

Into-Me-You-See

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THESIS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
I. INTRODUCTION	1
A. The Phenomena: Encounters in the Hallway	1
B. How I Came to Value Feeling as Much as Thinking	6
II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	12
III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	16
A. Theater: Of the People for the People	16
B. Psychology: From Domination to Interdependence	18
C. Philosophy: The Phenomenological Encounter	20
D. Curriculum Studies: Why This Matters in a Classroom	21
IV. METHODOLOGY	25
A. Why Write a Novel	26
B. The Speculative Personal Essay	34
C. Phenomenology	40
D. Fictionalized Autobiography	45
E. Contribution to the Field	48
V. INTRODUCTION TO SPITTING IMAGE	52
VI. SPITTING IMAGE	53
VII. ON INTIMACY IN THE CLASSROOM	190
A. Intimacy	190
B. Being There	191
C. Teachers Can Get Students to Be There	194

D. My Class	195
E. Meditation and Mindfulness are Intimate Practices	196
F. Schools Is Not the Classroom	198
G. Critics	200
H. Maybe Intimacy Then Really Is the Right Word	203
I. We Experience Intimacy in the Body	204
J. The Classroom Can Be Where Encounters Happen	207
K. Meta-cognition	209
L. How We Achieve this Integration in the Classroom or Ways and Means in which I Achieve the Intimacy of the I-You Relation in the Classroom	210
1. Meditation, non-verbal, and reflective activities	210
2. Theater	211
3. Storytelling	212
M. Conclusion	213
CITED LITERATURE	216
VITA	229

SUMMARY

What is the lived experience of teachers and students in school? Why is public discourse so disconnected from that lived experience?

I explore these questions through fictionalized characterization derived from lived experience in high school with special focus on care or intimacy that exists in relationships among teachers and students. Those relationships cannot be understood by quantified research alone; it requires a range of qualitative approaches drawn from narrative inquiry, the speculative essay, phenomenological hermeneutics, and fictionalized autobiography among others. I argue that such research orientations must be parlayed, adapted, integrated, and extrapolated to describe, interpret, and characterize moment-to-moment encounters that make up the school day. After depicting the intellectual conversation that has derived from literature, I draw a theoretical framework that constitutes my evolving personal vision from literature and experience in theater, psychology, philosophy, and curriculum studies.

The above serves as a basis for the bulk of the dissertation, a novel, *Spitting Image*, about one day in the life of a teacher. The dramatic structure re-imagines and depicts moments a fictionalized day by a fictionalized version of myself. Rather than depicting one particular day, the novel imaginatively reconstructs composites of experience, while a teacher strives to connect with and expand the intellect and feelings of high school students in a milieu infused with incessant calls for standardization, test results, and accountability quantifications. The main protagonist searches for authenticity and meaning in a system that increasingly is immune to such values.

The essay that follows the novel clarifies pedagogy and curriculum imbued with intimacy, an implicit idea in the novel. It is not an attempt to summarize the novel's main points, because the literary orientation employed here holds that readers will derive their own interpretations. In this sense, the dissertation, especially the novel and essay, are offered as heuristic devices for teachers, educational leaders, policy makers, and the general

SUMMARY (continued)

public to vicariously experience and realize more fully nuanced effects and affects of a teacher. Thus, one teacher's perspective is offered to encourage reflection on myriad meanings and exigencies of teaching life.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Phenomena: Encounters in the Hallway

I'm hungry on my way to American Studies. The thing to do is have a mini bagel from room 372. Administrator offices are perfect for a secret snack -- if I walk in on one side and leave out the other it will be like I was never there. It's when I start thinking about class that I start thinking about all those essays I haven't graded. Each day, they make the commute back home with me; each day, they stay in the bag. About when I round the final bend towards my classroom, I start thinking about how I'm never as prepared as I should be. Or rather, I hear my own reprimanding voice, "Avi. Again? Come-on!"

I try to counter this thinking with something a Bill Ayers's essay says: stop waiting for the day when your life conditions are perfect and get down to work. Then I think several thoughts at once. I think I will get down to it as soon as I eat this mini-bagel. I think about whether Bill Ayers' life is as full of adventure and abandon as it seems. I also think about the seven or so interactions -- mostly hellos and smiles -- while I've been thinking these thoughts. But mostly I'm considering the question every semi-unprepared, English teacher asks himself or herself as they walk towards their classroom.

