Holding On to Good Ideas in a Time of Bad Ones
Six Literacy Principles Worth Fighting For

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Finding a Language for Difficulty
Silences in Our Teaching Stories

In the movie Stand and Deliver, Jaime Escalante, an inspiring mathematics teacher in a difficult urban school, has an exchange with a colleague who argues that, given the poverty and lack of resources in the district, it is unreasonable to expect high achievement comparable to more affluent schools. Escalante dismisses this argument, saying that success will come if he “teaches harder.” As viewers, we are clearly invited to read this colleague’s comment as an example of “the soft bigotry of low expectations” and to cheer on Escalante for refusing to give in to rationalizations for poor performance. It would take a real gremlin not to cheer on these students, and Escalante, when he finally reads off their AP Calculus scores (after being accused of cheating because on an earlier test no one believe that they could be so high). And I find myself momentarily lifted up by this true story of educational transformation against all odds.
But only momentarily. In fact, I find the message of the movie demoralizing—that in any situation, no matter how difficult, teachers can prevail through the purity of effort, through “teaching harder.” Even when they are operating alone, in conditions of urban poverty. I began my teaching career in such a school, and students came in with such bewildering behavioral and learning problems I didn’t know where to start. On some days, particular students were so out of control that nothing happened educationally. Attendance patterns were erratic. I finished almost every day with a level of fatigue that I have never experienced since. I was clearly a victim of my inexperience, but in retrospect I could no more have been a Jaime Escalante than I can now be a Michael Phelps in swimming or a Tiger Woods in golf. Even in the privileged environment where I now work, I rarely feel myself capable of the transformational effect Escalante achieved, and to the extent that I feel this should be my goal, I fall short and experience failure—the poorly chosen book, the discussion that falls flat, the student who fails to engage with the course, the explanation of a writing problem that meets with a look of incomprehension from the student.

Although I suspect that all teachers have these moments of failure, I realize that not all respond as I do; they may not feel the acute sense of disappointment, the flat waste of time, the second-guessing about flawed decisions, even the way these moments can erode my sense of professional competence. There are those teachers with sunnier dispositions, the optimists, who delight in their successes and don’t dwell on problems (and rarely even talk about them), who do not feel this sense of disappointment. This chapter is not about them, or perhaps for them. I realize that arguing against depictions of excellence—of transformative teaching—may seem self-centered, like arguing that Annie Dillard shouldn’t write so well, because she makes me feel inadequate. I realize there is a place for heroes and saints, for those who selflessly, with a purity of purpose, devote themselves to helping others. And I realize that to some, it will seem self-indulgent to focus on the emotional life of teachers, when the accepted purpose of schools is to serve students—it is, after all, about others.
Fortunately, I am not alone in finding some of these teaching narratives troubling. In an essay, “It’s All About the Kids! Or Is It?” Peter Taubman (2008) cites an incident from Rafe Esquith’s teaching memoir, Teach Like Your Hair’s On Fire: Methods and Madness Inside Room 56 (2007). Esquith explains that the title of the book comes from an incident involving a science experiment:

In trying to get [the student’s] alcohol burner to light, I set my hair on fire and didn’t even know it until the kids started screaming. But as ridiculous as it was, I actually thought, if I could care so much I didn’t even know my hair was on fire, I was moving in the right direction as a teacher—I realized that you have to ignore all that crap, and the children are the only thing that matter. (2)

This is a teaching moment seemingly made for the movies, a depiction of exemplary self-sacrifice. But Taubman notes the disturbing paradox of this story—the teacher is heroic and at the same time selfless, larger (and smaller) than life:

Literally immolating himself, Mr. Esquith clearly believes sacrificing oneself for the children is essential to good teaching. . . . On one level his life is clearly worth less than the lives of his students. On another level, however, like so many teachers in these narratives of sacrifice, salvation, and rescue, he emerges as heroic. Fantasies of grandiosity and feelings of worthlessness unite in the commitment to sacrificing oneself for the students, who are all that matter. (2008, 96)

From a psychoanalytic perspective, these narratives present a very narcissistic image of teaching, an inflated self-presentation, even self-admiration—that leaves teachers vulnerable to psychological pain when they receive criticism or experience difficulty (or feel emotions) incompatible with this self-image. And to the extent that, as a culture, we treat these depictions of selfless teaching as an ideal, those (like me) who fall short also feel inadequate, and I will argue, lose some of the
pleasure that might come from a more realistic vision of teaching, with its small victories and small advances.

