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WHY WE HATE TEACHERS

Notes on a noble American tradition
By Garret Keizer

*Glory, glory, alleluia.
Teacher hit me with a ruler.
I knocked her on the bean
With a rotten tangerine,
And she ain't gonna teach no more.*

—“Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory of the Burning of the School” (Traditional)

As soon as I entered first grade, I began throwing up my breakfast every day, Monday through Friday, usually two or three minutes before the school bus came. I do not recall having what are nowadays referred to as “academic difficulties.” In fact, I was already the good student I would continue to be right through graduate school. Nor do I recall being picked on in any particular way; that would come later. What I recall is being struck at about the same time as my mother handed me my lunch with an irresistible urge to vomit my breakfast—that, and the sight of my mother on her knees again, wiping up my mess.

I have long since marveled at the way in which my parents, without benefit of formal courses in psychology or any thought of sending me to a psychologist (this was 1959), set about trying to cure me by a psychological stratagem at once desperate, risky, and inge-

nious. It amounted to the contrivance of an epiphany. One evening they announced that the next day I would not be going to school. Instead, my mother and I would be taking a trip “up country” to see Aunt Em and have a picnic. Aunt Em and her husband were caretakers of a sprawling rural cemetery in which I delighted to play and explore. They lived in a house “as old as George Washington.” Propped against one of their porch pillars was an enormous Chiclet-shaped rock, an object of great fascination for me, which they claimed was a petrified dinosaur tooth. There were few places on earth I would rather have gone.

The next morning arrived like an early Christmas. I watched impatiently as my mother packed a lunch for our adventure. Then, just at the time when the school bus would have picked me up, she turned to me and in a tone of poignant resignation said, “Now, you see, Gary, there is nothing wrong with your stomach. You get sick because you don’t want to go to school.” She handed me my lunch and told me that we were not going to Aunt Em’s that day. I did not throw up. I forget whether or not I cried. But, for the most part, I was cured.

I say for the most part because even now, at the age of forty-eight, I am rarely able to walk

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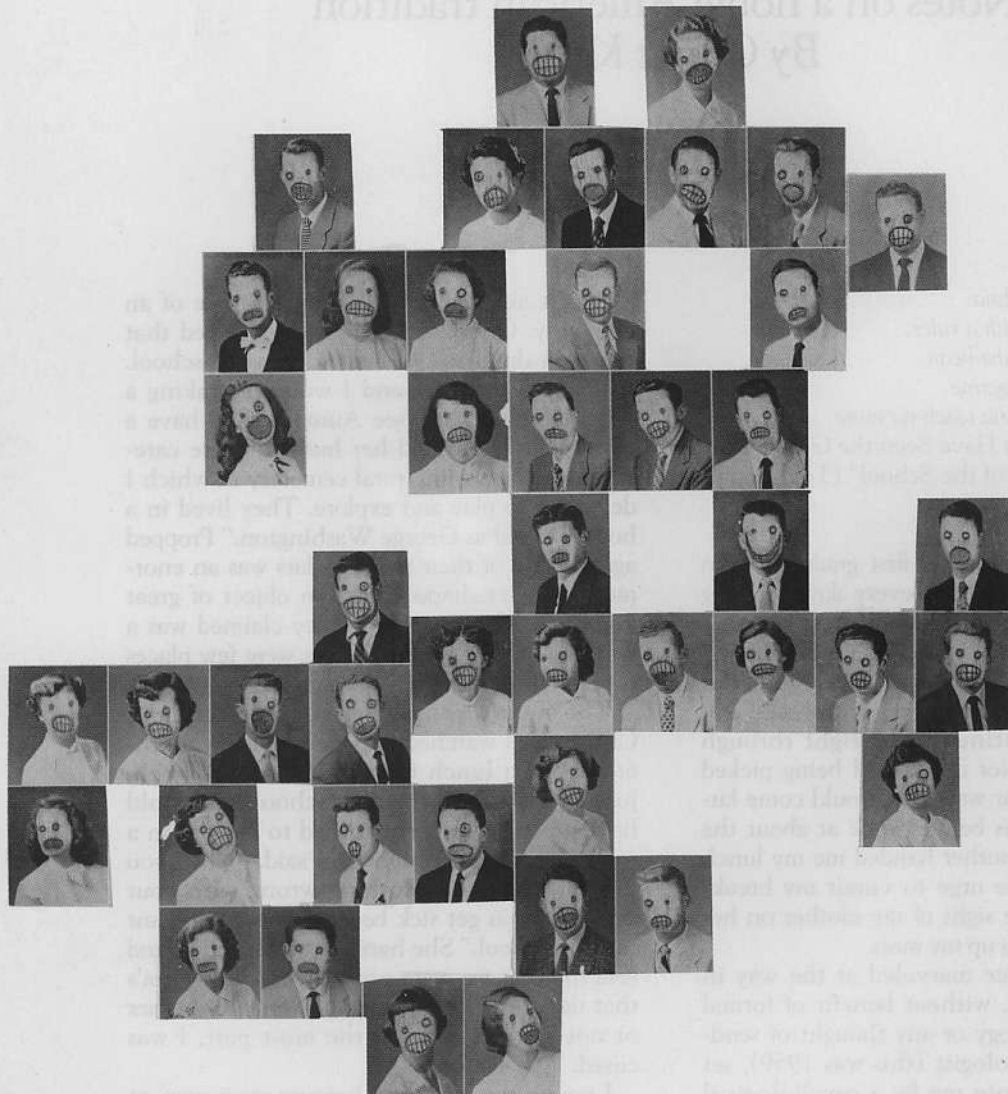
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into any school without feeling something of the same duodenal ominousness that haunted my first days as a student. I doubt I am unique in this, though it does seem like an odd symptom for someone who went to school for almost twenty years, who taught high school for fifteen years after that, who saw his wife through graduate school after she had done the same for him, and who will be in his mid-fifties by the time he has seen his daughter through college. I have spent most of my life "in school," doing homework or correcting it, which means that for much of my life I have either skipped breakfast or eaten it as an act of faith.

