me already. I craved alcohol, sweets, crunchy salty fried things; my breath felt heavy when I awoke each morning, the TV’s anesthetic trivia lured, and my headaches were more frequent. This was early in the year to feel so trammled, and I tried not to join in too much with colleagues saying the same thing at lunch or in the halls, fearing I’d become a part of the weight pressing on us all.

That weekend, I looked at some of Pema Chodron’s writings on the Buddhist concept of boddhichitta. I read only a few pages, but each one I considered slowly, taking it in as a healing lozenge. I realized I had let myself be “hooked”; it happens, and most often when we’re tired and dispirited. I should have recognized and told Keyonia’s mom, “You’re still angry about last week.” I should have said, “You’re worried about Keyonia.” I should have known the woman had her story, too, a life too much out of her own control, so much that she would desperately seek a scapegoat, unaware that she was doing so and that her daughter was following her model of how to cope. Her anger and mine were not so different: both were born of a sense of personal impotence and futility. I should have disarmed her with kindness. It is a hard thing to learn to do, but worth practicing—not just for her sake, but for my own. This anger was making me miserable. Sometimes it seemed so right to say, “Well, fuck you, too.” If I started saying it, I might have a hard time stopping—and be no better for having said it.

The following week I found that Keyonia had been changed to a different reading class, and now I had to wonder why. Was her counselor responding to the mother’s
complaints? If so, was she siding with her or giving us all a break? Had she thought about the message she was giving Keyonia and her students about behavioral expectations by removing her from class? Had she decided I was an unreasonable grump, or did she think—and this thought is the most troubling—that my white mannerisms were not something a student should be expected to deal with? And how should I have confronted this? Would Shatyra be honest about her reasons if I asked her? Would I just make trouble if I opened this can of worms, or was it a can that needed opening before it burst? I’d seen, or thought I’d seen or chosen to see, harmony among the multiethnic staff since I’d begun working there, but two weeks before at a staff meeting, another black counselor had complained about white teachers using slang to be “cool,” and another white teacher and I had exchanged glances: was there a certain way we as white teachers were expected to be? I didn’t know if I could find the kindness, the forgiveness and understanding, to deal with racial prejudice from other staff members. If this was what was beneath the surface in all our staff relations, enough so that it affected decisions made about our kids, what could we do about it? The conundrums snowballed; I needed a drink or a walk, and again I wanted to curse to somebody, explaining in precise detail exactly what I was cursing. But what could help?

_Fight_

We heard the page for a Code 55 to Sam’s room. She spoke slowly—later she told me she’d suddenly forgotten her room number. By the time I reached the door, the fight was out in the hall between our classrooms and moving rapidly towards mine. It was just two boys, but already students from other classrooms on the hall had tumbled out to
watch and goad, wanting their part in DeLaSalle’s favorite spectator sport. Three boys from my room burst past me before I could block the door, and I corralled them nominally, ordering them over and over to go back into my room so I could shut the door and minimize the collateral damage. My three moved closer to my door as the fight moved towards them but refused to go inside, standing there impassively. I tried pushing them as a group, as I’d seen other teachers and my principal do, but their bulk was too much for me. They ignored me completely. I might as well not have existed. I am one hundred forty pounds to their—what?—five hundred combined. I am also white, female, middle class, middle-aged—four more strikes against any presumption of deserved respect. And I have, it has been made clear through the years, no authority here.

Once the fighters were restrained—one’s parting words included, ”We’ll see to you outside of school”—and the spectators ordered back to class by the principal, I snapped at my three students. I snapped at them verbally and slammed my fist on a desk, and that is all and it was over, but the snap undid me just long enough to say what I should not have in any sort of case short of their physical assault: I called them little assholes. I had cursed students, and immediately I regretted it, but I was still too mad to back down. I sent the three to Brandee, their counselor, and spent the morning, as I also attempted to teach classes, doing what I frankly saw as damage control for myself: apologizing to the rest of the class who’d heard my outburst, e-mailing an apology and admission to the counselors and Gayle, going downstairs to apologize to the boys, and then calling two parents (Ray had said he doesn’t live at home and I shouldn’t call) to confess and apologize to them, too. Embarrassed to repeat what I’d said, I instead told them all, “It starts with A.” At one house I reached the grandmother, who said the mother
would not be happy about this but she would pass along the message. I shoved a current of fear away: this mother could demand public humiliation. At the other house, the mother fell silent, then said, “Well, that was wrong of you, so I appreciate your calling. But it sounds like the truth is, they were being assholes.” I was profoundly grateful for this bit of understanding. My colleagues also supported me, saying, “It’s okay—it happens,” and a few admitted their tongues had gotten away from them before. I put my fear away as best I could and went on with the day, teaching, grading, going to the afternoon meeting, but the day swam in the bad taste of the morning.

When I spoke to my principal after the staff meeting, I told her about all the apologies I’d made and repeated mine to her. She was stern and told me there would be no consequences for the boys. I accepted this chastisement meekly; it was about what I’d expected. She is, after all, at the mercy of those potentially furious parents. But then I wondered, Would I have lost my cool if I worked in a place where disobedience in a dangerous situation did have consequences? And if she must, in this incident, advocate for the boys, where was she when they said “Fuck you” for not giving them a hall pass, or told their classmates, “Don’t listen to what she say-- she nothing,” or when they accused me of racism or favoritism because I expected them to act decently and do their work?

At the meeting Jan, my friend and now supervisor, had handed out graphs of credits completed by students each month of this school year compared to each month of the previous year. “We are up 167 percent!” she’d cheered, minimizing the fact that this is apples to oranges, since last year we were only crediting courses to transcripts when students completed a course, not at the end of every .25 credit: we wouldn’t actually know whether we’d improved until the end of the year. Worse was the unacknowledged
pressure put on teachers to be sure even the least energetic student could complete his or her work. And what if a teacher was trying to get the students to work on high school level? What if she demanded a full nine weeks’ worth of work for .25 of a year’s credit when others’ courses could be completed in half the time? What if she expected to be answered when she spoke, to have instructions followed, to have responses other than ‘Get out of my face” or “Don’t talk to me” or “Fuck you” when she required something? Put all of those together and that teacher—me—became the hard-ass. All this is overgeneralization, of course. It is only a handful who spoke to me like that, and I joked with and cajoled and encouraged many more. But I was told over and over by students that they hated my class because of all the work, and because the work was hard, and that both of these things made my class different from many of their others.

So, I wanted to ask my principal, how warm a relationship would you have with students if you had no authority to discipline them beyond sending them out of class for a little talk with someone, and you also believed you had a responsibility to get them to accomplish something significant? I wish you’d try, I couldn’t help wishing—not in a rhetorical, sarcastic challenge, but with an honest wish that she’d step in my shoes and see just what she’d be up against. If most people at DeLaSalle were accepting a middle-school education as adequate, how could those of us who expected more be expected to endear themselves to their students? I know, it sounds like trying to squirm out of my considerable faults and mistakes, but how could anyone know until they’d tried to do what I do? So there I was, frantic with defensive questions, hooked by the chaotic feelings of moment I now was forced to articulate.
Sam told me later that the fight had started when one young man was telling the
class that his house had been shot up over the weekend when youths from a rival block
had driven by a party there. A student from that other 'hood, who Sam thought hadn’t
understood the seriousness of the event, had made a joke about it, and the first student
had thrown a punch. From there these two boys I had never seen so enraged before had
vaulted for each other with extraordinary determination; it had taken four staff members
and our security officer to break them up. And for this, both boys would be dismissed
from school, or at least their progress slowed by a detour to anger-management sessions
and in-school suspension. It’s likely their fight would have been as vigorous even without
the cheering squad, but the pressure to perpetuate a violent culture is everywhere: if
someone shoots, shoot back; if someone hits, hit back; if someone insults or threatens,
threaten violence and, for God’s sake, follow through. You have to. That’s the way it has
to be. The “We’ll take care of this after school” might never have been uttered without
the cheering squad—and now, having been witnessed, the boys carried with them the
pressure to do so, whether they were inside our school or out on the streets. It wasn’t a
fair fight with fists they’d be expected to handle it with, but guns.

Sam had already been looking for a teaching job down in Springfield, where she’d
grown up, and where her mother was beginning to have health problems. “But I’ve had it
with this,” she admitted. “Some days I find it hard to care.” She described what we were
facing wisely, if not completely, in these terms: “These kids are not my circle of
influence,” and I fought her implications that we, white and middle-class, were powerless
there, clenching hard to my ideals even then. Sam had passionately advocated for many
of them in school and in the community, found them jobs, encouraged them through
personal troubles, spent countless summer hours, as had I, devising curriculum to engage
and enlighten. But too many of them didn’t want what we had to offer, and there weren’t
enough people to tell them they urgently needed to move towards it, anyway. They were
trapped in a culture that was at least to some degree of their own making, and whatever
historical wrongs or misfortunes of race or poverty have contributed, it was they who
would have to decide to break away from it. Having opened our arms and offered our
gifts and made ourselves available to help, the next step was theirs, and someone better
able to influence them than me needed to tell them that it was time to take it.