This grandiose, transformative model of teaching—this big cultural story—can interfere in other ways. To the extent that we imagine ourselves as this dynamic, charismatic agent of change, we can easily imagine the role of students as feeding this need and in the process fail to really see them, fail to acknowledge the complexity of their lives because they are feeding our needs. This blindness happens all the time in aggressive parenting, when we project upon our children our own need to feel like we are successful—the great report card, the admission letter from Colby, the winning basket—reinforces our view that we are superior parents. The achievements of our children don’t simply reflect on us as parents—they reflect us.

Taubman argues that we can similarly project our teacher fantasies of self-importance and sacrifice and fail to decenter; consequently, we ignore, reject, fail to acknowledge the natural resistances and divided loyalties of students, the inescapable fact that, except in unusual cases, we are not as central in their lives as they are in ours. (In the movies, of course, these resistances make a momentary appearance, to be overwhelmed by the dedication and dynamism of the heroic teacher.) All of which does not mean we shouldn’t work to make our teaching important, only that there are seductive cultural narratives—of sacrifice and rescue—that not only obscure the incremental realities of successful teaching but cause damage when we don’t measure up, when we stop teaching as if our hair is on fire. In fact, I will argue in this chapter that we will become better teachers, and happier teachers, if we can replace some of these fantasies with more realistic stories, which can accommodate failure, disappointment, and resistance.

I was reminded of the power of these cultural narratives—their capacity for making us feel inadequate—when a teacher in our summer program wrote an essay, “Myth America,” on the birth of her first child, which described her emotional detachment from the infant and the guilt this detachment created for her. I will quote two substantial portions of this essay:

For days after the birth I silently believed that I was an emotional cripple. I felt awe for the new life, tinged with resentment
for the intrusion she was making on what little exhausted pri-

vacy I had left. But I didn’t love her.

When feeding time rolled around I momentarily welcomed
the relief from the tedium of the hospital day. Within 10 or 15
minutes I prayed for the nurse to return and take the baby
away—I had had enough.

Once at home, I was burdened with the overwhelming re-

sponsibility of caring for this squalling bit of humanity. A whole

new environment filled with baths, bottles, formulas, diapers,

and cradle cap, and navel infections insulated me.

Nagging constantly subsurface was my lack of emotional

attachment to this child, and I began to seriously consider

that I was emotionally unbalanced. Of course, I did not share

these feelings with anyone; that would have been totally

un-American!

I believed the TV commercials that depicted mother and

child rocking in worlds of billowing sheer curtains, sun stream-
ing through quiet awnings, confidently using the Baby X nurser
to achieve this serenity. However, the reality I was living was a

grotesque parody of this tranquil scene. The baby woke in the

pitch black of night and my body resisted waking, sagging and
devoid of maternal joy.

This situation was made worse by unsolicited advice of older women

who told Karen that this time of caring for an infant was the best time in
a woman’s life. For almost three months she carries on this subterfuge,
pretending to feel delight:

Then one day, when she was 11 weeks old, it happened. Quite

suddenly, out of nowhere, while I sat on the living room floor
watching her in her infant’s chair, a smile spread on her lips as
we made eye contact, and my heart vaulted. It was that simple.
There it was . . . what I had been searching for since her birth
jumped out and grabbed me. . . . I was amazed.

I spent several days puzzling over this phenomena until
the truth hit me over the head. It was not possible for me to
love or hate something until I knew it. Even predisposition couldn’t create these feelings. Until I had tended to her needs, watching her responses increasing daily under my care, and until I had slowly recognized her emerging personality, detachment prevailed.

I wanted to sing and dance and shout the news to the world. I was not emotionally deranged, merely a late bloomer. The myth of instantaneous maternal love, perpetuated by the media, had been dispelled. (Weinhold 1981)

In fact, Karen did not immediately shout her discovery to the world. It was years after the birth that she managed to tell outsiders about her experiences. Her story was difficult to tell because it was not the conventional mother love story.