Silent Reading or Free Write?

Maybe we should try acting out Gatsby. There's so much dialogue, it wouldn't be a bad idea. I scoot by my old classroom, room 374, thankful that I don't teach there anymore. It is small and has no windows.

I walk on slightly anxious; it would be nice to take a nap.

I am now caught between two different consciousnesses. I am hyper aware of looking at students and being looked at by them. It is pleasing to greet the students that I know and like. They smile or wave hello and we move on hurled inexorably

forward by the inevitability of the next thing. In that way, school is like an airport, with a dozen subject terminals, and hundreds of classroom gates. It's a portal, a sorting machine, a weigh station, a cheese shredder, an onion with endless, infinite folds. The hundreds of students I don't know fill me with wonder. I want to sing: "Look at all the people. Where do they all belong?" I realize again and again how addicted I am to the possibility of attention. The possibility of negative attention, however, fills me with dread. I am always managing these two polarities: how much to come out of my skin, how much to stay folded in it.

I'm in my classroom now. I have pictures of my family and newspaper clippings on the door. Students walk in. This group can be utterly boring or completely engaging: there seems to be no middle ground. When they bore me, and me them, I feel like we are one massive blob sticking to the floor. When I engage them, or vice-versa, I see us as a collection of fascinating individuals with infinite connections.

Campbell, a short blond-haired girl, comes in sulking. It's tough because she's been through hell in her life but what makes her moody is not the difficult, what I consider real pain but the everyday inconveniences – stuff that I consider meaningless. I'm critical of her but try to remember the two are related.

I announce we're going to do scenes. Some students cheer but Campbell rolls her eyes. She's wearing her personal uniform: white v-neck shirt, jeans, and Uggs. "I'm in a really bad mood, Mr. Lessing. I don't want to do this." She punctuates her point by shifting all of her weight to her other leg, raising her eyebrows, bringing her lips tightly together, and popping them as she twirls her hair. I've tried lots of strategies when Campbell gives me a look that seems to say, *I am suffering and you are the reason for it*. I've tried consoling. I've tried exaggerating her problems. I've tried the *there's-actually-a-study-in-the-New-York-Times-that-shows-complaining-only-hurts-the-complainer* talk. Nothing has worked.

Until today. This time when she comes up to protest, I say, “Why don’t you go lie down under my desk?” “Really?” she says. “Sure. Looks like it’s been a hard day.” “Thanks,” she says, and then joins her group to act out their scene. I watch this and feel slightly elated. My mind is no longer floating above my body. I’m not plotting my next snack, bathroom, or sports-section break, nor am I lamenting that I haven’t done more in life. I’m in it now and mostly because Campbell was whiny. It is two minutes into an hour and forty minute class.

My insights from writing and sharing that initial hallway piece (that would become the inspiration for the novel within this dissertation, *Spitting Image*) were as follows: (i.) learning can happen anywhere at anytime, (ii.) learning is always personal (iii.), and the more I know myself and my students, the better teacher I will become. Our ability as educators to practice what Jackson, Boostrom, and Hanson (1993) in *the Moral Life of Schools* called expressive awareness in order to understand the small (in scale) but powerful encounters we have with students is what enlarges or diminishes our capacity to have meaningful and dynamic experiences.

This awareness cannot simply be prescribed. It will differ depending on the genetic coding, disposition, life experiences, and circumstances of each teacher. While there is certainly a place for prescriptive argumentation in education, the current trend of every newspaper article, journal, and editorial to offer tutorials on what needs fixing in the public education crisis misses the point. Without bothering to see the significant worth of the richness of what’s already happening in the classroom (without the incessant need to fix, judge, alter, etc...), I may lose the most powerful part of teaching and learning to begin with, not the result, but the encounter itself.

If any institution needed rescuing from the poles of didactic conversation on the one hand and complete stereotype on the other, it’s school. The way I hear schools get talked

about often feels bankrupt of meaning. Rare too are the representations in art, theater, film, and the news that make me remember and reflect upon the intense richness of my work.

