

Looking for Loveliness: Success and Failure in the Inner City School

When needing to recharge from a rough day of teaching, I look to poetry as a source of restoration as with a poem, I can wrestle with something provocative, but concise. “St. Francis and the Sow,” by Galway Kinnell imagines an exchange between St. Francis of Assisi while he blesses a sow whose fourteen piglets exhaust her of her energy and esteem. St. Francis helps the pig to see that in her obligations as a mother, she fulfills her purpose and need do nothing else. She is lovely, to borrow a word from the poem, and helping students realize their own loveliness, their excellence, has become my mission. St. Francis is the sort of teacher I strove to be--kind, unflappable, and gentle. I thought that those qualities would allow me to tame the perturbations that interfered with my urban students’ abilities to become more than what they thought and that they could in time, blossom. However, I have had to accept that the beneficent teacher I hoped would thrive has not survived and a different facet to my personality in the classroom has had to emerge.

As a first year teacher I had an intervention class for struggling readers. Among the students in the class was a wide-faced, gregarious kid named Roderick, who sized me up fast. He tested me not infrequently by calling me, “Son.” My response to this was to look at him with my novice teacher-face, and his response to that was to flash me a well-rehearsed smile. He had me pegged.

Had my classroom been outfitted with a climbing wall, then I think Roderick would have felt more at home as he was prone to roam to visit any one of his numerous friends. One

day he was especially jittery and I could not get him to stay seated. “Roderick, please sit down.” Nothing. “Roderick, sit down please.” He still moved. “Please. Roderick, have a seat.” Nothing. Finally I yelled, “Roderick, get your ass in the seat right now!” Roderick looked at me, picked up his book, walked to his seat and sat down. What’s more, he started working and remained calm the remainder of class. When class ended, I apologized to Roderick, but asked him why when I approached him politely to move he did not, but when I cursed at him he did. Unfazed he said, “That’s the way my mother talks to me.”

I have shared this story with teachers and students alike. Teachers chuckle and nod and share a Hassidic shrug. Kids laugh. They tell me that they see this sort of exchange all the time. They confirm that, indeed, many times this is the way that parents speak to their children. Given the stress that many of the parents face this does not surprise me. They recognize the sow before she meets St. Francis—exhausted and with no means of finding any way to restore. Jr.

I became a teacher after completing the California AIDS Ride. That experience proved to me that when group of committed people do something to focus on making the world a better place—if only for a week—they succeed. I wanted to bring that spirit and innovation to each of my classes and show each of my students that each of them is lovely, each of them has the capacity to transform into something magnificent. Whatever the cost, I did not want any of my students to have the same isolating experience I had in high school, especially when it came to encountering the envious and mean-spirited teachers who were fixtures in my educational experience. In particular, I did not want to be the same as my junior American History teacher.

He was a scholar with disposition of a ferret with a missing leg. In retrospect, I see now that he was scrappy and jealous of the privilege dangled around him. While I did learn about two significant ways of looking at American history from this man, his demeanor was so condescending and unpleasant that deriving any enjoyment from him or the class was impossible. He referred to the school as “[Name of School] Prep. For Boys and Others.” If we were out sick, he railed against us. If we came in sick, he complained that we’d made his infant daughter ill. In true adolescent fashion I responded to his contempt by ignoring the work that I should have been doing and could have been doing, but it was the only way that I felt I could respond to his fundamental resentment.

So, teaching at the school where I work now has challenged me because the culture of the school is so different. Whereas I attended school with the scions of America’s great families, my students’ parents are the staffs of for those families. There’s nothing wrong with that, but the absence of educational advantages has left profound deficits in their education. My students read and write well below grade level and the disparity is shocking. Everything I teach requires adjustment or explanation of rudimentary vocabulary. Even among my most advanced classes, I must change the lesson to reach as many students as possible.

Summoning St. Francis compounds an already thick mixture because the only way work is done is if we completed the assignments in class. And even at that, many times, my students write only a paragraph, sometimes a sentence or two. So I am placed in a quandary. Do I return them to their loveliness by failing them? Do I return them to their loveliness by offering a second, third, or fourth chance? Even two college professors I know have told me about demanding that their students redo assignments that were

subpar. Should I not offer the same as a college class?

I had to come to the conclusion, however, that supporting this behavior from students is a form of patronage. Ultimately, the one person who feels better for the second, third and fourth chances is I. My mutability did not produce better work from my students. The work had the same errors and was still completed with the same haste and absence of care as if it were done right in front of me.

Last spring I gave a take home final. The assignment was simple. Students had to read a non-fiction book of their own choosing and complete a reader response paper. Every day before the paper was due I explained that the due date was firm and that because of the turnaround time, I could not offer extensions. Every day for three weeks, I allotted time in class for the reading of the books. Each day, I reiterated the importance of needing to have the work in on time. In spite of my pleas, three had late papers and I did not accept them in spite of copious tears. Two students failed and I know I did the right thing.

The process of returning someone to his/her loveliness takes on many forms, but the most important of which, it seems, is to be honest with the students. To allow students to turn papers in late and grade without high demands are forms of lying. These actions are intended to prove to someone that he is lovely, but in fact, the opposite happens. The student never then gains the footing he needs to succeed. He gains my pseudo-approval, but what value is that if it is not true?

The finest teacher for me, was one who helped me to see my own potential, but this person demanded more of me than I knew I had to offer. Isn't that what great teachers do, though? They surprise us. They make us realize that we have something to offer, even though we may have convinced ourselves of the opposite. The best teaching occurs when

someone does not add to what we know, but instead takes away what is interfering with our ability to grow.

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