This is just one of many possible examples of the way women, historically, are asked to emulate perfection: moral perfection—the perfect nurturer willing to expend any amount of energy for friends and family. The expectation of selflessness. And physical perfection—matching images in the media, always thin, young (or at least youthful), sexy. To the point where many young women regularly lose the ability to look in a mirror and see themselves with any accuracy. And more recently, the image of the superwoman, seamlessly juggling the roles of household manager, caring mother, loving and passionate wife, and dedicated professional. These ideals, to the extent that they are unrealistic, inflict psychological damage: they induce guilt, envy, and a sense of inadequacy, all maintained in secrecy—in addition to enriching companies that promote products to ease the doubts that they themselves help create.

As I read the sunny literature about the progressive methods for teaching reading and writing, I wonder if we are not creating the role of “superteacher,” one more ideal, without cracks, that can create a sense of inadequacy. Are there silences in the narratives of our teaching? Are we telling everything? Do these consistently upbeat success stories capture the emotional underlife of teaching? I think not.

I confess that I have become increasingly estranged from much of what I now read about literacy education. There is an emotional
turbulence and frequency of failure in my own teaching that I do not see reflected in many accounts, including, I admit, some that I have written and edited. In the classes I read about, everything seems to work; student writing is impressive, often deeply moving; the teacher seems to have achieved full participation of all members of the class. And what I find most difficult to believe, the teacher never shows signs of despondency, frustration, anger, impatience, or disappointment. If there is anger or frustration, it is usually directed at external forces—administrators, testing services (the designated “bad guys”)—and never at themselves or their students. The teachers I read about don’t doubt their competence, or at least they don’t admit to their doubts.

I have all these feelings—mixed with exaltation, affection, pride, and self-confidence, to be sure. But the dark side is there. There are days when I feel the energy sucked out of me, days in late November when I’m teaching writing at 4:00. It’s the time the Scots call the “gloaming,” no longer daylight, but not yet night. Still too early to light a fire. Usually a student turns on the classroom lights, but on some days the first six or seven students just come in and sit in the growing darkness, exhausted; they don’t talk. I come in the room, turn on the lights, and feel as if there is a great weight that I must move, and I’m not always sure I can do it. Sometimes I can’t. I think of optimistic claims that all students want to write, need to write—and I think, maybe, but not today.

These days of gloaming are hard enough to deal with, but they are much harder if I feel that no one else experiences what I experience, if I imagine them in a different story entirely. The lights are on in their classes, which are off to sparkling beginnings, their classrooms discussions flowing and insightful. If I imagine that they never have the sinking feeling that I am experiencing, if I must imagine myself alone with this problem, my very competence as a teacher is called into doubt.

This kind of difficulty is not a big topic in the educational literature I read. I suspect most discussions of failure are reserved for the teachers’ room and patient spouses—which is a shame. Because failure is inevitable, daily, persistent. In most classrooms, there is an asymmetry between teacher and student identity. As teachers, our professional identity is bound up in our teaching success; when we fail, something
very precious can be put at risk. With some exceptions, students do not think of themselves in the same way. Their sense of self, particularly in the later years, most likely comes from a range of other identifications—from success in athletics, of friendships, jobs, boyfriends/girlfriends. Even the most committed students must divide their loyalty among the different demands placed on them. In some school subcultures, it is even risky (or “being white”) to appear to care too much about school performance. Boys, for example, frequently boast about who studied least for a test. I don’t mean this to be discouraging, or that as teachers we don’t do our best to persuade students that the work they will be doing is meaningful. But it seems to me an inescapable fact that in a universal, compulsory, public system of education, the teacher and student usually enter a class with different kinds of investment. We deny this reality at our own psychological risk.