above me. It amounts to a waking dream, with a dream's psychic symbolism, and what I think it means is that I have reconciled myself to death by imagining it as the most sublime form of hooky: the blessed stage at which no one will ever again, in any form whatsoever, make me go to school.

I do not have frightful memories of my first-grade teacher, though my parents have told me she was "stern." I remember her punishing a boy who'd meandered into the girls' bathroom by forcing him to wear a cardboard sign that read I AM A GIRL TODAY. I remember another boy, a budding Leonardo da Vinci, whose crammed, cluttered desk she would from time to time dump over onto the floor, like an unfaithful wife's wardrobe tossed onto the street. I can still see him kneeling among his precocious drawings and playground-excavated fossils, straightening things up as best as he could, while the rest of us looked on with the dumbstruck fascination of smaller-brained primates. I can see these things clearly, but I do not remember the teacher herself as an ogre. As for the memories of my two classmates, the first of whom would eventually become an outlaw biker and the second of whom probably went on through a long progression of larger and even messier desks, I am not so sure.

Such stories of cruel and unusual punishment probably account at least partially for that hideous strain of American folk humor, with a pedigree that runs from Washington Irving to Garrison Keillor: the



And I still catch myself thinking of that aborted trip to Aunt Em's. I picture myself running over the mown graves, past generations of polished monuments, with a cool breeze at my back and the clouds unfolding like angel wings

Tale of the Teacher We Drove Nuts. I used to know a man who would tell me, in the tone of someone bragging about his first sexual experience, how he and his friends had driven a nun at his Catholic school to a nervous breakdown.

“Let’s put it this way: She didn’t come back the next year.” It so happens that I was working as a teacher when I first heard the story. So was the man who told it to me.

It’s hard to imagine a parallel from another profession, perhaps some folksy yarn about an undertaker driven to tears by a repeated switcheroo of his embalming fluid and his coffee, a cashier who fell down foaming at the mouth after making change for one too many ten-pound bags of dimes. It’s simplistic to say that we see these tales as innocuous because their protagonists are only children. We also see them as innocuous because their victims are only teachers (and usually women). We like to tell these stories, I think, because they require some primal—as in “primary” school—pain within us.