Teaching for me is often an act of hope in the face of substantial obstacles that have the potential to make me feel hopeless. In times of personal darkness (the loss of a grandparent, for instance) or in the midst of a national human tragedy (9/11), there is nowhere I'd rather be than the classroom. Mostly that's because I trust youth more than adults. And I am lucky enough to be assigned to an organized group dedicated to meaning making, self-improvement, and communal support without ever having to arrange for them to show up. I'm not naïve (I am idealistic); students don't make the choice to come. But what if you could arrange your class so that if it were option, they might consider coming? And that by attending, we would be collectively choosing relationship and engagement over isolation and dullness. We could sustain a subversive collective within a regimented system. As Herb Kohl (2006) said at the Theater of the Oppressed Conference, "The good thing about resistance is you know where you stand." The trend towards dehumanization in schools oddly clarifies and affirms the need for more human models (Freire, 2000).

Teaching is not a business. It's an enterprise concerned with care. As a teacher, it's been my experience that schools have become more and more concerned with results and efficiency and less and less focused on our capacity to be creative, curious, and compassionate citizen. The model of *school as business* (or any model that prizes growth and efficiency i.e. a factory) may churn out higher standardized test scores, but may also result in a less thoughtful, less creative, less civic minded population. *Adequate Yearly Progress* sends the message to schools, administrators, teachers, and kids that what matters is the results not the process.

I argue that school is not just where we learn, it's where we live, grow, and come to understand how to navigate within multiple worlds: academic, yes, but also the more pressing social and emotional aspects of being an adolescent. In fact, the two are directly related. As

Daniel Goleman (2006) writes in *Social Intelligence*, “The more apathy or angst we feel, the worse we do, whether on a term paper or an office memo” (p. 270). And yet, as teachers, due partly to the amount testing has come to dominate our curricular lives, there seems less and less incentive to teach and facilitate classroom experiences that will promote student reflection about the kind of person they are, let alone the kind of world they want to live in.

Deborah Meier’s (2002-2003) solution has been to demystify the unnecessary hidden goals and bureaucracy of education by making it more transparent. As a principal and an essayist her call has been for students to have more real, authentic experiences in and out of school. This means that the students completed service-learning projects and participated in internships. Also, it dictated the way she acted with students. She purposefully kept her door open during contentious meetings with state legislators so that students could listen in. They saw that what was happening there was important, had stakes, and needed to be fought for. She wanted her students to grow not just academically but in actual social situations that have consequences in the world. Meier prizes direct and immediate contact with students in authentic, real-life situations.

Learning for Meier is not just understanding academic content, but discerning social interactions, interpreting communication, seeing power dynamics. At a Progressive Educator conference, Meier (2002-2003) made an interesting distinction between modern life and a hundred years ago. Then, most young people were apprenticed into professions that exposed them to multiple adult mentors. Now, students may have no one; they are raising each other. Which means they perpetually reinforce for each other that school is a fiction, a game to get through, in order to get to the real business of life: getting a job, making money, etc...

We have come to normalize school as preparation for something *coming up* (only to find that that the *next thing* is preparation for the *thing after that*) instead of something that has worth in itself. We lose sight of what actually happens moment-to-moment in a school day. And when that happens, we forget what’s most important.

The actual day in the life of a teacher is so filled (one could also say rushed, crazed) that discerning moments of shared connection, attunement, and intimacy can be difficult to remember, piece out, and make sense of. So can stretches of preoccupation, listlessness, and conflict. And yet, more than any test-score, school improvement plan, or even curriculum we design, the school day unfolds this way, in the thousands of *encounters* and missed encounters between teachers and students. This is how we actually determine if the day was good or bad, if we taught well or poorly, if we learned a lot or nothing.

B. How I Came to Value Feeling as Much as Thinking

My own emphasis on personal relationships and what happens within them stems from several formative experiences I had at home and when I began teaching. There's been plenty of material to draw upon. For the last seven years, I have taught a senior English elective at Birchwood High School¹, outside of Chicago. *Experiments in Reading Literature and the World* is the title for the course catalogue but all the students called it *Avi's World* or *Feelings*. The class invites both teacher and student to bring more of their real life into the curriculum. This goes beyond superficial thematic to which the *students can relate to*. Rather, their personal stories, thoughts, ideas, and interactions with each other and the teacher are at the center of the curriculum. For seniors, I have found this particularly important, because they have one foot out the door; they are in need of understanding what has happened to them so they may develop a vision for how to live in what is coming.