So what happens if we begin with this premise: Difficulty, disappointment, resistance, and failures are inevitable in the profession of teaching. And that for some temperaments, like mine, they can take up a big part of our radar screen. I think about them a lot. It would seem to follow that success in teaching is dependent not on avoiding difficulty but on finding a way to process difficulty—to think about it, talk about it with other professionals. Those who have studied school cultures have demonstrated that schools are rarely structured for this kind of professional talk. Seymour Sarason makes this argument in his classic text *The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change*:

What does it mean to go through a work day with no sustained personal contact with another adult? Being and talking with children is not psychologically the same thing as being and talking with peers—and I am not suggesting that one is necessarily more satisfying than the other, only that they are different. I am suggesting that when one is almost exclusively with children—responsible for them, being vigilant in regard to them, “giving” to them—it must have important consequences. One of these psychological consequences is that teachers are psychologically alone even though they are in densely populated settings. (1971, 106)
These consequences, according to Sarason, are devastating; we have a contained system that profoundly limits the teacher, as if the oxygen of adult stimulation and professional discussion is simply choked off:

When in the course of one’s day-to-day professional existence the gaining of rewards is dependent almost exclusively on one’s relationship with children, and these rewards are frequently indirect and non-verbal, and when the frequency of these rewards is not greater than the frustrations one experiences, it should not be surprising if the well of motivation should run low or dry, or if behavior becomes routinized. To expect otherwise is to assume that one is not dependent to some degree, at least, on contact with and stimulation from one’s colleagues. (108)

I am convinced that this professional isolation is significantly responsible for the difficulty many school systems experience in retaining young teachers, who often leave for professions built around adult interaction. It is an issue that the current push for professional learning communities tries to address.

To explore this topic, I decided to track down former students in my Teaching Writing class, who were now teachers in area schools. I was interested in how they navigated the emotional demands of teaching in their first years. Kathleen Reardon had taken a high school English position in an area school that served a proud working-class community with its share of social and economic difficulties—a challenging assignment for a young beginning teacher. To compound matters, one of her sophomore classes in that year was composed of thirty students, twenty-seven of them boys:

My hardest part about the first year were more personal emotions with kids rather than academic emotions such as planning and discipline. I guess I quickly realized that I can’t reach everyone and teenagers are going to give me a hard time; some are never going to do the work. I mean I was hot and cold. Some days I would just come home from work and just cry. It was the stress that literally made me sick, but at the same time, as a teacher, in the back of my mind I knew that I wasn’t going
to let my emotions get the best of me. I was becoming a person and teacher that I never envisioned myself being. When I realized this, I began a lot of journaling just trying to sort out a plan. I would recollect my thoughts and try some new tactic that would possibly be less stressful on me and more beneficial to them.

The cycle of reflection that she describes parallels one of my favorite descriptions of thinking, a life-giving (for me) quotation from Marvin Minsky, a specialist in cognition and intelligence:

Thinking is a process, and if your thinking does something you don’t want it to you should be able to say something microscopic and analytic about it, and not something enveloping and evaluating about yourself as a learner. The important thing in refining your thought is to try to depersonalize your interior; it may be all right to deal with other people in a vague global way, but it is devastating if this is the way you deal with yourself. (quoted in Bernstein 1981, 122)

It is probably impossible to drain the emotion—to “depersonalize the interior”—from most of the personal difficulties we experience as teachers (or parents or spouses), but it is therapeutic and practically useful to find a way to translate an emotionally felt difficulty into something less personal, less emotional, less undermining. This seems to me precisely what Kathleen did as she began to work in her journal on a plan or a set of tactics. She also had the help of a science teacher, an informal mentor; in fact, when I asked her about advice for new teachers, she responded, “Find someone that you connect with, who you feel comfortable in going to for help, and never feel afraid to ask for help.”

I can’t say that I followed this advice when I began teaching, maybe through a combination of arrogance and shyness, but there was one older man, Tom Giachetto, a mechanical drawing teacher, who reached out to me. He lived north of Boston and his route home took him close to my apartment on the cheap side of Beacon Hill. As we wove through traffic on Storrow Drive, we’d talk about students we had in common. I had such a difficult time reading student behavior, determining what
was disruptive—what I should let go, what I should laugh at. He helped me sort things out. “He’s really a good kid. He just gets frustrated easily—you have to get to him fast.” This was the kind of advice I needed desperately. We came to the spot where Storrow Drive met Charles Street, and he stopped to let me off (at the absolutely most dangerous stopping point in Boston). Each ride was a great lesson about teaching, and the funny thing is, I don’t even think he was aware that he was teaching. He was just giving me a ride home.