For many children, going to school amounts to a fall from grace. I have long sensed a mystical connection between the iconic apple on the teacher’s desk and the apple Adam ate from the forbidden tree; I am tempted to take them for the same apple. Perhaps the New England Puritans who taught their children the alphabet starting with the A in “Adam’s Fall” were playing with the same idea. Although teachers may figure variously in the myth as Eve, the Serpent, or God, they are almost always the flaming cherubim who bar our return to the innocence of early childhood. For better or for worse, a teacher was our first surrogate mother. The wicked stepmother and the fairy godmother are *mothers*, after all, and in the fairy tales of personal history they both tend to have teaching licenses. In other words, the story of our first encounter with school is either the tale of how we betrayed our mothers for a princess or the tale of how they abandoned us to a witch.

And the last chapter mirrors the first: the teacher who took us from our mothers appears in another guise to take our children from us later on. The teacher who is a boy’s first crush is also his mother’s first rival. Furthermore, in an era when mothers frequently work outside the home, a teacher with the benefit of a shorter day and a longer summer vacation not only spends the best hours of the day with our children; she spends the brightest days of the year with her own. I believe this accounts for much of the disdain for teachers, particularly in working-class communities like mine. If someone gave me the power and the money to make one change that might improve the public perception of teachers, I would give working parents more time with their kids. At the very least, that

would remind them to be grateful for the hours their kids are in school.

There are, of course, other ways in which schools represent a psychic fall; and teachers,

[I] *t would only be right and proper that for every gulden you gave for the war against the Turks, you should give 100 gulden for the schools, even if they (the Turks) were already at our throats, so that you might be able to educate at least one boy with this sum so that he would become a true Christian.*

—MARTIN LUTHER (1524)

the guardian angels of its trajectory. Although schools in a democracy purport to exist for the creation of “a level playing field,” it does not take us long to discover that level playing fields exist mainly to sort out winners from losers. Unless we came from a large family with parents who went out of their way to play favorites, school was our first introduction to the idea of relative merit. It is not an idea with as much application to the so-called real world as we might think. Neither are any number of schoolhouse rigors justified in that name. Certainly we encounter relative merit in the world. My work as an adult is evaluated and rewarded, and I must face the fact that others are going to be better at it than I am.

But that oppressive sense of minute gradation, of success not as a mansion of many rooms but as a ladder of infinite rungs—where does that exist but in a classroom, or in the imagination of the adult who still sits there? To be a kid again, I must walk to my assigned place in a room ranked with little desks, each occupied by a writer my age, or as he was at my age. And the Updike kid always has his hand up first, and the teacher can’t seem to get enough of his stories about rabbits, whereas my poems about turtles always seem to lag behind in her esteem. “Taking your degree” is the most precise phrase in all of education: that is what we take from our first day in kindergarten, our *degree* of relative worth. The educational apple of Adam’s Fall, by which the first American primer said “we sinned all,” did not give us the knowledge of good and evil but of good, better, and best, world without end.

Another way in which our teachers took us out of the Garden was by taking us out of the

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moment. It was in school that the future first began its incessant bullying of the present and the past. The watchword was "preparation," and, considered only by the criterion of effective pedagogy, the watchword could hardly be called progressive. Ask a random sample of parents if and when school began to grow sour for their kids, and they will usually say "sometime around fourth or fifth grade"; that is, when teachers began working with a more intentional zeal to "get kids ready for high school," a process that might be likened to getting Sir John Gielgud ready to do a Pepsi commercial. Diminishment follows diminishment, until we reach graduate school, where the ability and certainly the desire to teach are not only rare but generally held in contempt. Few can go that far without developing grave suspicions about the future—perhaps one reason why so many people end up stalled in graduate school. The Serpent promised that we would become "as gods," though it seems that what he really meant is that with the right amount of training and gumption we could become as serpents.

For some of us that meant we could become teachers. We could bring the process of

If nothing is to be exacted from children by way of obedience it follows that they will only learn what they feel to be of actual and present advantage, either because they like it, or because it is of use to them. Otherwise, what motive would they have for learning?

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU (1762)

preparation full circle, like the myth of the serpent that devours its own tail. That is, admittedly, a paradoxical image. To be a teacher in America is to embody any number of seeming contradictions, some peculiar to the profession and others intrinsic to the nature of democracy itself.

For one thing, teachers can find themselves an embarrassing exception to the first article of their own creed: that education prepares one to be privileged and prosperous. Of the professional classes, theirs is probably one of the least esteemed; it is certainly one of the least paid. Teaching has traditionally been a port of entry, the Ellis Island by which the children of blue-collar workers entered the professional classes. I seldom see a first-year teacher with her tote

bag or briefcase without conjuring up the image of an immigrant and his duffel bag of worldly belongings—so full of faith, so free of cynicism, so ripe for exploitation. And such an easy target for prejudice.