The focus of relationship building and quasi-philosophical discourse I got from my parents. My father is a philosopher and my mother a therapist – dinner conversations, to put it mildly, were not light fare at the Lessing house.

Me: My toe hurts

Mom: How does that make you feel?

¹ Names of places are changed. People in the narrative are either fictionalized or composites.

Dad: What is a toe?

In my 20's I was an aspiring everything: improv actor, teacher, boyfriend, etc... who wanted to write stories like Philip Roth. I was the one at parties who practiced a kind of rehearsed self-deprecating spontaneity to make people laugh, the one that keeps telling you he's Jewish² even though he never goes to temple. That's because I've never felt being Jewish had to do with the religion. I know it's a cliché, the cultural Jewish guy, who watches *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Woody Allen films, and vaguely looks like Ira Glass. But I'm hoping that by identifying the stereotype, or the possible perceptions that I might attract, that I can transcend it, enlarge others sense of who I am.

As for my interior life, there's always a clanging voice in my head that keeps ringing: *What's happening to me now? How am I am being perceived now? This is my life? Now?* Perhaps that's what I carry from my father: that I am alive at all is a miracle (he's a Holocaust survivor); the fact of existence in itself seems astonishing. Life, I know all too well, is both fleeting and extraordinary. After I completed my college thesis about death, which was partly a narrative about the death of two college friends, my advisor gave me my first moleskin journal with this Hippocrates quote: "Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting, experience treacherous, judgment difficult." That pretty much described my dad's childhood, and put into words what he had already taught me by the example of his life.

My father grew up in Delft, Holland. When the Nazis came, my grandmother had twelve hours of advanced warning to make a decision – go into work camps (that turned out to be death camps) or to go into hiding. She made the right choice; she was lucky, my dad says. They left the house carrying almost no belongings, and she said to my father, who was six at the time, *if you tell anyone you're Jewish they'll kill you*. His family was the only one of 100 Jewish families in Delft to survive intact; two-thirds of all Dutch Jews were murdered. Years after they escaped from the Nazis and immigrated to Massachusetts, a woman said to my father and my uncle on their way home from school, "You're the little Jewish boys who live

² you see . . . did it again.

down the street right?” “Me?” my father said. “No. I am not Jewish.” He and his brother sprinted the last three blocks home.

In the 60’s, he marched in Selma, Alabama with some of his students from Northwestern. He’s never been able to stand others suffering because of their religion or race, especially children. But it was only after his first marriage ended, and later when he met my mom and went into therapy, that he realized that he thought of his own experiences in hiding as an important story to tell. He changed his name from Arthur to Abba, taught a Holocaust class, and gave my brother the name Uri, and me the name Avram (Avi is short). By giving us recognizably Hebrew names, he was saying *I’m not hiding anymore*.

My dad was traumatized by the war, though he’d never put it that way. My mom would and there’s a body of research that suggests some of that trauma gets passed on to the next generation. That feels true for me. I can tell tons of funny stories about my dad’s legacy and how it impacts me. We both share the same tendency to push and subvert boundaries. We enjoy being outrageous. As teachers, we see our job as partly to provoke, to make people uncomfortable. But I’ve also inherited, much to my mother’s dismay, a tendency to be afraid, often irrationally so, a topic which is much harder to talk about.

I had none of these insights about myself until after my junior year in high school (which is why I like teaching seniors). Kids growing up in Highland Park (a wealthy suburb of Chicago) had their bar mitzvahs at the Drake Hotel and the Ritz Carlton. Until then I mostly wished my parents were lawyers, which would transform them into my friends’ parents who had season tickets to the Bulls games and drove BMW’s. As it turned out, my parents hated sports, were disgusted by Highland Park residents’ love of financial wealth, and certainly did not support me in efforts to fit in and be popular.