By extension, there should be far more opportunities to visit and learn from our peers. I am convinced that the one great untapped resource in most school systems is the excellent teaching going on in them—and the potential for that teaching to be instructive to others. Yet for logistical and scheduling reasons—or just plain inertia—teachers are often practically locked in their own classrooms; or they can get money to go to some Holiday Inn to listen to a consultant, but not a substitute teacher for a couple hours to visit a colleague. There are so many points of strength in any school system, but no one working to connect the dots; there are too few opportunities to break down this isolation and allow teachers to see someone other than themselves teach (assuming it is possible to see yourself without seeing others). I realize that visitation carries the impression, and sometimes the reality, of evaluation. We feel exposed, potentially embarrassed, vulnerable. When poorly done, without time set aside for debriefing and discussion, they can feel hit and run. I remember that Jean Robbins, when she was principal at Atkinson Academy during Donald Graves’ groundbreaking research, would tell potential visitors that she would love to have them come, and she would meet them in her office at 7:00 A.M. to set the stage.

So many of the realities of teaching are hard to represent in the traditional forms of inservice instruction. We can’t hear the teacher’s tone of voice; we can’t feel the flow of time; we can’t experience how the physical arrangement of the room contributes (or doesn’t contribute) to learning; we can’t see how instructional media are used; we can’t attend to the way teachers handle student contributions (the good ones often seem to have “soft hands,” a football term used to describe a receiver who can catch anything).
These visits can demystify excellent teaching, which, as I have noted, is often depicted as performative, charismatic, hair-on-fire drama. In the early days of the writing process innovations, there was an exchange between Don Graves and Nancie Atwell that has passed into legend. Don had just visited Nancie’s class in Boothbay, Maine, and over coffee at the end of the day this exchange occurred:

DG: You know what makes you such a great teacher, you’re so, so. . . .
NA: [Imagines the adjective he is searching for—"so articulate," "so brilliant," "so daring," something good.]
DG: You’re so organized.
NA: [Thinks: “Thanks a lot, Don!”]

When I visited her class a little later, I saw what he meant. I was not struck by the spectacularity and charisma of Nancie Atwell—rather by the deliberateness of what she was doing: the clarity of her explanations, the selection of reading material, the way one thing led naturally to another. I was stuck by the way she managed time, so that at each stage students could accomplish what she wanted them to do. This was before the term curricular coherence had become part of the educational lexicon, but this was it. And I was stuck by her tone of voice, her way of treating students seriously, probably more seriously than they took themselves (as I recall she began her lesson by having her eighth graders read and comment on a New York Times op-ed piece). What I saw didn’t look like brilliance so much as thoughtfulness—in every detail. It was excellence, but of a quieter, even more attainable, kind.

These visits can demystify teaching in another way as they can show that effective teaching is not effective at every point, with every student. In any class, some students will be stuck, inattentive, doing work that will not make its way into published accounts. At about the same time I visited Nancie’s class, I made one of my first trips to Atkinson Academy, taking care to be there by the required 7:00. The classes I saw were wonderful, but not in the way I had imagined from reading the published work. I recall in particular two boys who were playing in
the sandbox during writing time, pretty oblivious to literacy instruction of any kind. I’m not saying it wasn’t a fine, innovative classroom, indeed one that helped change the face of elementary writing instruction. But I was so grateful, so relieved, to see those boys—who could care less about writing—in the sandbox. This, after all, was a world I knew and could live in.

For a few years I hiked with a University of New Hampshire graduate student, Alex Fobes, an experienced wilderness guide. He had led any number of mountain hikes with young kids, who would often ask him, “When will we be there?”

His answer was always, “You’re there now. Look around. How do you know the top will be any better than this? You’re there.”

