"To the Foot from Its Child": Teaching as the Discipline of Hope

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The child's foot is not yet aware it's a foot,
and would like to be a butterfly or an apple.

—Pablo Neruda, "To the Foot from Its Child"

Six years ago I walked into Bronx Regional High School in the Fort Apache section of the Bronx. The principal, Mark Weiss, had invited me to observe his school. I have to admit the main enticement he offered was not the school visit but the promise that on the way home he would drive me past the house I grew up in and give me a chance, for the first time in twenty-five years, to see my old Bronx neighborhood.

Mark is one of the most welcoming people imaginable. His face is open, his presence expansive, and his spirit antic. He has a story for everyone, and even if it's often the same story you believe he is telling it for the first time and only for you. This holds for the tales he tells his students as much as for those he tells teachers, other administrators, and visitors to the school. I loved the tales, but something else impressed me more. Coffee, doughnuts, and bagels were set out in the hallway for anyone who wanted them—not just in the teachers' room or the principal's office. The students were treated like adults worthy of comfort and respect. Mark and I waited at the

door as the students entered. He greeted each new arrival and embraced at least half of them. Most of these youngsters had troubled school careers and had come back to this school for a last shot at hope. Some had clearly had bad nights, others bad nights and days.

When one young man walked in looking ready to kill, Mark excused himself and put his arm around the student's shoulder—a remarkable feat; very rarely will volatile and enraged youngsters let you touch them. Trust had made it possible for Mark and the student to adjourn to the principal's office for a chilling-out talk. Later that morning I conducted a class and encountered the same student. By that time he had settled down and was articulate, intelligent, and self-disciplined. In many other schools he would have been turned away rather than welcomed.

The human quality of the life at that school—across the street from a crack house, around the corner from burnt-out though partially inhabited buildings and empty lots shared by garbage, rats, and children at play—spoke of hope, of a belief that no matter what the students' past school experiences or their current lives were like, education could have a redemptive value and learning was still possible. As in the Neruda poem "To the Foot from Its Child," at Bronx Regional students were free to look at the raw material of their lives and their past failures and to dream, to embrace the possible rather than become resigned to roles other people expected them to play in the future because of their past failures.

After an exhilarating day teaching and observing at Bronx Regional, Mark kept his promise and I did have a chance to see 1696 Grand Avenue again. The numbers my grandfather had embossed on the glass over the front door in 1939, when we moved in, were still there. And the house looked exactly as I remembered it, only smaller and more vulnerable. It was surrounded by a barbed-wire fence and there was a sign posted next to what used to be the living room window, where my grandmother watched over us when we played stickball out on the street. The sign announced that the house had become a Baptist church, a sacred place. Across the street, where most of my friends had lived, was a six-story apartment building, half burnt out and half in the process of being rebuilt.

I could infer a history of despair and an awakening of hope in my neighborhood—fire and reconstruction. I got to speak to some older members of the church that used to be my home and they

seemed delighted that I was a teacher, that I cared about children. They, like my grandparents—perhaps everybody's grandparents—dreamed the world through the eyes of the young.

Mark had another agenda, and taking me home was part of it. He knew that, though I have lived in California since 1968, I'm a New Yorker, and he wanted to get me involved with public education in New York City once again. The question was how to craft a useful role in yet another attempt to make public schools work for all children.

This role emerged slowly as I commuted from California, connecting with old teaching friends and making new ones. Continuity, change, and continuity—as the poster I received from teachers in Paris in 1968, which still hangs on our kitchen wall, says, "La Lutte Continue": "The Struggle Goes On." A number of teachers I had known for years and who now had a bit more power than we had had as teachers in the early 1960s suggested that it was possible to find support for me to spend time back in New York and help people who were creating new secondary schools from scratch within the New York City system. Mark is one of them and is now the principal of the new High School for the Physical City.

I had to invent a role for myself and to think through, once again but in different social and historical circumstances, how to educate children who have been failed by their schools. Over the years my fundamental conviction that all children can learn has been strengthened by the results I have seen, both in my work and in the work of other teachers. Balancing a return to New York with writing, while still working with children at my home, has not been easy but, just as I did as a child, I want it all. At this stage of my development as an educator I believe that it is possible to play many roles simultaneously and be effective in all of them.