That all changed on a teen trip to Israel, when my youth group visited Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Museum, in Israel. I wandered off from the group and found myself in the Children’ Hall where 12 hours a day someone reads the names of the 1.5 million Jewish children slaughtered in the camps. That day, more than my bar mitzvah, catapulted me into

manhood. I lost my blinders and what I saw made me more scared and more human. Extermination was not just an abstraction but also a reality. The Nazis tried to turn my family into things and then into nothings. It was not the evil plan of one man, as I had thought, but the plot of thousands of people, witnessed by thousands more, and tolerated by millions. “That’s the way genocide works,” my dad used to tell me. “And don’t listen to this shit Jews say about never again. It’s happening right now, in Darfur, happened in Rwanda, Albania. The list goes on.” This orientation particularly makes me sensitive to the way human beings in power (teachers) treat other human beings without it (students).

That crushing, overwhelming experience at Yad Vashem was a catalyst for me. After that, a lot of things snowballed together: when I got home, I hung out with people outside my friend group; I started acting. My new friends who could talk about what they thought and felt. My dad took me to a bookstore and I started reading Roth and Dostoevsky. A year later, I went into therapy and told the therapist how terrified I was to die. I found saying that aloud didn’t kill me or make me feel stupid, but actually made me feel temporarily free. For that hour, I could say things and in saying them their weight was lessened. Two year after that I discovered meditation, which gave me a powerful tool that could expand my awareness.

More than anything, though, what the encounter at Yad Vashem did was heighten the meaning of my own life, how precious, raw and vulnerable I was, and how important it became not to hide those things. It was no coincidence that three days after the trip to Yad Vashem, on a hike from the Sea of Galilee to the Red Sea, I fell in love for the first time. I confronted what scared me most and I felt myself as a whole person afterwards. I knew parts of myself I hadn’t known before. I had more of a capacity for understanding others more fully. And I truly valued what was heart rendering, intimate, and true, even if it was scary, overwhelming, and turned my world upside down.

Half a lifetime later, as a teacher and a researcher I still embrace, rather than turn away from, what’s hard or uncomfortable. I’m still trying to find and create emotional

catalysts for students. What we get back in those meaningful encounters can often be the full force of our lives. The teacher-student and student-student relationship is formed, in part, by the willingness of each to be vulnerable in their shared encounters. This is not only the stuff of revealing oneself through the stories we share; though, that is undoubtedly part of it, but also how we talk to one another, how we sit with one another. It includes the amount of uncertainty, silence, and emotion – all taboo in education – I risk bringing into my classroom.

As Bill Schubert (2009a) puts it, curriculum should come down to the kinds of questions we ask and live into: “what is worth knowing, experiencing, doing, needing, being, becoming, sharing, overcoming, contributing, sharing?” (p. 199). What students get out of school is not just what they know they can prove they have learned, but also what they wonder about, realize, discover, and are inspired by. Or similarly, by what they disdain, push against, and plot around. So what am I advocating for? A romper room where students sit on beanbags and tell the teacher what they want to learn?

No. I tried that with mixed results.

But it does mean looking at the kind of autonomy I give students, and also the kind of freedom I allow myself. Do I see them *and* allow myself do be seen? Do I ask them to share stories *as I* share my own?

Given the current educational climate, there’s little danger that schools become places that emphasize personal, emotional, process-oriented learning in order to celebrate the wonder and sacredness of life. There is a real possibility that they become mechanized, bureaucratic places that value control, tasks, and power over all else. The debate over whether to focus on skills or character in our teaching is a false dichotomy. Intellect and emotion are not separate (Davidson, 2012).

Teaching for me goes beyond what students learn or retain. It’s what they live. What they think about, feel, question, and wonder during the time of the class or in its aftermath. Curriculum is not outside of us; we embody it every day, every moment with our students.