To be honest, I do not feel I harmed these students terribly with my words after
the fight. What I said was unprofessional, and I should have had better self-control. But it
was something I might have said to my own son when he was an older teenager if he’d
grievously aggravated me. He would have been mad; I would have apologized; we would
have talked after we’d both cooled down and gone on with things. He knows I love him,
knows I’m going to have Mom expectations he doesn’t like and, as a human being, will
lose my temper on occasion, as does he. I knew I was supposed to act differently with my
students, and for most of my seven years there I did. Two of those young men I had
cursed, Ray and Christian, I actually had good relationships with. They were smart and
forgiving, having admitted they’d done something wrong themselves and accepted my
apology. The third, more generally an “asshole” aside from that one incident, was
dismissed within a month after the fight for slapping a teacher. I can only speculate
whether lack of consequences for earlier transgressions had contributed to his
increasingly unacceptable behavior.
In the meantime, admitting defeat, my primary concern at calling these kids what I did was that it would get back to a prospective employer and I wouldn’t be able to leave. Two weeks after the incident, with no previous notice that the matter would be pursued further, Jan called me in my room to tell me we had an appointment that afternoon in my principal’s office. When I became concerned, other teachers told me, “Don’t worry—they probably just want to see how you’re doing and find out your perspective of what happened.” However, after we sat down in Gayle’s office, I was handed a formal letter of warning that was to be placed in my personnel file. The letter thanked me for my apologies but reminded me that my language had been unacceptable and that I needed to be a better role model for students. That was to be that. In a crazy focus of the moment’s awfulness, I happened to notice “ass holes” had been spelled as two words, something only an English teacher with minimal cussing experience was likely to have done. Jan.

I expressed surprise that they had no questions for me, no concern for why my emotions might have gotten so out of hand, and I volunteered what I’d been feeling and thinking. I told them I’d realized much of my anger was misdirected frustration at my lack of authority and the inconsistent discipline I saw around me. “So many of these kids are coming from unstable backgrounds,” I explained. “There’s a term, ‘unresponsive parenting,’ that means you don’t necessarily suffer continual abuse or neglect but you don’t know what reaction you’ll get [Yates, T.M., Egeland, B., & Sroufe, A., 2003]. You might get ignored; you might get slapped; the response is seldom in proportion to the severity of your behavior, so you don’t know what will happen. These kids are anxious. They don’t know what, if anything, will happen if they misbehave. They keep pushing
and pushing, trying to find out how many times it will take to get a response. Whatever they need, I’m sure it’s not less discipline than what average kids require.”

Gayle explained that our discipline was consistent but the fact just might not be apparent to me. “We have to deal with each circumstance compassionately,” she went on. I could not let the implication go. “Believing in discipline doesn’t mean you don’t have compassion,” I defended. “It’s for their sake, too. Things are getting out of control around here; they need more stability. Some actions need set consequences.” I didn’t go into the list of offenses for which students were not disciplined I’d seen in astounding numbers that school year: students cursing me, ordering me what to do or not to do, physically threatening me or other students with unmistakable gestures and words, causing a ruckus in class and in the halls.

Jan chimed in with support for Gayle. “I know from raising my own children, different children respond to different things.” I was reminded of my own mother’s reiterations and validations of my father’s decisions, and how they used to irritate me: what did she think herself? Did she even allow herself to know? And of the “different children” theory, I recalled an Anne Bradstreet writing that characterized some children as requiring “salt” and some “sugar.” How wise. If the sugar fails to work, over and over, at what point is it time to try the salt?

Gayle and Jan conceded a bit by detailing the new detention program they’d put in place, to begin after spring break. Students who were tardy to school for the day three or more times would serve an after-school detention one afternoon from 2:50 to 4:30. It was not clear how late they had to be—an hour? two?—and the detention was not for students who skipped a class during the day after they’d arrived, for which there was no
“We don’t have money for that,” Gayle informed me. Nor, apparently, was there to be detention for the curses or threats. Well, at least it’s something, I thought, until I considered later: how long before a halfway intelligent student figured out that if she was late to school three times, she’d serve detention, but if she just didn’t go at all on those days, there would be no consequences whatsoever? Students were sometimes put on attendance contracts, but this was not usually until they’d missed a week or two (there were no apparent cut-offs, and thus—I’ve got to say it—no consistency) within an academic quarter. In fact, students could skip school one day every other week and be rewarded, with certificates and candy bars or bowling trips or pizza parties, or even for awhile with a quarter credit, for their 90 percent attendance.

It was surely not the time to go into all this, so I held my tongue, but I’d offered too much already. Gayle and Jan could tell I was stewing. “Sometimes people find they’re just not happy here after a while, and then it’s probably time for them to move on to someplace else,” Gayle then told me. “Jan tells me you’ve been looking out of state for other positions. Do you plan to return next year?”

I had spoken to Jan of the possibility I’d be moving several months before but had said that nothing was certain and that I wasn’t ready to tell Gayle. I kept my eyes towards Gayle and stopped myself from looking at Jan; something clicked closed between us. “I don’t know,” I said firmly.

“When will you know?” Gayle pressured, and I found myself agreeing to tell her before contracts came out the following month. I had no job lined up, I thought, but how could I possibly stay after this?
I left the meeting, lips pressed together, and headed back upstairs to handle my paperwork, determined to persist. But when I caught sight of Sam in the halls, just coming out of the tail end of a meeting I’d had to miss with my other teammates, I burst into tears. She hurried me into the room and Brandee closed the door; I spilled my guts, voice shaking, as they gathered around and offered tissues and consolation. When I told them Gayle had contradicted my impression that discipline at DelaSalle was not consistent, they were incensed. After all, at the January all-staff meeting in which a chorus of laments at the low morale had apparently taken administration by surprise, our team was not the only one that had listed discipline matters among our concerns. Sam was outraged, immediately searching her legal sources for employees’ rights in the case of formal reprimands—but as my own Googled studies and a frantic e-mail to my corporate-employed brother had revealed, it turned out as “at-will” employees, we didn’t have many rights at all. I decided I’d have to let the matter drop, at least until I’d cooled off.

Too late, my brother’s cautions reached me: do not discuss this with anyone. Even well-meaning colleagues might have done something with the information that would hurt me. But besides my team, I’d also told my lunch buddies when they asked. Francie, our art teacher, petite and curvy and with a youthful voice perpetually infected with merry sarcasm, had been here several years longer than I and was a favorite of students and administration alike. She shook her head when I told her about the meeting. She’d been one of the people predicting a meeting in which my feelings and perspectives would be sought and respected, perhaps one reason I’d felt so blind-sided. She was also the person at the annual staff meeting who’d first had the audacity to publicly characterize
our morale as low, starting the discussion on possible causes, which had taken up much of the meeting.

“It’s not just the kids they’re inconsistent with,” she observed now. “It’s with staff, too. Sean curses kids all the time; I’ll bet you won’t find any letters in his file.” And I remembered: it was Jan who’d told me, a few years earlier, that Gayle sometimes cursed kids as well. It’s possible cursing was something she had struggled with and overcome, since I’d never seen or heard it, and if so, all power to her. But could she not, then, have treated a similarly erring employee with some compassion?

Francie went on to confide that one of our mental health counselors, a smart, caring, and forthright former electrical engineer who’d taken a substantial pay cut to devote herself to these children and put herself through the rigors of a clinical counseling degree, had tried mightily that year to effect changes in policies but had been met with obstacles at every turn. And another counselor, Francie told me, was continually chastised for trivial problems, such as referring to half an academic credit as “fifty cent,” as in “Come to school every day, so you can get that fifty cent. Don’t stop there; come on and get your dollar.”

“They put in writing that she isn’t allowed to say that any more; she showed me,” Francie told me, and I didn’t know whether to laugh until my lunch came out my nose or just throw it up directly. Too, too much. It was time to go.

It was past time. If only I’d gone before this incident... I should have known my limits and recognized my bubbling frustration before I let it blow. Now, when an application to a school in Vermont, where I knew I wanted to be, came to me, I was brought up short while answering “the bad people questions,” as a colleague had once
called them: Have you ever been convicted of a criminal offense? Have you been investigated for child abuse? Have you been terminated before the end of a school year? I had to hesitate before circling “no” all down the line, since one asked if I’d ever been disciplined, and I had no idea whether Jan would feel obliged to tell anyone who called my references all about it, or even how they classified our little meeting. So I circled “no” but on the lines offered for explanation, I wrote, “I said a very unfortunate word during a disciplinary situation with students. A warning letter was placed in my file.” I held my breath and crossed my fingers. I had to hope someone would understand.