Occupying a no-man's-land between the union hall and the reserved parking space, able in some cases to take a sabbatical but in many cases unable to get to a toilet, teachers sometimes find themselves caught in a crossfire of contradictory resentments. On the one hand, the public expects teachers to have some of the same expertise and even some of the same polish as physicians, though no teacher of my acquaintance has ever had the opportunity of hiring his own nurse in the form of a classroom aide—assuming he even had one. On the other hand, those who see teachers as no more than a highly specialized class of clock-punchers are prone to ask what truck driver ever had a nine-week vacation, or what waitress ever had a pension fund.

It almost goes without saying that a teacher's perceived status will vary with the status of the perceiver. So to the svelte mom in the Volvo, Ms. Hart is an air-headed twit without a creative bone in her body, who probably had to write crib notes all over her chubby little hand just to get through Hohum State College with a C. To the burly dad in the rusty pickup truck, Ms. Hart is a book-addled flake without a practical bone in her body but with plenty of good teeth in her head thanks to a dental plan that comes out of said dad's property taxes. In Shakespeare's *King Henry VI*, a common rebel known as Dick the Butcher says, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers," but to honor the sentiments inside as well as outside the palace Ms. Hart has to die first.

Of course there are any number of parents, in Volvos, old Fords, and on Harley-Davidsons, who will see Ms. Hart as an angel. And of those who see otherwise, might at least a few be responding to her pedagogical competence rather than to her professional status? Undoubtedly so. Teachers probably provide some of the most and least inspiring examples we have of human beings in the act of work. A friend of mine remarked to me recently, "No one, not even a farmer, works harder than a hardworking teacher. But there is nothing on this earth lazier than a lazy teacher." Having taught school for a good part of my adult life, I tend to agree. I wouldn't say that extremes of this kind are unique to teachers, however. I would propose that the same extremes can be found in any occupation that shares the following characteristics: a notable degree of special-

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ized training, a mission to help other human beings, a duty to help them irrespective of their ability to pay, and a measure of authority that comes from all of the above. In short, the extremes of character and performance that exist among teachers also exist among doctors and police. But most of us, even if we grow up to be invalids or criminals, will have spent more time with teachers than with either of their counterparts.

What also sets teachers apart is the milder consequences of their extremes. Doctors and cops can kill somebody or save her life; teachers at their worst or best can usually do no more than to ruin or to improve it. Because the extremes of benefit and detriment are less, the mystique may be less also. But because those extremes do exist and are so noticeable, the mediocre quality of the mediocre teacher tends to be noticeable as well. An average guy seldom looks more average than in front of a classroom.

In a society that touts both "excellence" and "equality," teachers are perhaps our best example of the complex interplay of those two values—both in the evaluative nature of their work and in their own status as workers. We put them down in the clichés of populist rhetoric and we put them up in the titanium shrines of space shuttles, but the truth is, taken as a whole, they're probably more representative of "ordinary Americans" than any single occupational group. If I were Arthur Miller, I would not have made Willy Loman a salesman; I would have made him a teacher. In the lines in which Willy calls the Chevrolet "the greatest car ever built" and then, several pages later, says, "That goddamn Chevrolet, they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car!" I would have him talking about the American public school.

Yet another way in which the conflicting currents of our democracy affect our resentment of teachers has to do with how we conceive of service, which is not much different from how Süleyman the Magnificent conceived of service. In aristocratic societies, service is the butler who appears when the master pulls the velvet bell rope. In a society like ours, service is the desk clerk who's supposed to come running (with a smile) whenever any tourist slaps the bell. Our version may be the more "democratic," but like the Greeks, whose democracies preceded our own, we always seem to need a few slaves in order to feel truly emancipated.