When I model for students techniques that heighten intimacy and connection they often feel less and less restricted in the way they express themselves back to me, and towards each other. As teachers, instead of throwing our hands in despair or idling in impossible idealizations, I want to re-imagine and re-create the everyday fiascos and miracles that already exist in my too brief encounters with my students. So that I appreciate what I have. Instead of bemoaning what I don't.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

An important shift occurred in the Curriculum Studies when theorists became less interested in design and more concerned with people. Writers and thinkers like Dwayne Huebner (1999), James Macdonald (1995), Ted Aoki (2005), and Maxine Greene (1973) led the ensuing reconceptualization that shifted the focus from designing lesson plans towards the commonplaces (Schwab, 1969) of students, teachers, subject matter, and milieu (p. 1). While Schwab was calling for a more grounded, immediate kind of educating that impacted students directly, others were branching out towards understanding the ways imagination, classroom aesthetic, spirituality, and philosophy impact our understanding of education. No longer was the field of curriculum simply about design that one could transmit through instruction. The revolution brought curriculum into a living, breathing, fluid undertaking that changed the way we think about teaching and learning. The question what should we teach expanded to *how?* In *what way?* For *whom?* *Who* are the students? And *who* is the teacher before them? These curricular theorists were questioning the underpinnings of school altogether. They were talking about race, class, and sexual orientation in ways that had been muted.

Their collective work began to clarify the intimate and profound nature of what it means to educate. They were illuminating that schools could and often did do harm to students. They focused less on what subject matter looked like and more on the shared capacity of human beings. They asked basic but profound questions that brought into sharp relief our basic purpose: What's worth knowing? (Schubert, 1994, p.25, 2009a), What may transpire? (Huebner, 1999, p. 75), How do we build our capacity for wonder? (Huebner, 1999, p. 7), "Why do we not act with courage?" (Pinar, 1975, p.272) "How do we make education more human? (Pinar, 1975, p. 140). Each of these theorists aimed to make us more *tentative* in the way we examined our teaching encounters. As Geertz wrote (1995), "change,

apparently, is not a parade that can be watched as it passes” (p.4). This means as qualitative researchers could not separate their observations from their own lives, from the lives of the observed (Geertz, 1983, p. 48). The focus shifted from results to living in the questions (Tillett 2011).

The best questions are often provocative, even dangerous. Mark Danner’s (2005) commencement address to English majors at University of California, at Berkeley, makes this point.

Whether you know it yet or not, you have doomed yourselves by learning how to read, learning how to question, learning how to doubt. And this is a most difficult time — the most difficult I remember — to have those skills. Once you have them, however, they are not easy to discard. Finding yourself forced to see the gulf between what you are told about the world, whether it’s your government doing the telling, or your boss, or even your family or friends, and what you yourself can’t help but understand about that world — this is not always a welcome kind of vision to have. It can be burdensome and awkward and it won’t always make you happy.

Likewise, my work draws from curriculum theory that questions, problematizes, and subverts our assumptions about education. Ivan Illich’s (1971) deschooling, Paulo Freire’s (2000) problem posing pedagogy, Maxine Greene’s (1995) and Kieran Egan’s (1992) work on imagination, and Anna Deavere Smith’s (2000) American Character project all radically re-imagine who we could be as teachers. These writers return us to the essential questions about what make us human.

The best curriculum thinkers not only challenge the status quo on a micro level but also from a larger understanding of psyche, school, state, and country. What is the purpose of school, economic wealth? Personal happiness? (A.S. Neill, 1960) What do students learn when they chose exile or when it’s chosen for them? (Ming Fang He, 2003) How is a school day structured? In what ways are schools like jails? (Foucault, 1977)

My own questions teeter back and forth from the personal to the public. What are the necessary boundaries between teachers and students? Am I the same teacher for all of my students? How am I then different depending on the race, class, gender, appearance, etc... of my students? How does my body shift in interactions between different students? How do theirs? How does that difference in relation impact learning? In larger debates around issues like the achievement gap, these questions matter. For instance, when students struggle in schools, why do we implicate them? We think, what's wrong with these black kids that they can't succeed in our school? How about asking, what's wrong with our school that black kids can't succeed in it?

Asking these questions, on a basic level, is an act of sanity. I'm exaggerating only slightly. After eleven years of teaching in varying types of schools (urban, private, and suburban-urban), there have been periods when I've tired of playing the skeptic: I too want to get on with the day, the week, the year. And yet asking questions for which there are no easy or pleasant answers is itself an act of freedom. The worst my questioning can get me is an iconoclastic reputation. In places like Syria questioning can leave you dead (Mohammad Ali Atassi [2011] recently wrote in the New York Times about his father's murder by the Syrian government for questioning it. Now 25 years later, he, too, is willingly putting his own life in peril, by *questioning* and *agitating* the government injustice like his father did.).