*Our Minds, Our Lives*

When we do or think anything, whether processing a word on a page, practicing a social gesture such as a nod or a wave, or breathing in and out with awareness, our brain’s amygdala and hippocampus, processors of emotion and memory, are both activated. Emotion and memory in turn interact with the prefrontal cortex, domain of discernment and decision, to regulate continual responses to our interfaces with the outer world or within our own. Previous experiences, many we’ve all but forgotten, have drawn and reinforced specific synaptic pathways: we feel and act in characteristic ways that become our temperament. The insistence of proteins within each cell, the roll of fluid and rush of hormones and nutrients within the womb, the turn and pull and assault of light already work to shape an infant’s temperament at birth. Growing or grown, we are further shaped by all that’s happened in between: our mother’s kiss or slap, a nightmare or daydream or dream for the future, a violent assault against us or witnessed by us between our parents or our neighbors or on a TV screen. In the reach of a hand or the turn of a
gaze lies a skein of patterned proteins, a scent of summer earth from a day long past, a sleepless night ruminating on another hand or another look. For each experience, the brain tests and practices its responses, the Yes and the No, the celebration, the shutting down. You can’t teach these away; you have to work with what’s there, engaging and offering chances to shore up the pathways that help and learn new ways to think and react that might circumvent old, harmful patterns and passageways.

Since we’ve been babies, we’ve been developing the means to check our thoughts and actions by inhibiting instinctive responses. It is a practical skill. In a laboratory setting, we can teach ourselves each time to say the color that’s spelled out instead of the color in which the words are presented. In life, we learn to read to the end of a word or sentence before blurting out a sound with the first letters we see, or we hold back the punch in the face that an initial provocation to flight or fight might urge. On its most basic level, this is known as effortful control, and the more mature we become, the more continually this self-control smoothes our passage through the world. One benefit of E.C. is the time won, fractions of seconds though it may entail, to consider all possible consequences. This comes to include consequences to others, which involve others’ perspectives, so leading to compassion and from there to a moral sensibility (Kochanska, G. & Aksan, N., 2006).

Children who experience emotional or physical trauma, or who receive mixed signals from their environments as to what causes what, experience delays or perversions in the maturation of their effortful control. In teenagers, even normal responses are challenged by their stage of brain development. The natural pruning of synaptic pathways, which serves to simplify and clarify appropriate responses in adults, is still
underway, so each experience is fraught with so many synaptic choices that even the most mature, stable, and morally upright teen is more likely than her elders to react inappropriately—sometimes tragically—when under stress (Sabbagh, 2006). Chronic stress and recurring trauma, and the depression or other mental illness that may eventually be activated by them, are enfolded into each new experience, becoming a runaway snowball that tears along, bad decision following bad choice following unfortunate reaction and so on, until a whole life is out of control.

I’ve enjoyed a stable home, a mother and father who not only clothed and fed me but read me books and laughed with me, our worst crises a bad grade or a grandparent who passed away. I’ve gotten a college education, jobs, and cozy houses, known love, seen the world, its strangeness and beauty. But sometimes I feel out of control, too. I want to halt the changes, hang on to what I have or shape the future in the image of the past. I fret over what’s wrong, founder in confidence, want people and things I can rely on. I mourn the disappointments, react endlessly to old sores and unexpected blasts. I hope and hope, and the hope brings me as much grief as anything.

Many of my teenaged students at DeLaSalle had suffered or witnessed traumas I, at 50, never have. They react to protect themselves, physically and mentally, and this reaction, born of self-defense against extreme circumstances, often of fear channeled into aggression, becomes their way of reacting to the world every day, much as do combat veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. Understanding and simple kindnesses and basic instruction do only a little to heal such trauma. It’s become part of the wiring.
Even more common to my students, though often concomitant with the PTSD, is an early life dominated by what’s been termed unresponsive parenting. They become accustomed to never knowing how a volatile or unstable or distracted parent will react, whether with anger or compassion or neglect, so they have struggled to form a coherent, constructive picture of the world, of what’s right and wrong, what’s important, and what they themselves are and what they’re worth (Yates, T.M., Egeland, B., & Sroufe, A., 2003). They need, usually without knowing it, honest information and clarity, compassion without the sugar-coating schools so often feel obliged to offer as encouragement. For example, the student who has not learned the basic social interactions of greetings and pleasantries needs to know they’re essential to success in the world, and the child who’s barely passed basic math needs to know he’ll have to spend more time on it to acquire the skills a typical young man or woman has upon graduating from high school. These seem obvious matters until you see the daily mixed messages and obfuscation of rules and requirements and teacher reactions that reinforce rather than supplant the inconsistent early nurturing styles these children have known at home. My students adapted by stepping away from their own powerlessness to assert their peers’ nihilistic worldview, which made as much sense as anything they’d known.

Sometimes we’re stuck. The blue shirt or the green today? The marriage or the divorce? Graduate or drop out? Everything is half way, no way, no Yes or No but maybedon’tknowimpossibletotell, impossible to act, so we’re drifting through our days unable to effect change. Or sometimes we’re stuck in Yes or No, using the same old tools of coping, rebelling or accepting what we shouldn’t, stuck in a single gear and going round and round. Our ruminating, our incessant, judgmental stories of ourselves, entrench
the synaptic ruts deeper and deeper, sometimes right down into the sharp metal rims and wells of depression. We are trapped.

It’s not a new problem. Our modern life carries its unique pressures and dilemmas, but the human condition has not much changed for as long as people have been self-aware. The Buddhists, known for an eminently practical understanding of human psychology that long predates our current understanding of neurology, speak of mindfulness, and today psychologists look to their lessons in framing how the mind works and lives and how it might heal. How often do we lose sight and sense of even the fact of our own breathing? We have become accustomed to pushing away the present, but when we lose the present, harmful patterns of seeing and doing, from malfunctions of effortful control to the stagnation of inaction, creep in to dominate our lives. Our motivations become obligations and expectations, at a remove from our vitality whether they are from within or from others, and we become self-conscious instead of self-aware. Often everyone around us is operating the same way, so that we can’t put our finger on our vague sense of dissatisfaction. Or we ascribe it to external factors we feel no control over—our parents, our society— or things that we can but that don’t get to the root of the problem, such as the neighborhood we live in or our lack of money. “Life is Suffering,” the Buddhist teachers instruct, but rather than consigning us to acceptance of misery, they are showing us how acceptance might leave considerable room for love and creative acts and moments of joy.

My studies, from Otto Rank to John Kabat-Zinn to Eckhart Tolle and Pema Chodron, tell me it’s all about the moment, that if I can only awake to the present, I’ll be able to find or create there all I’ll ever need, indeed all there ever is. I can teach myself,
I’ve read, to meet each experience with my all, not trying to manipulate or avoid it but quieting my mind, offering each synapse and neural bundle to sensation, finding in each second a new world of being and responding, a babe again, but one with depths of memory and emotion to feel. When I open myself to life, I am not afraid of the next moment, or the days past, or of you.

So, here we are. I want a life in a warm and comfortable home, with people and family who love and respect me, doing work I find satisfying and useful. I want time to read, to laugh, to think, to see and enjoy and learn. You want these things too, or something like them. The question is, how will we get there? I am craving respect and acknowledgment from my family and friends, from my bosses and colleagues, and from you, my students, wanting so much to know that I am doing you some good. But over and over I am pulled up short at seeing: you cannot see me. You are not listening. You are shoved to the wall by the press of your pasts, your family and peers, and now by the social expectations, school among them, you never sought, and all seem to say, “Do something, or you do not matter.” Our lives drag us down as they propel us, away from each other and towards futures we imagine dimly as change and resolution. There must be a way to do this right, I think, and you think, there must be a way to make my life right. And there is, for us both: to awake and look each other in the eyes and do and be what’s right for this moment. I, with all I know, am struggling to be this way. How can I even begin to help you do the same?

The answers come in the days I know when to stop asking questions.
Stephen, Kurtiz, Amelia, Others

Stephen has small eyes and the over-full face of an earnest capybara, and he shuffles carefully out onstage, since he has injured his knee while helping a relative move. I can so easily imagine him thirty years from now, a talkative salesman, perhaps, hopeful and sad, the accounts just enough to keep up payments on the duplex and the pre-owned Cadi, a wife and child with whom he dutifully attends church and soccer and couples’ counseling. Now he places the table and chairs, looking concerned; I wonder whether he is in pain or just blanking on his lines. Then this boy with the snuffle and lisp and the extra weight, who inserts himself in every conversation, who boasts randomly and wildly of inappropriate conquests and skills, far too eager to please and otherwise, yes, playing his part in calling forth that regular derision from cruel or insecure classmates—this boy launches into the soliloquy. It is from As You Like It, on the Ages of Man, which are not so changed for us, it seems, from Shakespeare’s day. Stephen takes his time; he gestures and pauses; he doesn’t miss a word. He nails it. As he exits the stage, looking relieved and shell-shocked, my hands explode in hard claps of approval, while silently I also thank the teaching actors from the Kansas City Repertory Theatre who’ve known he could do it, coached him through, helped him understand the language and himself and humanity enough to nail it.