"Playing roles" in the development of good education is one instance of the central theater metaphor that is at the root of much of my thinking on education. If schooling can be thought of as a performance, a drama and a comedy and a historical pageant all at once, then the creation of new schools, new performances, requires a redefinition of the traditional educational roles. We have to figure out new ways to support innovation that acknowledges that, no matter how well thought out, well researched, or well funded a plan is, the test of its effectiveness is within a community and with specific

students who have their own ideas about their lives. My experience has led to the conviction that even the most carefully designed and innovative schools, if they are not self-critical and built for self-modification, will fail.

There is a theatrical role that has recently emerged as useful for the success of performances, a role that crosses old boundaries and creates new responsibilities and relationships among all the people involved in a production. This role is that of the dramaturge. A dramaturge assists in any way possible or useful and works with all of the parties involved in the development of a performance. Ideally, she or he works with everyone from the producers, writers, directors, and actors to the set designers, lighting technicians, costumers, and stagehands to enhance their information and knowledge and provide critical feedback about the current state of the production. The goal is not to judge or evaluate the performance but to help things succeed. I am comfortable doing that kind of thing in education, especially with new schools and with new educational ideas. However, in order to play the role of dramaturge you need an open-minded cast, a support infrastructure, and a desire for success on the part of everyone involved, from the district office to the community, the teachers, and (most of all) the students. Making education work is a collaborative enterprise, in which there has to be a shared interest in the success of all the children rather than a sorting system based on adversarial relationships.

I thought it might be possible, in the context of building new public schools in New York and transforming schools elsewhere across the country, to craft a role for myself as an educational dramaturge. That meant being a critic and a resource in the service of improving a school; a researcher at the service of the teachers; a friend and counselor; a provocateur who scares up new and unusual educational ideas; a listener and friendly observer who helps develop resources for the school, focuses on danger points, praises strengths, notes progress and process, and at times teaches as well. That last was essential—being in direct contact with the children and never forgetting that we are there for them.

To my surprise, there were people who felt this idea was worth investing in. So I began another adventure in New York, which is still continuing. My first teaching experience in one of the schools plunged me into the cold deep waters that I love. It must have been

ten-thirty in the morning when I was directed into a class to teach, to show my stuff. I knew that I would be observed by the teachers and administrators and that unless I could hold my own with the kids—could be interesting to them and not be intimidated or demoralized by their resistance to anything I might offer—respect for my work as an educator would simply not develop at the school. People who spend every day in the classroom have a healthy suspicion of all experts who try to tell them how to do their jobs but who could not survive a month in the classroom doing what they preach.

As I walked into the room one of the students jumped up and called me almost every name imaginable about being white and an oppressor and told me to get the hell out of his classroom. I had heard such words before and knew they had nothing to do with me; he didn't know a thing about me. I figured he might be a leader, so it would be good to win him over. He looked at the other students while he was carrying on, so I guessed that his confrontation was more theatrical than a matter of out-of-control rage. Admittedly, this was a judgment that I could make only from experience and that involved risks. So I said, loudly at first but then bringing my voice down so that everyone would have to listen:

"What if I were here to deliver a check for a million dollars, like in one of those shows on television? What if you were the one it was for, and you treated me the way you just have? What would you do?"

I waited and after a few seconds he responded, "I wouldn't talk to you. I'd just get out of here."

I said I wasn't going to leave and didn't have a check for a million dollars either. But, I pointed out, he didn't know what gifts I was bringing and it might make sense for him to give me a chance before calling me all kinds of white people. I told him he might be right, but at least he ought to be sure he wasn't making a mistake that might hurt him.

Rather than wait for him to respond and (consequently lose dignity by being forced to back down in front of the class), I reached into my pocket and pulled out the first object I found. It was a barnacle I had taken off the tail of a dead whale that had washed ashore about five miles from Point Arena.

I always stuff my pockets when I go to visit other people's classrooms. That day I had, in addition to the barnacle, a miniature deck of cards, some little plastic action figures, about ten of my favorite

poems that I had had made into a tiny booklet, and some wire puzzles. You never know when you'll need an object or a poem to change the focus of attention, illustrate an idea or story, or otherwise provoke learning in some way.