It would be foolish to suggest that teachers are a kind of slave. It would be equally foolish to forget that not so long ago they were virtually a kind of indentured servant. That they

A GOOD SCHOOL deserves to be call'd, the very Salt of the Town, that hath it: And the Pastors of every Town, (who are, *Sal Terræ*.) are under peculiar obligations, to make this a part of their Pastoral Care, That they may have a Good School, in their Neighbourhood. A woful *putrefaction* threatens the Rising Generation; Barbarous Ignorance, and the unavoidable consequence of it, Outrageous Wickedness will make the Rising Generation Loathsome, if it have not Schools to preserve it. But Schools, wherein the Youth may by able Masters be Taught the Things that are necessary to qualify them for future Serviceableness, and have their Manners therewithal well-formed under a Laudable Discipline, & be over & above Well-Catechised in the principles of Religion. Those would be a Glory of our Land, & the preservatives of all other Glory.

The Minister, that shall give his Neighbours No Rest, until they have agreeable Schools among them, and that shall himself also at some Times *Inspect & Visit the Schools*, will therein do much towards Fulfilling that part of his Ministry, *Feed my Lambs*; & his Neighbours under his Charge, will (whatever they think of it!) have cause to Bless God, for this Expression of his Faithfulness.

But these are not the only persons, to whom *this matter belongs*; The Civil Authority, & the whole Vicinity, cannot be True to their own Interest, if they do not say, *We also will be with thee*.

When the REFORMATION began, in Europe, an hundred and fourscore years ago, to Erect Schools every where, was one principal concern of the Glorious & Heroic Reformers; & it was a common thing even for Little Villages of Twenty or Thirty Families, in the midst of all their Charges, & their Dangers, to maintain one of them. The Colonies of New England were

planted on the Design of pursuing that Holy Reformation; & now the Devil cannot give a greater Blow to the Reformation among us, than by causing Schools to Languish under Discouragements. If our General Courts, decline to contrive and provide Laws for the Support of Schools; or if particular Towns Employ their Wits, for Cheats to Elude the wholesome Laws; little do they consider how much they expose themselves to that Rebuke of God, *Thou hast destroyed thy self, O New England* . . .

If you have any Love to God, & Christ & Posterity; let Schools be more Encouraged. If you would not betray your Posterity into the very Circumstances of Savages, let Schools have more Encouragement. But in the Anguish . . . of Success to be otherwise found by this Address, I will Turn it from you unto the Almighty Hearer of Prayer.

And, O thou Saviour, and Shepherd of thy New-English Israel: Be Entreated Mercifully to look down upon thy Flocks in the Wilderness. Oh, give us not up to the Blindness and Madness of neglecting the Lambs in the Flocks. Inspire thy People, and all Orders of men among thy People, with a just care for the Education of Posterity. Let Well-Ordered, and well-instructed, and well-maintained Schools, be the Honour and the Defence of our Land. Let Learning, and all the Helps and Means of it, be precious in our Esteem and by Learning, let the Interests of thy Gospel so prevail, that we may be made wise unto Salvation. Save us, O our Lord JESUS CHRIST. Save us from the Mischiefs and Scandals of an Uncultivated Off-Spring; Let this be a Land of Light, until Thou, O Sun of Righteousness, do thy self arise unto the World with Healing in thy Wings.

Amen.

—COTTON MATHER
An address, Ad Fratres in Eremo
(1699)

have advanced beyond servitude is not always regarded as a cause for celebration. Add teachers to that list of groups and persons who eventually "got so uppity" that they threatened to diminish the status that came of having them under our thumbs. Here again I must be careful not to overstate my case. One of my favorite school stories has to do with a principal who told a friend of mine that although he understood his frustration when his son's teacher



I DO NOT BELIEVE that there is a country in the world where, in proportion to the population, there are so few ignorant, and at the same time so few learned, individuals. Primary instruction is within the reach of everybody; superior instruction is scarcely to be obtained by any. . . . Almost all the Americans are in easy circumstances, and can, therefore, obtain the first elements of human knowledge.

In America, there are but few wealthy persons; nearly all Americans have to take a profession. Now, every profession requires an apprenticeship. The Americans can devote to general education only the early years of life. At fifteen, they enter upon their calling, and thus their education generally ends at the age when ours begins. Whatever is done afterwards is with a view to some . . . object; a science is taken up as a matter of business, and the only branch of it which is attended to is such as admits of an immediate practical application. . . . A middling standard is fixed in America for human knowledge. All approach as near to it as they can; some as they rise, others as they descend. . . .