Then there’s Kurtiz. Another round and doofy boy with impulsive, inappropriate speech and an ability to avoid all but the few chosen academic assignments at which he excels, Kurtiz has managed to land himself in the in-school suspension program for the rest of the school year. His teachers there have agreed to let him join my class enough to
work with Philip, my playwright, actor, director, and dramaturge friend, on a monologue, and Philip and I are both astounded by what he produces: the musings of a prisoner in the penitentiary for life after committing a robbery and murder. The prisoner sums up his experiences and wisdom in smiles and frowns—acknowledging how he’s gotten where he is, regretful but grateful for what he has. At one point he tells the audience that the gas chamber smells like pine oil: “They was gon’ send me to pine oil heaven,” he laments, before a judge’s unexplained reprieve. “How did you know about that?” I’d asked him, and he’d named a recently popular action movie. I am no less impressed by the fact that he’s drawn on this dramatic element and made it his own.

But the night of the performance, it’s not just the monologue Kurtiz is responsible for. First he’s a student traveling to Tanzania in a skit about Pete and Charlotte O’Neil, much-mellowed Black Panther exiles who now welcome DeLaSalle students and tourists to their community center in Arusha. Then, it’s salsa dancing with the fellow in-school suspendees and their teacher, Michelle: he and Michelle are enthusiastic and rhythmic, unlike the girls who let their arms hang at their sides likes hams or the other boys with their sullen faces. Kurtiz’s head is bowed over his and his partner’s feet, concentrating, but his movement is fluid and competent. By the time they finish, he is sweating, and so he makes a quick change of shirts for his monologue. The mic periodically plagues him with static, but those who can hear shout their approval when he is done. Next he’s on stage with Devin, now in his twenties, one of our former students who’s never graduated and has, it turns out, as beautiful a voice as he has skin and eyes and long, lean legs. Kurtiz holds his own backing him in the song, which he’s helped write, and the sound is
surprisingly professional, a crowd-pleaser. But off again—and now Kurtiz is back for the one-acts, engaging fully with his cohorts, convincing us all as he comfortably inhabits his characters. Others shine, too, but Kurtiz has the night. Now if we can just get the boy through high school.

I've been backstage keeping things moving, policing resentful kids I don't really know, but finally I've been able to come out for the one-acts and breathe. Devin slips into the seat beside me to watch, too, until his cell phone goes off and he slips out again to take the call. And suddenly I have broken my vow never again to indulge in Imaginative Fornication with a student, buttressing myself with the flimsy excuse that well, he's not my student anymore, and besides, he's way past twenty. I conjure that infamous, ancient DeLaSalle elevator, and the two of us stuck, sweating, between floors until the firemen come. It must be the stress. It must be the Arts. It must be time to get my sorry ass out there and find a (grown) man. It must be the end of a long school year, a long seven years.

Later, I gave Damon, another monologue writer, a ride home, just as the skies opened and the tree tops began to whip the air. He was happy, grinning that his part had gone well. After being booted from his last school, and moving from Grandma's to Mom's and back within the past few months, attending a funeral the week before for a cousin shot dead in a neighborhood conflict, and surviving who knows what other miseries and traumas, a bit of his life was going right. When I let him off, he thought to thank me—more, he thought to say, “Drive careful, now,” as I headed out again into the driving rain. The rest of the way home I played Prince's “Purple Rain” at top volume,
letting the joyous anguish frame the night, and slept well until the roar of the winds woke me at 2 a.m. and I turned on the TV to watch for tornadoes.

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I’d been having my Humanities class read a short passage from Julian Baggini’s *The Pig Who Wants to be Eaten*, in which hypothetical philosophical cases are presented and discussed. There’s a case in which a prison guard is ordered to commit a heinous war crime against a political prisoner; if he refuses, he will be killed, leaving someone else to carry out the execution in an even more horrible fashion. My kids didn’t understand at all. They didn’t get that the prisoner is innocent, nor that the guard will be killed if he refuses to comply. Less than a page’s reading, one I’d thought was fairly straightforward in situation if not in ethics, but they didn’t get it. Yet this is my “advanced” class, which generally reads close to grade-level.

So, I read the situation aloud to the class. I reread it. I read a few paragraphs from the accompanying discussion, and I explained the predicament. I found myself describing *Sophie’s Choice*, the William Styron novel made into a movie I’d seen long ago, in which the main character must choose: have both her children killed by the Nazis, or choose the one to die. I reminded those who’d been with us the year before of the movie *Invisible Children*, which some young adults from around the country had come to screen for us the previous spring. The displaced children who were its subject, young Ugandan refugees, feared the terrible kidnappings of Joseph Kony and his men, knowing Kony had forced children to murder their own friends, siblings, parents. Now my class was silent. I waited for a response but hoped it wouldn’t be the one our visitors had earlier—from a very small minority of our student audience, to be sure—of shouts, as boys not even
twelve wept onscreen, that this was boring, and why should they care about those people way over there who weren’t going to do anything for them?

It was Andre who finally spoke up about the prisoner’s dilemma, very quietly. He’s the boy who’d started his days at DeLaSalle wearing one of those charming ankle bracelets in evidence of his place in the court system, and he’d been to the in-school suspension program at least once since. Twice I’d spotted him at a bus stop on Troost on my way to work, once in the rain and once in the cold, and given him rides, for which he’d mumbled bashful thanks. And both times he’d later paid me back: once telling me, after I’d given him a warning in class for some excessive foul language, that I’d better watch it, because “I know which car is yours”; the other time he’d told his classmates, “Yeah, she takes pay for it,” implying something more than rides, until he caught my look and quickly added, “Naw, not really.” I’d sighed and vowed to myself the rides would have to stop, but I wondered how I’d feel some day in a thunderstorm if I just flew past him.

Now Andre informed the class, low but decisive, “Man, I wouldn’t do that to my mama. I wouldn’t care what they did. I wouldn’t ever do that to my mama.” Others in the class agreed: better to die yourself than have that on your conscience, or have to remember your loved one’s eyes. About the innocent prisoner, there was still some disagreement, and less sympathy, but practically so: you do what you can for her, might not be expected to give your life for her, especially if you only assure her of more grief by refusing the order. It’s complicated; it’s hard—they got it.

I’d been told by several students through the years that of course they’d sell their own child if given enough money, and once been asked earnestly, by a particularly sweet
and mild young man, how much money someone would have to pay me to kill another human being, I had honest fears for their moral development, which I believe was skewed and twisted by their own fears, subject to the pressures around them to act uncaring and rough. My own parents had taught me better, but that’s partially because we all had the luck to be born into families and neighborhoods where the Golden Rule and honest decency could be touted in place of the watch-your-back-and-your-family’s my students were more often pressed to adopt. If they had grown up safe, would they have resorted to guns and continual posturing? Probably no more than those Ugandan boys would have turned violent without the immediate trauma they’d endured. There are things more important than self-preservation, but sometimes it’s the privilege of perspective that shows us what those things are. It might fall to those with the luck, the luxury of moral certitude, to step in and call a halt to the tortured decisions between wrong and wrong.

But I was weary of the battle to impart morals to those who so clearly resisted learning them from me. I began to think: this is not my battle, it is yours, and if you are not ready to see it, much less to engage in it, what can I do for you?

The verbal abuse begins to sound over and over in my head, even though days might go by when I don’t hear it:

“I hate her.”

“Who does she think she talking to?”

“I can’t stand you.”

“Get out of my face.”

“You better quit talking to me.”
“You better back the fuck up off me.”

“Fuck you.”

“You better watch it; I know what car you drive.”

“I don’t care what you say; who cares about you?”

“You better watch it. You say one more word to me, I just might flip.”

“You ain’t nothing. Shut up talkin’ to me.”

April, our team’s math teacher, twice reprimanded for inappropriate classroom management and twice struck by students, says she sits in her car in the parking lot in the morning, five minutes late, ten, screwing up the courage to go in.

Sam says she cries at night: “I’ve failed. I thought I could do this, but I can’t. I’ve failed.”

They’re both leaving, too.

Annie Laurie and Jan don’t teach any more. Annie Laurie, after retiring at 60 from tough middle schoolers in Las Vegas, came here last year to teach remedial reading; she also found herself rushing to the bathroom to cry on more than one occasion. Now she coordinates volunteers and testing and works with a small student group on the yearbook but makes her hourly rounds to encourage students to be on time for class:

“Make good choices! Listen for the bell! This is part of being ready for the workplace!

Thank you for making good choices!” she intones pleasantly, wearily. The students keep
just ahead of her, often for several rounds up and down the stairs, jeering at her, imitating her.

I want her to say, “Get your ass in the classroom—NOW.” I want her to say, “What did you say to me?” and grab the impudent jerks by a collar or ear and haul them to the office, call their parents and tell them, “We don’t talk to teachers like this here—your child is suspended for three days” or “Your child will have to clean up cigarette butts outside for two afternoons.” Stop accepting it. Say no. Say NO.

I go home to a daughter of fourteen, sometimes my cuddly sweet who makes me laugh, watches old movies with me, awes me with her romantic verve and sly humor. At her own school’s arts festival, she’s read one of her own poems. It is dramatic and improbable, about old lovers who meet again after years apart. She is poised; that black eyeliner is perfectly applied. I am so proud.