Instead of the check for a million dollars I showed the class the barnacle and asked the students what they thought it might be. Then I handed it to the student who had challenged me and asked him to pass it around the classroom. I also mentioned that it was valuable to me and hoped he would keep an eye out to see that I got it back at the end of class. This was simply a way to get him to be with me and part of the process and get him out of the problem that he had created for himself.

Everyone welcomed the release of tension. As the barnacle was passed around, the students speculated on what it might be and where it could have come from. They figured out that it was a shell, and they had heard that I come from California so they guessed I found it on the beach. I said yes and no, that I had found it on a dead creature that had washed up on shore. One of the young women in the class shouted out that maybe it came from a whale, and everyone laughed. I said she was right, and we took off on a discussion of whales. We had set off from New York and traveled beyond racism and anger into the curious and wonderful things the world has to teach when the students' minds reach out beyond their wounds and their rage. That is the very source of hope—that we can create places where young people can dare to dream without being brought down by the realities of their terrible experiences in schools and by an adult world that dares them to succeed rather than welcoming their energy, love, and contributions.

The last question the class asked me, after inviting me to return, was, "How do whales make love?" I didn't know, and suggested that from both scientific and poetic perspectives we might all benefit from the answer. Our parting arrangement was that we share our information about the love life of whales during our next meeting. The original question may have been facetious, but, as in all teaching, it's what you make of the question, not its specifics or its original intent, that leads to the learning.

I did return to that school, and still visit as an occasional dramaturge, helping with curriculum development, sitting in on project planning meetings, helping in problem-solving sessions, and when-

ever possible working directly with students. I also work with other new schools in New York as well as with schools throughout the nation. The schools are not all cut to the same model. Some are academically oriented; others are centered around the arts or based in community partnerships.

In Brooklyn, for example, the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice involves an N.Y.C. Board of Education collaboration with El Puente, a Brooklyn-based, predominantly Puerto Rican community organization. El Puente is based in an old church building that serves as a community arts, economic development, youth leadership, health, and recreation center. The high school shares space with the health and arts programs, so people of all ages are constantly present at the school.

And some of the high school activities merge seamlessly with community-based activities. For example, there is a toxic dump in the neighborhood of the school, and struggles to clean it up and to document and help people poisoned by the toxins are part of the work of El Puente. The school's environmental education and youth leadership programs are, naturally, part of the effort. What is even more inspiring, El Puente is the only human rights–based high school in the United States, and as such provides a bold model for the reshaping of the curriculum to encompass abiding worldwide issues as well as local ones. Through human rights the school consciously addresses the discipline of hope, which is at the center of teaching.

These are not easy times in which to keep hope alive in poor or even middle-class communities. The most common question I am asked these days is whether the schools are worse now than they were when I began teaching. My answer is no; they are just about as bad. But now there are more local efforts to provide decent schools based on the notion that all children can learn than I have ever seen before. Unfortunately, the world beyond the school is much harsher toward children, much more cynical about the future, and much more indifferent to those children who do not have privilege, support, or special gifts that will enable them to succeed. The ordinary child, my child, your child, our children have a much harder time of it than I have ever seen before, and their needs are not being met by most schools.

And yet I have hope—hope that we will look intelligently at what *is* working, especially for poor children, and learn from those special places how to shape learning for children in the spirit of hope. I hope

that we as adults will then make it our business to transform society into the place of hope that we have prepared them for.

A common characteristic of all these schools and educational programs, which I call schools and classrooms of hope, is that staff, parents, and community are in common accord that every child can learn. They all see their role as making the doable possible, and this is reflected in how their students come to believe in themselves as learners. This is in contrast with the majority of schools for the poor, where the staff is demoralized and projects the belief that only a small number of the children can learn. In such schools the community and parents are often considered the enemies; this turns the school into a sad, isolated place that perpetuates failure.

Schools of hope are places where children are honored and well served. They have a number of common characteristics, no matter where they are to be found across the country. They are safe and welcome places, comfortable environments that have a homey feel. They are places where students can work hard without being harassed, but also places where the joy of learning is expressed in the work of the children and in their sense of being part of a convivial learning community. They are places where the teachers and staff are delighted to work and are free to innovate while at the same time they are willing to take responsibility for their students' achievement. If you talk to children in schools like these, they express a pride of place and sense of ownership that are also manifest in how the rest of the community regards the school. Parents feel welcome and often have a role in school governance. Community volunteers are abundant. Hope, projected primarily through the children's learning, is also manifest in how the physical environment of the school is treated with respect.