At the extreme borders of the Confederate States, upon the confines of society and the wilderness, a population of bold adventurers have taken up their abode, who pierce the solitudes of the American woods, and seek a country there, in order to escape the pover-

ty which awaited them in their native home. As soon as the pioneer reaches the place which is to serve him for a retreat, he fells a few trees and builds a log-house. Nothing can offer a more miserable aspect than these isolated dwellings. The traveller who approaches one of them towards nightfall sees the flicker of the hearthflame through the chinks in the walls; and at night, if the wind rises, he hears the roof of boughs shake to and fro. . . . Who would not suppose that this poor hut is the asylum of rudeness and ignorance? Yet no sort of comparison can be drawn between the pioneer and the dwelling which shelters him. Everything about him is primitive and wild, but he is himself the result of the labor and experience of eighteen centuries. He wears the dress and speaks the language of cities; he is acquainted with the past, and ready about the future, and ready for argument upon the present; he is, in short, a highly civilized being, who consents for a time to inhabit the backwoods, and who penetrates into the wilds of the New World with the Bible, an axe, and some newspapers. It is difficult to imagine the incredible rapidity with which thought circulates in the midst of these deserts. I do not think that so much intellectual activity exists in the most enlightened and populous districts of France.

— ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE
Democracy in America
(1835–40)

consistently failed to return his phone calls, he should understand that "returning calls has never been Mrs. Van Winkle's strength."

Still, even when one allows for the maddening imperviousness—and equally maddening impunity—of certain teachers, one is still struck from time to time by the popular assumption that public schools, like Third World bazaars and Atlantic City casinos, ought to be places where the almighty spender can throw his weight around like Almighty God. Whenever one hears that dearly beloved phrase "local control," and one hears it in my corner of New England about once a day, the accent is usually on *control*; and the control, firmly on the teachers. Of course this is also true beyond the local level, most recently in proposals to fingerprint teachers in order to "protect children." What politician as keen on protecting his or her career as on protecting children would ever propose fingerprinting clergy, orthodontists, or live-in boyfriends? Not to forget every legislator employing a page.

For the most part, though, I do not hear teachers criticized for having slipped their leashes so much as for having dropped their halos. "Teachers are not supposed to be in it for the money; they're supposed to be in it for the children"—a sentiment that sounds reasonable enough until we remember that even the most altruistic teachers have been known to produce children, and that teachers' children have been known to eat. Still, one can almost hear the aggrieved tones of unrequited love in the voices of those who wistfully recall the days "when a teacher was respected" and wouldn't have known what to do with anything so crass as a dollar bill, not if you taped it to her nose.

Once again there's a contradiction lurking under the rhetoric, which reveals a cultural contradiction as well. Teachers are also resented *for* their altruism, and one does not have to look too far for examples of the resentment. I remember sitting next to a father at Town Meeting who in his litany of grievances against teachers closed with this: "They teach kids not to work." It was a hardworking man who said this. What I think he meant was: "They teach kids that there are other things in life *besides* work, that is, besides work done for money." I recall another father, also hardworking but with the added perspective of being a teacher's husband, who gave as his explanation for the bitter controversy surrounding a guidance counselor at his school: "I think people resent her goodness."

It was a remark that struck home, in part because home for me is a hardscrabble place