Another night she pulls every item, including old toys, shoes, things that haven’t seen the light of day in years, out of her closet to “clean” it, leaving it all in the den, then getting mad at me and refusing to touch it further. She forgets to give water to her pet rats; she forgets to turn in a day’s, a week’s, two weeks’ assignments in math or science. She has melted wax or foil or boiled sugar on the just-cleaned stovetop in some bored experiment of a way to avoid homework or chores and left the crusts welded there, another time baked muffins for us both but then not cleaned the bowls until I nagged and threatened; stormed because I won’t let her walk to the Plaza on a school night or I’ve refused to pick up her friends for her yet again (“It’s not like you have anything to do,” she’s sure). Some displays are so outrageous I have to laugh, but there’s a knot in my stomach. Sometimes I’ve blurted out, “Okay, go ask your father what he thinks of that;
go ask him to take care of it.” Everything’s fine for him. He has a new job; he has money; he has a girlfriend; so where is he? The knot in my stomach I held so long in worry for his future he never had for me. I let him sweet-talk me into another cat; another baby; forgiveness, a second time, a third time. What an idiot I am. What an idiot I’ve been for failing to deal with the conflict between my philosophy and my supervisors’: instead I let myself blow: You little assholes. Fuck you. Finally, an afternoon comes when I say it to my own daughter, Fuck you, and it is hours before I am even sorry.

Time begins to gather and crowd itself, the memories of last year or last decade splicing themselves to the possible futures I consider, the freedoms and regrets each will entail as they become memories themselves. Driving to work one day, running late as I pass the tulips and Metro stops on Troost and trying to place myself mentally in this new locale or that, the dissociation hits so hard I have to catch myself to realize I must still physically drive, at least go through the motions; it’s not all a done deal of equally possible trajectories in reality.

I am the quiet, motherly one at private, progressive Proctor or Gould, my common sense a needed check to ideals and art, a steady hand and succinct voice. At home on a Saturday, a little cottage in the woods, I watch the quiet snow fall along the front path as Mozart fills the rooms on a finely engineered sound system, or sip Keemun tea to the morning call of redwing blackbirds as the lilacs begin to swell, contemplating what I will write and garden that day. In small-town Arizona, I am the mysterious, critical one, my sharp wit bringing students and staff to task for assumptions and complacency, my romantic passion bringing forth the same in quiet, moored, outwardly plain adolescents,
or maybe in a quiet man with depths and history I come, in time, to see. In the evenings I walk long miles and think, soaking up sun and rock, waving to distant neighbors who pass in their dusty pickups.

And here at DeLaSalle, where I can no longer imagine a satisfying future, I try to take each day as it is, the good, the bad, neither reacting nor suppressing, as Pema Chodron (whom I’ve been reading) and the Buddhists recommend. And so I accept the little gifts.

One morning Shatyra is not there for her Lifeskills class, so I end up vaguely monitoring the group in the gym. Sean is there, too, along with his son DeSean, waiting for his dad to drive him to kindergarten. DeSean used to attend our daycare and is now familiar and assertive with students and staff; there is the unmistakable gleam of mischief in his cherubic face, and I take pleasure in seeing him dance towards his father for a word or a hug, then dance away to speak to students, peek into the hall, or contort and stretch himself as he watches the students playing basketball.

It’s an informal game, four on four, all males but a jumble of ages and sizes. I can’t see that anyone’s winning or that anyone cares; even when someone lands a basket, there’s little fanfare beyond a nod of acknowledgement. They are doing their best for its own sake, and “best” here means teamwork, passing the ball unselfishly whenever a teammate has a better shot. Christian, the shortest student on the court, whose mother had been sympathetic when I’d cursed him, keeps a running commentary of “Yep”’s and “Oh, now, no you don’t”’s, his consistent humor and handsome smile declaring the tone of the game for all. They are graceful, leaping and twisting and angling, and they work hard, running and galloping, in a sweat before they’ve even started classes, for some before
they’ve even eaten. Twice, Damon hits particularly rare shots, from half court and the side, and then he punctuates the court with his brief, powerful grin and an extra spring step, and the others echo praise in their guttural, “Oh!” This lasts a split second, and then the game goes on, until it’s time for class. I note a question forming inside me, How to tap into all this good and channel it to other domains? but I’ve got to get up to my room for first period, and anyway, better for now to just take in what it is. And then, I note, I am serene that whole day.

On a Friday a few weeks later, students are given the afternoon to stay in the gym for board games or just to chill and talk, classes having been compressed into a morning schedule. It is a way to keep them coming when the weather’s warm and school’s almost out, and of course again I questioned whether the lowered expectations helped or hurt them, or even increased attendance at all. But it’s what we’d be doing every Friday for the rest of the year, and my arguments were done, so I embrace the fact that it is the week for my half of the staff to get caught up on paperwork while the other staff monitored students in the gym. Instead, after lunch, several of us find ourselves still at the staff table, bantering and joking. I don’t know who suggests first that a warm cookie would sure taste good, but Tish, who runs the kitchen, offers to bake us up a batch of cookies from the chocolate chip dough in buckets that the Prom Committee has been selling. We debate the merits of various recipes and refrigerator dough brands, raw and plain, while Gary calls Rochelle, who sponsors the committee and is presently upstairs working, on her cell phone to confirm we might break into a bucket. She assents readily and places her order, and Tish asks us each how many we’ll eat? Several people say, “Sure, I’ll have one,” but I say two, knowing I could easily eat five or six. Everyone ups their order
to two, Gary requests his nearly raw, and Sharon, on her way to deliver some students to a field trip, asks that someone save hers and bring them by her office later.

We all slouch in our chairs, merry in anticipation, while Tish sees to our needs. Then we eat our cookies warm off the cookie sheets, the dark buttery chocolate smears and warm brown sugar chews filling our mouths, their scent filling the cafeteria. We offer extras to surprised staff who wandered in. Then Tish wraps two from the second batch in foil for me to take to Sharon when I go up, and I set them in front of Sharon’s door, feeling like Secret Santa and hoping she’ll be back before they cool. Then I’m off down the hall to start on the evaluations and credit slips, and I work at a casual pace but somehow manage to get a lot done. I am cheerful and patient when I pick up Amelia, reminding her she needs to work on her science makeup, but just providing an encouraging fact, without my usual frustrated judgment. She responds, unsurprisingly, in kind.

_Eric & Rochelle, Iman & Jim_

One Friday an e-mail came from Gayle mid-morning. “Today was Eric’s last day with us,” she informed. “We will miss his innovative ways,” she commented, not saying much else. Everyone else was as surprised as I was, including the teacher with whom he team-taught and shared a room and a carefully coordinated language arts/social studies program.

I hadn’t known Eric well, as he wasn’t on my academic team, and I had heard that he was prone to inappropriate outbursts and, more frequently this year, vocal complaints to his team members and administrators. “The guy’s clueless,” Gary had once assessed,
and having seen Gary’s common sense in action, I tended to trust his judgment. But gone in the middle of a school year? Either he had quit—in impulsive anger or having found a better job—or he’d been fired out of someone else’s impulsivity, enabled by our private, non-union status (we were even expected on our contracts to sign away right to a jury trial for disputes with our employers). Sam speculated he’d been too honest about something or other; I wondered if it was a new job, since he’d let slip to me in me weeks before that he was looking and advised me, “Do what you can for yourself. Believe me, they won’t have any loyalty to you.”

And he was right. He’d been one of the people who worked at the DLS Middle School, where half the staff had been cut in the middle of the year with no notice. Just as it is nearly unthinkable for a teacher to break a contract before year’s end, it is almost impossible for one to find a teaching job in the middle of the school year. I couldn’t imagine what horrible thing he could have done to warrant immediate dismissal, hoped it was the new job, but his co-teacher Norma said later she thought Sam was right: it was his mouth. Well. I guess things could’ve gone worse for me in my little incident with my mouth.

What happened to Rochelle surprised us all even more. It was just Rochelle’s second year as a teacher, but she had directed recreation programs for years, and she took to teaching as a natural. Her degree was in math, but offered a science position, she threw herself into it, developing resources and curricula in physical science, biology, and chemistry. She was demanding but ever encouraging, offering support and extra time and materials to whoever needed them—and most of her students did. One day when I’d had an unexpected free period, I’d wandered in to her class on some errand to find her
instructing fifteen kids, some of the same ones who couldn’t sit still in my class long enough to hear five minutes’ worth of instruction, now rapt or at least submissive as they were guided though a whole assignment together, Rochelle directing from the head of the class. I was impressed.

Rochelle’s energy seemed boundless. She reminded us all of meetings when our team leader, Shatyra, was preoccupied with other things, and often when Shatyra was called away for outside duties, Rochelle would volunteer to cover her Lifeskills class before the rest of us even knew about it. She assisted Gary with the Robotics club, which had gone on to glory this year, twelfth out of a field of fifty-five and winner of the directors’ award, their “small but mighty” team of five dwarfed by the dozens of students on other schools’ far more experienced teams. She headed the Prom Committee, helping with fundraising throughout the year and then with planning and many outside hours of shopping, decorating, and phone calls. She also coordinated a special program on environmental awareness with another non-profit agency, introducing a group of students to global warming concepts and gardening and taking them on frequent field trips. She was a treasure—the sort of treasure Sam and I had hoped to be and maybe had been once, and I was a little envious, but her honest cheer and warm nature meant I admired rather than resented her.