We do have many schools of hope across the country, and many teachers who try to build classrooms of hope within more hostile and indifferent schools. It is essential to seek out these places, to support them, and to learn from them. Simply acknowledging that there are places where public education works is not a formula for school change. Besides, particular formulas do not work anyway. You have to know the community you serve, know what you want to teach or need to teach. You have to understand the times in which you work and your responsibilities as a citizen to fight for your children. Most of all, you have to love to be there with them, have to be delighted in

their presence and feel the awe at their growth that any gardener does in experiencing the unfolding of a beautiful flower or the emergence of a delicious fruit or vegetable. It takes hard, careful, loving work to nurture hope and bring learning into the school—but what a birthing, what a pleasure, what fun despite all the struggles. And because teaching is so full of love, so hope-centered, and so difficult, it is also one of the most painful vocations. Despite the best teaching and the most passionate learning, this society has a way of wasting young talent. To teach well and care about the children has a double edge that keeps one militant as well as romantic, that tempers what you know children can do with worry about what might happen to them after school, on the streets, in the job market, and in their own personal lives.

About four years ago Rick Fine, a student leader at Other Ways and an African American student who walked across all boundaries and commanded respect from all of us, came to visit Judy and me in Point Arena. He arrived with his wife, their baby, several tapes, and a long manuscript. Rick had a story to tell us. He had just escaped from crack, and the voyage was partly due to Other Ways. That's what he wanted us to know: that we provided the kind of strength he could call upon when he had hit bottom and almost forgotten who he was.

The first thing he had to tell us was what the descent was like. Rick had become a computer programmer and was just about to purchase his own home and get married when he encountered crack. It wasn't the crack itself, he explained, but the pain and struggle it relieved, that first took him in. The struggle to get to where he was, to deal with the constant pressure of being considered a "Black" programmer rather than simply a programmer, of always feeling on trial and knowing that even if he succeeded he wasn't respected by his co-workers, made him come home from work every day on edge, feeling that he was where he aspired to be and nowhere at the same time.

Not everyone in Rick's situation descends into despair or imagines that she or he can take a little relief from crack and survive it intact. What is essential to understand, and what Rick helped me understand, was that he only wanted a little space away from the pressure, and instead found himself in the belly of a beast.

Rick escaped crack through music, writing, and meditation, but

first he had to leave his community. He explained that he knew too much about the wholesale and retail aspects of the crack trade to be physically safe if he straightened out: as those in the trade saw it, there was always the possibility that he might turn that information over to the police. So when he decided to kick the habit, he moved to another community and used the skills he had acquired from us and in college to get a job and settle into a simple ordinary life. For him, as the Shaker hymn says, " 'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free."

Rick felt that at Other Ways we had helped him learn how to discipline himself to write on a regular basis in his own voice, to think about the decisions he made and the decisions he had to face, and to use his music as a medium for meditation. It seemed to me that he had learned a little piece of each of those things from different members of the staff. He also knew that our doors were always open to him and that we would not reject him if he got into trouble or tried to hurt himself.

Rick's story about overcoming crack was tempered by other tales he told of successful former students losing jobs, family, and homes to the epidemic. Some of them had died young. I was struck once again by how close to despair and the streets people are when there is no fundamental community coherence, and by how teaching cannot be the only thing. We also have to be advocates for adult decency if we are to truly serve our students.

The vulnerability of Rick's friends is centered around a rage and depression that I believe can only be cured by living in a world without racism. I know it is unfashionable to blame the behavior of African American people on the racism of whites, but my experience is that racism in both personal and institutional forms frames the lives of many of my current and former students. In California, if they look Latino they have to prove that they are not in the country illegally; if they are African American they have to prove that they are not violent. It is always a matter of proving yourself to white people. Even in the college classes I teach, the gap between the students of color and the white students is a problem I have to deal with before I can get us to function as a respectful learning community.