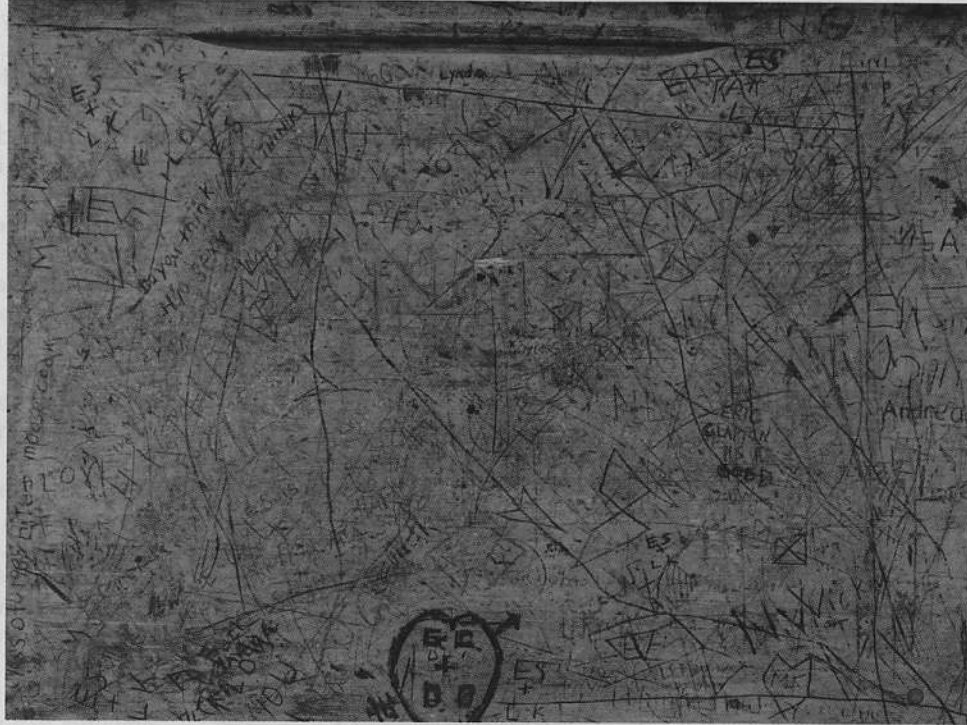
where many people have led very hard lives. In their eyes, teachers make children unfit to live in a world where survival belongs to the toughest. Special education, cooperative learning, second chances—even art and music—are “fine for some,” but what have such things to do with real life as these people have known it? And if all this coddling is indeed valuable, does that mean that a hard life is not? I’m told there’s a Sicilian proverb that says, “It’s a foolish man who educates his children so they can despise him.” It’s a foolish man who doesn’t see that fear at the root of nearly everything we might call reactionary.

People are said to hate change, even though in our society political change, at least, is supposed to come about by the will of the people. I imagine that for many of them hating teachers comes down to the same thing. Whenever our society changes, or wishes to change, or pretends that it wishes to change, schools and teachers are enlisted in the cause. If we decide that cyberspace is the place to go, we start by sending the second grade. If we come to fear that morality is going to hell in a handbasket, we draw up a curriculum of “values-based” education. No teacher can hear the phrase “launching a new initiative” without knowing that the launching pad is going to be located on top of his desk.

If we oppose a given change, we may be inclined to disdain the teacher who carries it forward, though in many cases this amounts to hearing bad news and killing the messenger. Our chagrin can come not only from the change itself but from the sense of having to subsidize our own obsolescence. We shall never require a sign outside a school building that reads YOUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK; people feel them at work, no less than the workings of their own bowels, which is why, in times of unsettling social change and political insecurity, citizens will sometimes descend with merciless indignation on a school budget. The first thing we do, let’s kill all the special programs. I have even heard people say, “It’s the one thing left that I have some control over.”

But schools have not only been placed in

the vanguard of change; they have in many ways been used to contain and minimize change. So if, for instance, we want to continue to practice de facto racial segregation, we can pretend otherwise by busing children between racially homogeneous schools. If we are content to see the gap between rich and poor grow wider every year, but wish to seem more



“compassionate,” we can try to establish some semblance of equity in the funding of public education. Ostensibly, our guiding principle here is that the first step in changing society for the better is changing schools.

That is a fairly sound guiding principle—provided that the *first* step doesn’t wind up being the *only* step. Schools can indeed be better places than the communities that sustain them, but never much better, and never better for long. In the end, we can only change the world by changing the world. When something happens in a schoolyard to remind us of this, something awful and sad, we lash out at “the teachers” and “the schools.” They were supposed to be making the world a better place, or at least maintaining the illusion that we wanted them to.

Public schools embody our democratic principles and contradictions better than any other institution we know. In schools we behold our own spitting image as a people who value equality but crave excellence, who live for the

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IT IS OMINOUS, A presumption of crime, that this word Education has so cold, so hopeless a sound. A treatise on education, a convention for education, a lecture, a system, affects us with slight paralysis and a certain yawning of the jaws. We are not encouraged when the law touches it with its fingers. Education should be as broad as man. . . . The imagination must be addressed. Why always coast on the surface and never open the interior of Nature, not by science, which is surface still, but by poetry? Is not the Vast an element of the mind? Yet what teaching, what book of this day appeals to the Vast? . . .