This may be no more than the classic advice to “seize the day,” but it reminded me about how hard it can be to there in teaching, to be fully present in a moment and to take pleasure in that moment. The novelist Walker Percy has written a haunting essay on this topic called, “The Loss of the Creature” (1975). The “loss” in the title is our inability to perceive, the way cultural expectations can come between us and the world, the way we are culturally programmed to experience that world in a particular way. We know the Grand Canyon because we have seen pictures, so many of them that once we actually “see” it, we say, “Wonderful, it looks just like the picture.” It seems to me that in any goal-directed activity—like teaching or climbing a mountain—we “lose” the creature by our focus on the future, on expectations, benchmarks, standards, on “where they should be.” Where we want them to be.

I thought of Percy’s essay a few years ago when my son was playing out his final year on the high school baseball team. I would leave work early to sit on the folding bleachers; often the weather would be the raw New England April. That year, the team had no real pitching and my son, who had no real fastball but who could throw strikes, was chosen to pitch. With some teams, this control would keep them in the game, but against one neighboring team it didn’t work. He was hammered. I still see those monster hits finding the gaps between outfielders and rolling forever because there was no fence. I recall my frustration sitting there, watching it all, watching the hopelessness of this game, the futility of
this season that should have been his happiest. Innings seemed to take hours, the sun began to set, increasing the chill, and I could feel my frustration mount.

Then it hit me. The thing I had been missing the whole time.

I was here to watch my son. Wasn’t that obvious? The great thing was I had a son, that I was a father and I could be here to watch. The success of the season didn’t matter that much. None of these players, even the stars of the other team, were really going on in baseball. It was the end of the line. We were here to watch our kids, and I had been so wrapped up in the score, the hits, the team’s record, my need for success, the raw weather, that I wasn’t even seeing him, my son. As I write this, it seems the most basic cliché, but for the rest of the game I watched him, his movements, the way he would catch the ball (and I would think of the endless games of catch we had played). I’d watch the way he accepted the ball back from outfielders after those monster hits, and how he went on to the next batter. How did I miss the incredible dignity of that moment? I’d watch the ritual swings in the on deck circle. For the rest of the game, I watched him.

I realize that the comparison I am making—between this moment at the ball field and teaching—is not exact. Teachers have responsibilities that parents don’t have; they are responsible for long-term goals. But I would argue, paradoxically, that as teachers we might be more successful if we can bracket the moment and really pay attention to what is happening before our eyes. It is easy and seductive to lose this moment as we concern ourselves with “where the child should be”—if we sense some stern, test-obsessed administrator over our shoulder. Or in the hecticness of the day, we continually anticipate the next step, the next activity, the next program we must transition into. To cite the Fobes’ doctrine we are never there. We are always projecting into the future, we don’t dwell, don’t relax, don’t experience the slowness that I would argue is necessary for good teaching.

My former student Kathleen Reardon describes this process as “letting down her guard.” She admitted that when she began teaching, she was trying to “make everything run perfectly and if just one little thing
set the plan off, I felt it was a bust.” But with some advice from a science teacher in the school, she changed her viewpoint:

He basically gave me a “don’t sweat the small stuff” lecture. His advice allowed me to step back and look at the big picture. I began watching my students when I gave them an activity. When I would normally tell them to quiet down when it got loud, I began observing their “noise.” I would say 95 percent of the time when my students were acting noisy, they were actually learning more than in a quiet setting. I would have never realized this if it wasn’t through the coaching of some teachers, and also just letting my guard down and letting my lessons unfold and come to life.

Kathleen’s description of “letting her lessons unfold” is similar to descriptions of the writing process—with the writer allowing the text to find its own meaning, and not being locked into a plan.

Peter Elbow deals with this issue in his great essay, “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment” (1993). Obviously, the surprising term in his list is liking, which seems so “soft,” in this age of hard-nosed assessment. Yet of the three terms, Elbow clearly finds liking the most powerful teaching response and the one most aligned with the pleasure of teaching. Unlike ranking and evaluating, which are restrained and fractional, liking is wholehearted. Like laughing, it is a letting go, a feeling of complete presence in a moment. A great gift to the writer and reader.