Rick isn't the only Other Ways student I've run into recently. About a year ago, Chris and Julie, now happily married, drove up in

their camper. On the top were a kayak, suitcases, and what looked like a picnic table and folding chairs. Julie had been a member of the guerrilla theater troupe and was now a member of Actors Equity. Chris was a nationally ranked nineball player who was on the Professional Pool and Billiard Players Association tour. They traveled together, Julie performing in professional theater productions and Chris playing tournaments. Chris used to bring his pool cue to school every day and take off around eleven in the morning. He convinced me that two and a half hours a day was all he wanted to spend at Other Ways, since his real learning came from the old pros who practiced in the pool halls in the late mornings before the customers came in. Chris developed a personalized vocational education program for himself, and so far it has paid off in his adult life.

I've also run into a number of former students from New York, Berkeley, and Point Arena. Some are doctors and scientists, some political activists, and others lawyers. Some run small businesses and a few work for large corporations. One is an organic farmer. There are a number of actors and musicians, some artists, a few computer scientists. Peter is an independent TV producer. Agnieszka is an opera singer, Jena a painter, Sean a guitar maker, Phil a professional master of theater rigging, Laurie a community organizer, Chiori a journalist. Justin is headed for a career in professional baseball. Many of the young people I have taught are now teachers themselves. And just last summer a young woman came up to me after I gave a speech at a teacher-education college in Tacoma. She told me how excited she was about becoming a teacher, how she was inspired to teach by her own high school English teacher, who gave her a copy of *36 Children* as a graduation present. That caring teacher was Rachael, one of the thirty-six children herself. The young woman concluded by saying that she considered me her educational grandfather. I prefer to think of myself as her child, a new learner who looks to the young as much as to the tradition to engage in the continual renewal of educational ideas and practice.

The hundreds of young people I have taught do dozens of different things, and it is a delight to see many of them embodying the central driving ideas of my life's work as an educator: that everyone can learn; that you can become the person you want to be and do work that you love; that whatever you do with your life, you can also do things for others; and that being thoughtful and possibly

controversial and unpopular can be morally more sensible than being passive and conforming.

There are many things I hope to do with children over the next fifteen or twenty years. I still don't know how children learn to read, even though I can teach them to do it, so I hope to learn more about the actual process. I would like to teach calculus to six-year-olds and nonlinear differential equations to eight-year-olds; introduce particle physics and complexity theory into the elementary school curriculum; create and test science and math programs, beginning in kindergarten, that are based on how contemporary scientists work and think —that is, I want to incorporate technology, mathematics, genetics, and the interdisciplinary sciences such as biochemistry and physical biology into children's ways of thinking from the beginning of their formal schooling.

I would also like to create a watershed curriculum based on a study of the history, nature, and future of the places students live in and the dreams they can develop about convivial communities; set up hundreds of poetry and writing groups of the sort I've been doing for years and continue to do; direct a production of *The Tempest* with five young theater troupes, each working on one act, each act set in a different time and place but with color-coded costumes, and each group working independently of the others and then coming together to perform the entire play; and create an extracurricular high school arts and math program that takes up as much time and excites as much passion and commitment as athletics and in which students regularly travel to other schools to participate in the arts.

Those are just a beginning. I would like to work with other teachers to develop a pervasively diverse and excellent literature curriculum that integrates reading, writing, thinking, and discussion and connects them not to critical theory, but to everyday life, personal identity, culture, and community; to set up a school and teacher-education program centered on social justice, the arts, literature, and modern science and mathematics.

Finally, and most centrally, I would like to understand more about how to deal with youth rage and violence and try to use this understanding to make life more nurturing for my students. I would like to create a diverse, compassionate, nonracial community of learners where students honor themselves, respect each other, love what they are learning, are passionate about justice, and prepare

themselves for compassionate, connected adult lives. To paraphrase Neruda, I wouldn't mind being a butterfly or an apple—or, even better, a gadfly or a mango.

With these, as with all of the challenges of teaching and learning, I'm looking forward to beginning again. There's no end to the delights and joys of teaching, no limit to the challenges we will continue to face in order to serve children well, and no limit to the creativity and love adults can and should bring to helping children grow through teaching, which is at its heart the discipline of hope.