Alas for the cripple Practice when it seeks to come up with the bird Theory, which flies before it. Try your design on the best school. The scholars are of all ages and temperaments and capacities. It is difficult to class them, some are too young, some are slow, some perverse. Each requires so much consideration, that the morning hope of the teacher, of a day of love and progress, is often closed at evening by despair. Each single case, the more it is considered, shows more to be done; and the strict conditions of the hours, on one side, and the number of tasks, on the other. Whatever becomes of our method, the conditions stand fast,—six hours, and thirty, fifty, or a hundred and fifty pupils. Something must be done, and done speedily, and in this distress the wisest are tempted to adopt violent means, to proclaim martial law, corporal punishment, mechanical arrangement, bribes, spies, wrath, main strength and ignorance, in lieu of that wise genial providential influence they had hoped, and yet hope at some future day to adopt. Of course the devotion to details reacts injuriously on the teacher. He cannot indulge his genius, he cannot delight in personal relations with young friends, when his eye is al-

ways on the clock, and twenty classes are to be dealt with before the day is done. Besides, how can he please himself with genius, and foster modest virtue? A sure proportion of rogue and dunce finds its way into every school and requires a cruel share of time, and the gentle teacher, who wished to be a Providence to youth, is grown a martinet, sore with suspicions; knows as much vice as the judge of a police court, and his love of learning is lost in the routine of grammars and books of elements. . . .

I confess myself utterly at a loss in suggesting particular reforms in our ways of teaching. No discretion that can be lodged with a school-committee, with the overseers or visitors of an academy, of a college, can at all avail to reach these difficulties and perplexities, but they solve themselves when we leave institutions and address individuals. . . . I advise teachers to cherish mother-wit. I assume that you will keep the grammar, reading, writing and arithmetic in order; 't is easy and of course you will. But smuggle in a little contraband wit, fancy, imagination, thought. . . . Nobody shall be disorderly, or leave his desk without permission, but if a boy runs from his bench, or a girl, because the fire falls, or to check some injury that a little dastard is inflicting behind his desk on some helpless sufferer, take away the medal from the head of the class and give it on the instant to the brave rescuer. If a child happens to show that he knows any fact about astronomy, or plants, or birds, or rocks, or history, that interests him and you, hush all the classes and encourage him to tell it so that all may hear. Then you have made your school-room like the world.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON
"Education"
(circa 1840)

moment but bet on the future, who espouse altruism but esteem self-reliance, who sincerely believe in change but just as sincerely doubt that change will do them any good. Whether we call these contradictions schizophrenia or creative tension, beauty or ugliness, will depend on the eye of the beholder. Public-school teachers themselves are no less an embodiment of the same contradictions, just as in the broadest sense all teachers embody the subjects that they teach. At least the more memorable ones do. Think of it sometime: lean Mr. Silverstein didn't teach you math; he *was* math, fleshed out in its angular glory. All of this is to say that the best teaching is incarnational. Teaching is the *word*—the music, the formula, and even the Constitution of the United States—made flesh and dwelling among us.

The forty-odd years that I have spent in school are not unlike the forty-eight years I have spent in my body, a mix of pain and pleasure in which the pain has perhaps been more intense but the pleasure more constant, more influential, and, in some way I can't entirely explain, more true. At some level it was most fitting that my mother sent me off to school that morning, and every morning, by handing me my lunch, as if to say that the part of me that learns is one with the part that eats, even if on certain mornings it was also one with the part that pukes. In contrast, the daydream of the boy I was at six, playing among the tombstones when he ought to have been at school, amounts to a wish for disembodiment. It is the vision of a gnostic heaven, in which the emancipated spirits of the elect rise from the complications of the flesh, not in a new body but in no body at all.

The same can be said for many of the present initiatives to diminish radically the scope of public education in America, if not to abolish it altogether. The utopian school, the cyber-school, the voucher-subsidized school, the school of "school choice," all reduce to a fantasy of social and political transcendence—an attempt to sidestep the contradictions of democracy, the cruel jokes of genetics, the crueler jokes of class, and the darker side of diversity. If we can but find the right gnosis, you see, the secret path to educational enlightenment, we shall at last be able to shed the blemished, prickly skin of the body politic and live as unencumbered spirits with harps and cornets or whichever golden instrument best accompanies the appropriate lifestyle choice. It may sound like a return to Eden, like the miraculous reversal of some irreversible fall, but make no mistake; it is the equivalent of a wish for death. ■