One day we received a voicemail that Rochelle’s classes would report to other teachers until further notice. I wondered if she or her son had taken sick. But then students in my next class began talking about how she’d “gone off” on a student, Pierre, who’d pressured her about writing up his credit. Pierre was a handsome young man who turned on the charm at every opportunity, especially with the girls. I’d seen him work
hard in my classes, in fact turning out highly original and thoughtful papers on several occasions. But more often he did nothing except flirt or sit, or not come to class at all. He'd had a burst of activity the previous month or so before, after we'd laid out for him all he'd actually have to do to graduate that year, but then his determination had subsided, perhaps in uncertainty at his own capabilities. He was a bullshitter, most of all probably to himself, and he still hadn't admitted to his family that he wasn't going to be able to pull off the requirements in time to walk in May.

I can only imagine that the realization he wouldn't graduate had come to him in Rochelle's class as they debated how much credit he'd earned so far. The details weren't clear, but Pierre had turned from cajoling to nasty threatening, and Rochelle, after numerous run-ins with him throughout the year, and maybe after a bad day or too many other days of the veiled threats or insults or other trials to which I'd imagined her invulnerable, had indeed "gone off." She'd threatened back—not one bit of credit ever in your life if you don't shut up. She'd cursed. She'd sent him down to the office and then, some time later, left herself, escorted weeping from the building by Jan.

Sam and I worried that she wouldn't come back, like Eric. We worried that she'd be fired—we trusted no one. Sam left a message on her cell phone: "We've got your back, Rochelle! Let us know how we can help!" and we waited to see what would happen. The kids were waiting, too.

She came back—by that afternoon, in fact, in time for the guest teacher to lead her group in a session on recycling. But the following week Sam pulled me aside to tell me that Rochelle had gone directly to our executive director, Jim, to complain, to tell him he was going to keep losing teachers if he didn't do something about teachers being
abused, and to tell him, “You’d better talk to Sam and Debbie and April before they leave.” Rochelle had signed her contract for the following year but told several of us that she was heading for a job fair in Dallas, keeping her options open.

So near the end of the year Gayle sent the three of us who were leaving an e-mail saying we were to join her and Jan and Jim and Carolyn, our human resources director, in Jim’s office to discuss “What went right and what went wrong” during the year. The meeting would be half an hour, right in the middle of the school day; “Lunch will be provided.” They couldn’t have tried harder to discourage frank disclosure—but it’s possible they were actually just plain clueless. April had already planned to be out of town that day. Sam called Gayle and begged off, saying she needed a more private setting and that she just wasn’t in a good place right now for such a discussion. I reminded them all by return e-mail that such a meeting would likely be very stressful to face right after and before dealing with students in regular classes, and that I wasn’t sure if I could succinctly express the year in the 10 minutes we’d each be allotted. “Could we put this off another week or two, until we’re done with our paperwork?” I requested, hoping I sounded diplomatic but firm. The meeting was cancelled, but Jim caught me in the hall a few days later and asked if I wouldn’t be willing to come talk to him alone. I told him I’d appreciate the chance to do that, and we set a time: the last day of classes, when students would leave at noon for the summer, and my next to the last day at DeLaSalle.

I debated in the days that followed how much to say, how to be diplomatic but clear. I didn’t want to hurt Jan, or even Gayle. And I didn’t want to jeopardize my chances for another job. On the other hand, there were things that needed to be said—and things Jim might be glad I said to him instead of to someone at the Missouri Department
of Elementary and Secondary Education. I made my list. I thought and waited, quietly
beginning to tell the kids I wouldn’t be back, counting up the credits they’d earned and
writing them up for Jan to approve, enjoying the sense of accomplishment they were
feeling, those who’d kept at it all year and those who turned themselves around in time to
pull something off, as they saw the numbers on their transcripts, one column decreasing
as the other increased. I was my usual soft touch when it came to assessing what someone
had done. A little work first quarter, a little second quarter, third quarter in Recovery but
that great project and a couple of lively Socratic Seminars fourth? Okay, that’s a quarter
credit—even if you did sit on your ass most of the year.

I sent an e-mail to Iman, who was discouraged that she’d earned three C’s and a D
her second semester in college. “At least you passed!” I encouraged. “What about next
year?” Then I told her I would soon be gone and said I’d like to take her and Kurtiz, who
was her neighbor, to lunch one day over the summer. “That sucks, but you need to be
someplace where the students will appreciate you,” she advised, accepting the invitation
and confirming that yes, she’d be back at Western Missouri State the following year. A
tiny measure of hope warmed me. For all the Imans—no less the Kurtizes, the
Dah’Keviahs and Damons, and even the Derricks and Pierres—someone had to say
something to Jim.

So I brought nine pages of “concerns,” as I called them, to Jim, joking that I was
long-winded and opinionated. He was surprised and thanked me. He asked, “How did we
get to here? I thought we were such a good fit for you.” I told him there were personal
reasons to go as well—I was sick of city life, of sirens and car jackings and bad public
schools, and I was homesick for New England, and besides, Amelia’s dad would be
working in New Hampshire, and we’d decided perhaps she needed to be near both her parents more than she needed to stay with her friends.

“But there are things that just haven’t been addressed since I came to DeLaSalle,” I went on. “A lot of the discipline issues I think you’re hearing from other people, but there are also things that might affect your accreditation. I hope you’ll think about them; I don’t feel like I’ve been heard this year. I think that’s why I cursed that time. I’m a curser from way back, Jim; I really hope you don’t think it was some hidden hatred for these kids being expressed, because I love these kids. Christian and Ray are two of my favorites.”

Jim smiled and confessed he was a curser from way back, too, and said, “I don’t think they held it against you. We talked about it one day in my Friday group; Ray defended you and said you had just gotten frustrated.” I was grateful for Jim’s understanding, more so for Ray’s. I gave Jim a hug as I left, and he seemed surprised again. We wished each other well.

On my last day, I came to find a group of corporate volunteers sprucing up the place. They were dusting rooms and repainting lines in the parking lot, and a team of IT specialists was clearing out hard drives on all the student computers. I started to tell them, “I need some time here! You’ve got to understand, this is my last day ever at DeLaSalle.” I didn’t want an audience as I boo-hooed while taking down my wall decorations: the world map surrounded by laminated postcards from “The World from Above” exhibit, including the half-naked worker reclining on bales of cotton in Ghana; Petra, Jordan, warmed by evening sun; and a serene, uninhabited cove by turquoise water in Greece. I wanted no words as I flipped the staples out of the Amnesty International banner and
pried off the framed Alma-Tadema and Renoir’s Dance at Bougival, a hard choice to put up in the first place because in miniature it had once graced an anniversary card from my husband. I didn’t want company as I decided to leave, to whoever inherited DeLaSalle Room 406, A.J.’s slender birds illustrating his poster on “Once by the Pacific,” or Ray’s icons of money, family, and friends, like Daniel, lost forever to violence or accidents, that illustrated who he was, or John’s colorization of a black-and-white Tupac, in the photo his naked torso curved in complement to the smoke curving generously from his mouth, eyes closed, placed alongside the lyrics of want and need.

But there they were, after I’d stepped out to the bathroom, already at work on the computers, and their good-hearted efforts and questions put me at a remove I decided to be grateful for. When they asked how long I’d been working there, I said seven years, this one my last. “Must be a hard place to leave,” one noted. “In some ways yes, in some ways no,” I responded mildly. “I will miss it.” That was true. Four trips to the car later I was ready to roll, avoiding further good byes and promising myself I’d instead write everyone personal notes in my Summer of Freedom—well, as soon as I found a job, finished my courses, sold the house. I met Jan and Annie Laurie at Taco Bell for a final lunch, again with unemotional banter. “This isn’t good-bye,” Jan promised, with a quick hug. “We’ll all get together later this summer.” I wondered if she’d still want to if Jim spilled the beans about my list, but we made plans to e-mail each other and our former Taco Belles, Kathy and Linda and Kelly, after we were back, they from Wichita and Iowa seeing grandchildren and I from New England, where I’d head the next day for job interviews. I drove home to pack my own suitcase and coach my daughter through packing hers, clean the house for the realtors that might come through while we were
away, do the laundry, and write the instructions for the pet sitter. It was after midnight when we tumbled into bed, not six when it was time to rise again.
One Year Later

After a winter of below-zero temps, icy porcelain moons, cars crusted with sand and salt, the snow is beginning to melt in Southern Vermont. I drive less than twenty minutes to reach the public high school seven miles away where I am teaching part-time; on a typical morning, I might pass six or eight cars the whole trip, along with hills and streams and stands of birch and maple. I spent a fall semester fretting over my principal’s, colleagues’, students’, and their parents’ judgments of me, but now I am relaxing, able to joke with my students and betray my love for them and for literature. They are almost all white, living in the small town of Chester or in nearby towns or down dirt roads with neighbors but also deer and turkeys and the occasional bear or moose. About a third of our students qualify for free or reduced price federally subsidized lunches; at DeLaSalle the percentage had hovered in the high 80s. My students here have problems, too: the problems of being adolescent and human in an uncertain world, and sometimes the more specific problems of family violence and poverty and drugs. But the tenor of the place is resoundingly positive, infused with the belief that life holds something good in store for the young people there, or more pointedly that they will be able to make that good for themselves.