And even in the achievement of long-term goals, it is essential that we focus on the small and immediate. If some want to reach for the stars, that’s their business; I’ll try for something I can actually hold. As Al Pacino once said, “Forget the career and just do the work.” As I have written earlier, I was raised in Ohio, in the 1950s, and instilled with the firm belief that all human wisdom could be conveyed by sports metaphors and stories, a belief I still hold to. One story goes back to my days as a lifeguard. During the midafternoon rest break, one guard, Bob Doerr, would get young kids to put up money (nickel, a penny) if he could swim the entire length of the fifty-five-yard pool.
underwater, which he always accomplished. But then he was the best distance swimmer in the high school. One day I decided to try it, and I asked him for advice because I would have to swim and hold my breath for almost a minute to make it. He told me that the secret was not to look up, because the end of the pool was too far away—and it would seem you were making no progress. The way to do it was to look straight down at the bottom, at the tiles of the pool bottom that you were passing over. It kept you thinking that you were moving. I took his advice, and it worked; only as I was totally out of breath, seeing spots before my eyes, did I look up and see, a couple of yards in front of me, the cross, the blessed cross, at the end of the pool. I made it.

In this age of big reform, this focus on the small and immediate may seem timid. Yet it has always seemed to me that great teachers are great not because they are constantly engineering revolutions in their classroom—but because they are alert to the small changes, the small victories. This alertness allows them to reinforce and acknowledge those changes, both to the student and to themselves. The great American psychologist, William James, articulated this point in a letter written in 1899:

I am against bigness and greatness in all their forms, and with the invisible and molecular forces that work from individual to individual, stealing in through the crannies of the world like so many soft rootlets, or like the capillary oozing of water. (quoted in Menand 2001, 372)

This argument for smallness coincides with a view of writing that I have tried to argue for in this book (stolen primarily from Don Murray and others). It is one in which the writer experiments, is open to failure, is fully present in the writing and alert to opportunities of the moment. And perhaps most importantly, where the writer (and I would argue by extension, the teacher) enacts a form of self-generosity. In the classroom, we need to find a way to bracket off the big picture, the long-term goal, the concern about AYP (annual yearly progress), and take pleasure in those “molecular” moments—the student who speaks
up for the first time in class, the young writer who finally finds a good
topic, the troubled kid who begins to trust you. It is, I believe, the na-
ture of human growth for these moments to be intermittent. As James
once wrote, it is human nature to hold on to routines, and that “in
this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives” (1954, 172)—
and resist change. Though as a culture, we celebrate big stories of
transformation, of rescue, of those who remake themselves and
their students, a lot of that is Hollywood. Our pleasure in teaching
must come from something smaller, and I would argue more
permanent.

The spring graduation at the University of New Hampshire usually hits
me at a time of extraordinary fatigue. Final papers or portfolios are
graded, and by the end of the grading, I wonder if there is any consis-
tency or even value to the effort. But on graduation Saturday, I grab my
mortarboard, fold my gown over my arm, walk to the football stadium,
past great-grandmothers in wheelchairs and younger sisters struggling
in high heels for the first time. For three hours, I watch bleary, hungover
students march in, and I listen to speeches about the future that seem
interchangeable year from year, jokes about late-night papers, the occa-
sional pop of a champagne cork, concluding with Nancy Kinner, the
head faculty marshal, singing “Happy Trails to You.” In my memory, I
have trouble distinguishing the years.

There is a profound regularity to this morning, a sense of it being
both incredibly significant and amazingly boring at the same time. But I
have come to love graduations. I have come to experience them as a col-
lective form of forgiveness, or acceptance—which is what ceremonies
are good at. Because for all of us, the year has been flawed. There have
been classes that didn’t jell, assignments that were poorly constructed,
those students I failed to connect with, and students who had written
rushed papers that didn’t deserve the C they received, missed classes,
excuses. And on and on. But on this day, it is all washed away, absolved.
There is something magical and ancient in the way the president recites
the formula that confers the degree on all that are assembled, and they
move the tassel on their mortarboard. Our success, on this day, is ab-
solute and unqualified.
I always leave the stadium uplifted by this ritual. I wear my academic gown as I walk the mile or so to my house. Along the way, parties are already starting, grills are getting fired up, the Bud Light is on ice. As I turn the corner on Mill Pond Road toward home, I am assaulted by the color of the crab apple trees that line the street and by the unstoppable brilliance of the forsythia bushes. And what I am feeling is pure joy.
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