My daughter Amelia makes the drive with me, and she is, in fact, my student this year. It’s been a hard year for her, with so much less access to shopping and movies, and her old, dear friends—those who endured Rebecca’s trials with her, those who celebrated (or took advantage of) her last school’s liberating quirks—going on with their lives without her, except for brief weekend visits and marathon virtual visits via Facebook and iChat. She doesn’t do her math homework; she closets herself in her room for long
stretches on weekends; some days she can’t bear to go to school. But she has a friend now, someone who rides her wavelength of humor, balancing awareness with surprise and sly hilarity, and she’s beginning to make more friends. She writes with a verve and sophistication I never had at her age, and she’s won an essay contest judged by other teachers at our school. She sees her father nearly every weekend, now that he lives a comfortable 50 minutes away. He and I, past the drama and despair, are beginning to solidify a new relationship, one informed by all the years and by our commitment to being good parents together, even as we now pursue separate lives. I too am making friends, and I am finding people to love.

I think of my time at DeLaSalle often, sometimes re-evaluating what all went on there and more often just missing what was good. I miss Ray’s resigned humor and Mario’s quiet good will and Shanita’s bright shows of exasperation. I miss the bitch sessions at Taco Belle with Jan and Linda and Sam and Kathy and Kelly and Annie Laurie, or at Francie’s art tables with her and Phyllis and Gary, venting and laughing so we could turn around and go back and do it again. I miss my room, one wall all windows, my beloved posters and samples of student work on the others, and the rare but so miraculous sound of teenagers focusing their efforts and energies long enough to all be reading, all at once, for Sustained Silent Reading. I miss Iman and Kurtiz and Khadijah and so very many more, their unfailingly indirect shows of appreciation for my care, their tentative movements towards everything good in life.

Since I’ve left, there have been numerous layoffs at DeLaSalle due to the economy or maybe confusion over our purpose; several other teachers have left by choice. Some of us moved on ahead of all this: Karen and Brother Alan the year before I did and April and
Sam with me. I’m still in touch with many of them. Brother Alan has moved to Tennessee, obeying orders from his religious superiors but cheerfully so, closer now to a community of Christian Brothers and returning to parish schools where he may join religious instruction to his other ever-changing duties. Explicitly contrasting his present teaching with the expectations at DeLaSalle, he reports, “I am now in a small Catholic school with a rigorous curriculum and strict rules. Yet we have happy students, mostly because the teachers are loving individuals who do believe they are being loving when challenging students.” He says he could never go back to DeLaSalle.

Sam is teaching in a Springfield, Missouri public high school where parents frequently pressure teachers for accommodations and challenges and the class sizes mean endless amounts of paperwork at home and on weekends. She’s not sure what she wants to do about next year, but looking back, she remembers of DeLaSalle, “There are a lot of unwritten norms and procedures. Clear expectations were not made regularly and it was a battle if you tried to start a new trend!” I asked her what effect she thought we were having and she concluded, “Giving an education albeit substandard to kids that otherwise wouldn't get one.” When I went on to question how she feels about DLS and her time there now, she summarized, “Thankful that I saw what I saw. It opened my eyes to the limitations of fiscal and social aid programs."

Karen and I exchange emails every week or two and talk on occasion, and I’m hoping to have a chance to visit her and her partner and daughter in Bend, Oregon. She’s currently teaching second and third grade happily in a private school where the students are curious and excited about the world. Her move was personal and rather sudden—her partner had landed a job in the Pacific Northwest over the summer and they’d agreed it
would be a better place for their family—but once gone, she almost immediately recognized the stress she’d suffered every day and decided not to pursue work in another alternative school. Even her job one year as Dean of Students in a school more than twice DeLaSalle’s size was comparatively serene. This realization has helped her see her colleagues at DLS as weathering astounding emotional violence each day, so that she has new respect for them all as “doing the best that they could.”

Karen defends Gayle for her undying altruism, refusal to give up on kids, and personal appreciation of the challenges that growing up in poverty entails. Jim she views as paternalistic to the point of racism, a propagator of shallow relationships with students and staff and dangerous in his lack of meaningful accountability for his decisions. She recognizes the disconnect between our roles as school and as social service agency, the latter too often unarticulated and undermanned even as it was essential. She agrees with me that while every kid deserves a million chances and resources, practically speaking we cannot give them those without hurting others and ourselves—and that sometimes it is a gift to young people to allow them to fail and learn from their failures instead of coddling them, keeping them dependent and infantile and self-destructive. We don’t agree about everything, but her support and encouragement sustain me as I face new challenges in teaching and in life. Most of my other friends and colleagues from DeLaSalle have given me just as much, and I quite simply could not have made it through seven years there without their help.

I look with good will and hopefulness to all well-meaning people who’ve decided to spend a good chunk of their lives with adolescents, even as I remain the questioner, the skeptic. It’s not clear how long I’ll be able to stay in any school before my disagreements
with its philosophies and methods make working there impossible for me. My current principal lays out our goals simply and straightforwardly, sometimes too much so to my thinking. At least he has a plan, and marginally valid ways to evaluate our progress, which I believe DLS was lacking—but then, its challenges were in many ways more complex. I appreciate my school’s accountability to a wider community that demands simple, straightforward questions and answers. But I am chiefly accountable to my students, bound by belief and passion to offer them the usually vague and messy and unquantifiable lessons of art and enlightenment, those that differ for each person at each moment and that can’t really be evaluated except years’ later, or even at life’s end. I am learning to balance criticism and acceptance. My role as a teacher is still uneasy, but I am older and more practical now, more committed to and practiced in teaching for the present moment as much as for the long term: whatever misguided impulses of politics or ego swirl around us, my immediate interactions with my students remain pregnant with possibility.

Sometimes when I look back at that seven years at DeLaSalle, my jaw and neck and breath tighten, recalling unbidden waves of adrenaline that poisoned my feeling and thinking. If I look too deeply into that pool of memories, it easily turns into a well of regrets: that I was not strong enough or wise enough, that I could not be more persistent or persuasive or compassionate or free, and so work more of the wonders all of us there sought. Seven years is long enough to bum out, but hardly time to begin what I would have wished to do. And yet in leaving I’ve learned much about all these qualities I’ve desired, about wisdom and compassion and persistence, plus gained the perspectives of distance and intellect that let me understand a little better how I might bring them to work
together. As Karen says, we all did the best we could.

Jan and I still exchange emails, and now Facebook messages, on occasion. “It’s been a hard year. I think you made the right decision to leave when you did,” she said in one, although she’s stayed on. When I first began writing about my DeLaSalle experiences, I thought the perfect way to end would be with Jan’s story of the hugs she gave her students before she had to go away for several weeks. This, I thought, is what it all comes down to: transforming young people’s lives by showing them our love. Now I know that so much else is necessary, from us and from them, and that there will never be one answer for what people need or what others can give them. The world is a complex place, and more courage and thought and imagination and just plain hard work are required to do well in it than most people or institutions have been willing to admit.

DeLaSalle lost sight of many possible answers by avoiding the questions, and so I think those there, myself included, perpetuated as many problems as we solved.

But with the caveats and hesitations and deeper understandings, the clearer sight of all that’s truly involved in such an offering, Jan’s and mine, Iman’s and theirs, Kansas City’s and the long hard roads that pass through it and on to Grafton, Vermont and the world, there is, after all, much in a hug between teacher and student to observe and consider and appreciate. To mark it, and place it, and then look further for more, might be at least a start for the rest of us in learning how to live our own lives well and how to help others do the same.
Sources and Annotated Bibliography

Everything below helped shape how I came to understand my experiences while I worked at DeLaSalle. Some of these are cited specifically in the text; others, especially those with annotations, have been the source of attitudes and explanations I began to apply generally to my work and my life. The more I read, the better I was able to articulate reactions to and feelings about what was right and what wasn’t at my school. The conclusions I’ve drawn about how to teach, how to run a school, and how to live may be disputed. I offer these readings, alongside my own memories, as opportunities for the reader to draw his own conclusions, or at least to see schools, alternative high schools, and the interactions between teachers and students in a new light.

On Human Developmental Psychology and Social Issues


The chapters in this book detail the thinking and lives of young people from their late teens and well into their twenties who are considered in the latest literature to be emerging adults. This life stage has arisen fairly recently, within the final quarter of the last century, and its existence is largely due to changing economic models as they impact personal and family life. Career development, social relationships, morality, and other aspects of personal identity and development are covered. This model serves as stark contrast to young people in poverty who have
children young, end their formal education young, and in other ways circumvent themselves or are prevented from developing along this new norm.


Crosnoe, R. & Elder, G. H. Jr. (2004). Family Dynamics, supportive relationships, and educational resilience during


This hefty book covers lots of ground in the recent thinking of how challenged young people approach their lives. Besides identifying and deciphering the various components of interaction between teens and their environments, it looks for ways in which concerned adults can change probable outcomes. There are, its authors make clear, no magical formulas for ameliorating disadvantaged backgrounds: both risks and protective factors are complex and cumulative.


Valiente, C., Eisenberg, N., Spinrad, T.L., Reiser, M.,


www.thenationalcampaign.org:


From scholarly articles to policy statements to resources for teens, young adults, parents, and communities, this web site has content and links that address nearly every aspect of this complex issue. Respectful of nearly all political and social
perspectives, the Campaign is willing to ask questions and publish answers.


**On Education**


Goeffrey Canada returned to the streets of Boston, Brooklyn and Harlem to help African-American children growing up in poverty—as he had in a different time. With love, strength, and the lessons of discipline and knowledge, he offered a way out to those caught up in an increasingly violent and self-limiting environment. He is honest about the heartbreaks as well as the successes and unflinchingly direct in his admonition that we are all responsible for these children’s lives.

Arnett & Tanner, above.


The authors’ findings apply to anyone who works with others for a living, but in attending to the roles of values and relationships as much as to compensation and work hours, it is especially relevant to nonprofit organizations such as schools. Maslach and Leiter are adamant that the common phenomenon of burnout is neither unavoidable nor, in many cases, due to personal failings of employees, and in so doing they offer considerations and possibilities for making high-stress jobs manageable and fulfilling.


I can’t say enough good about Rothstein (and, in the latter book, his colleagues). He “gets it”: the complexity of what goes into learning, the difficulty of deciphering what’s really happening in schools and in students, and the most reasonable ways to approach what we provide in schools and how we go on to evaluate how well we’re doing. He sees children and young adults as whole human beings with whole lives, not students whose successes or failures can be assigned a number based on a math or reading score, and he patiently explains the limits of what teachers and schools in our present system can be expected to do for them. This might all be pretty discouraging except that at the same time he offers prescriptions for doing better than we have—accepting our role in non-academics of students’ lives and exploring long-term views of achievement are chief among his recommendations—and he is relatively specific about how we might go about adapting these approaches.


Schein’s analysis of several corporations from an almost anthropological perspective offers tools for understanding the
dynamics within schools, too. Our conceptions of ourselves as members of groups, some separate and some overlapping, does much to explain our own behavior and that of the groups we belong to. Schein explains the complexities, challenges, and opportunities of which we should be aware in goal setting and intergroup relations, for example, using lively examples from the business world.


A psychoanalyst and an Anglican priest relate their personal experiences helping individuals, families, and organizations identify their needs and desires and work towards them, paying attention to how misunderstandings typically develop from a social perspective.


As it reports on brain functioning and compares autopsies of a cohort, this book might also be suited to the “Mind and Mindfulness” category. However, I am most interested in this book for its implications about what real life-long learning is. Dr. Snowdon, a neurologist specializing in issues surrounding
Alzheimer’s disease, heads this longitudinal study of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and attempts to find correlations between lifestyle and long-term mental health. His findings are not, he admits, conclusive, but they hint that a life of regular intellectual, physical, and spiritual activity, coupled with a well-balanced diet, regular healthcare, and companionship, mean we are more apt to be happy, healthy and alert into our later years.


Tough, an education writer for the New York Times, has written perceptively, sympathetically, yet not uncritically about Canada’s dedication to transforming schools and so lives in Harlem. He traces Canada’s roots in poverty and his years at Bowdoin, which solidified his identity as an activist at the same time they endowed him with a traditional education in the liberal arts. Tough then reviews the years in education Canada wrote about himself in Fist Stick Knife Gun and brings us up to the present, and Canada’s running of the Promise Academy charter school.

Tough presents without much interpretation the facts surrounding Canada’s mixed success there. The reader may conclude, as I have, that Canada’s whole-hearted, thoughtful
devotion to his cause, his conception of the “conveyer belts” at early and late periods of education at which students might best be helped to thrive, and his understanding of the motivation to be found in high expectations and rigor have been to some degree thwarted by his occasionally stubborn reliance on his own charisma and a capitulation to the test-hungry mania of what currently passes for accountability. Now that President Obama has called for an expansion of Canada’s “Children Zones” to other urban areas across the country, we would do well to consider what works and what doesn’t in his model.


This is a reassuring book, explaining that there are good enough reasons that public education has never undergone the earth-shaking revolution that is periodically called for by the American public. The authors examine schooling from the nation’s founding and then concentrate on the 20th century, its goals, methods, and consequences, and conclude that we’re “tinkering” along as best we can and would be ill-served by radical changes. This long-term perspective is surely helpful nearly 15 years after the book’s publication as we continue to
rethink the best ways to educate our young people.


This is a thorough examination of a few short years in the early experiments in educational vouchers, primarily in Milwaukee. Initially a voucher sympathizer, Witte was willing to approach the experiment with a careful, critical eye, and so he shares research findings that confirm that vouchers, while they may have merits, are surely no panacea for our country’s education problems. He advises caution in interpreting results that show otherwise, pointing out on age 151, “Researchers professing such results have a major responsibility to outline the causal mechanism by which these miracles are to be accomplished.[...] If it is something they do differently and better, those of us who have devoted many years to studying inner-city education in America would like to know exactly what it is.”

The author betrays a few personal frustrations with the organization in question, having been a critical, questioning employee (much as I was at DeLaSalle). However, she does a good job of noticing and analyzing dynamics at work in this non-profit. Assumptions made by and conflicts between administrators, staff, donors, clients, and the public are shown, each unique, with special ramifications for social justice agendas shared by other non-profits.

**On the Mind and Mindfulness**


Unfailing, unceasing generosity and compassion are pretty much impossible for human beings to accomplish. The American-born Buddhist nun Pema Chodron, drawing on her own experiences and the wisdom of her Buddhist predecessors, appreciates this fact and guides us through the mechanisms and attitudes that ensure we’ll do the best we can. She uses as her text the 8th century writings of Indian yogi Shantideva and his 19th century proponent, Tibetan Patrul Rinpoche. Any one who is
a friend, parent, lover, or teacher, regardless of their religious beliefs, will find inspiration in this book.


Grandin, who is autistic, offers an interesting window into the mental processes—from emotions to seeking behavior to decision-making—that animals employ, so helping us better understand ourselves. Perhaps we are all at different places on an Autism continuum, and a greater awareness of how we differ from others and function ourselves might help us towards more honest, productive interactions with other sentient beings of all sorts.


Kabat-Zinn’s writing style, which is aware, compassionate, and straightforward yet profound, reflects his message about Mindfulness and its practical utility in making too-hurried lives considered and joyful. Reading this book is itself an experience in Mindfulness, an exercise in appreciating the moment at hand.
and so reshaping our lives. I have found its approach eminently helpful in how I handle immediate encounters with adolescents.


The author of *Listening to Prozac* reminds us again of how crucial brain anatomy and functioning are to our wellbeing. He warns against the romanticizing of depression we are culturally prone to and details the actual physical damage brains apparently suffer in the chronically depressed. Kramer acknowledges the dangers and uncertainties of medication—however, he makes clear that there are times when the alternative is worse, untreated depression maintaining as it does irredeemable suffering and loss for individuals, families, and society at large.


Otto Rank was a prodigy of Freud’s who eventually separated himself from his mentor and developed his own philosophy of the human psyche. His insistence on the freedom and creativity to be found in nonjudgmental experience of the immediate moment echoes the Buddhists’ practice of Mindfulness. Rank easily integrates individual psychology with questions of sociology and spirituality.


Details research into the neurological effects of a uniform program of Mindfulness training. While the study’s numbers and chronology were limited, there is enough hard evidence here to suggest promise in this approach to treating depression, particularly those who have suffered more than two bouts of clinical depression. As the studies continue, we will learn more about the nuances of brain response and long-term effects.

the prefrontal cortex. *Neuroimage* 32 (3), 1290-8.


Vancouver, BC: Namaste Publishing.

My friend Tom in Grafton introduced me to this book. Eckhart Tolle is a pop-cultural phenomena—this book is an Oprah book—but he is trained as a philosopher and clearly knows his stuff, although I sometimes find his semantics problematic. His conceptions of the ego and of what he terms the Pain-Body come across almost as alien entities striving to control us rather than naturally occurring parts of ourselves. However, I’ve found these concepts very useful in making it through my own daily struggles and appreciating those of others, including teenagers with messed-up lives who seem caught up in their pain or anger or helplessness. His approach is completely consistent with most philosophies of mindfulness I’ve encountered, and he is encouraging, clear, and practical through most of this book.