The second strand of literature that undergirds this dissertation is work on narrative. For me, humanizing curriculum means telling stories about dynamic encounters with students, ones that work, and ones that don't. Herb Kohl's (1969) *The Open Classroom*, Bill Ayers' (1997) *A Kind and Just Parent*, and Greg Michie's (2009) *Holler if You Can Hear Me* come to mind as examples of narratives that make a point to include disastrous, despairing moments, where all is disjointed, out of whack, at odds, along with moments of success, revelation, and connection. These educators clearly value the messy, improvisational, sometimes even harrowing encounters that defy easy clichés. They know that what is

spectacular or worth examining often happens outside of what is planned, expected, or even conceived beforehand. I like narratives that prize process over results, error along with mastery, and miscommunication next to clarity, not only to draw a more precise picture of what it means to teach, but also to suggest that the things we hide, that cause consternation, sorrow, and the feeling *I want to give up* are just as profound, important, and central to teaching and learning as any positive outcome or result.

The new theoretical frameworks that emerged in Curriculum Studies marked a titanic shift from curriculum as subject matter to curriculum that valued subjectivity. The conversation widened from *what should they learn* to *what is learning*. The influx of ideas broke down the wall of curriculum design allowing for hybrids from curriculum and other disciplines. As for my own interest in the raw, essential experience in the classroom, phenomenology best examines the role of subjectivity in the way we perceive our encounters in the here and now.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Shifts in the Curriculum field over the last 50 years invite us to see school through interdisciplinary lenses. My own particular orientation, interest, and area of study are in theater, psychology, phenomenology, and Curriculum Studies; each discipline provides a unique framework and contribution to the studying of the phenomena of human interactions. In theater, particularly in the 20th century, we see an emphasis on complex human relationships, and an appreciation of the heightened encounter. It offers both a way of viewing classroom life and techniques to dramatize it. I bring in psychological theory as background to explore inter-subjectivity, the way we make meaning in connection with others. Phenomenology is a lens for understanding experience at its most raw and pre-predictive state. Our understanding of all phenomena originates from our consciousness and should be described that way (Natanson, 1996, p. 12). The curriculum field is one of the few places where all this knowledge can be juxtaposed and linked in both a theoretical and practical way.

A. Theater: Of the People for the People

I can understand both my teaching and my dissertation as a play. This shift changes our focus from outcomes and learning to experience and relationships; from what students *take away* to *what happens*; from the future to the present.

Any given school day features a beginning, an end, and characters engaged in quotidian dramas unfolding over time. British director, Peter Brook (1996), begins his book, *The Empty Space*, with this credo: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged" (p. 3). Brook's opening salvo could easily be applied to teaching. *I can take an empty space and call it a classroom. A teacher enters a room with a*

group of students. This is all that it takes for an act of teaching to be engaged.

This juxtaposition between teaching and theater is constructive beyond the obvious observation that teaching is art and theater is educative. In both, the sheer difficulty of *being present* emerges from what appears to be a simple act of encountering. An encounter is different from an exchange. One requires presence, the sense of really being there, and the other doesn't.

Studs Terkel once lamented to Anna Deavere Smith (2001) in an interview: "We're more and more in communications and less and less into communication." Of course, he said all this before texting, Facebook, and Twitter became a part of our everyday waking life. Each of those mediums furthers a kind of self-aggrandizing, a platform to speak without need of a response. My students will sometimes say when I challenge them to listen, connect, or respond. "That's just me. I'm not gonna change." Last point about social media (at the risk of sounding like a curmudgeon): Facebook, texting and Twitter allow us *not* to have to talk to people, or defer talking until later. While some people would argue that texting is talking (and I do *love* texting), it is still not a substitute for actual presence.

Absence and presence affect little children much more than adults. Take the game of peek-a-boo: each time I appear in front of my year-old son he smiles and squeals in amazement, because each appearance is like the first time. This world of amazement and wonder gives way to a natural predictability when we're adults and only resurfaces occasionally. As the librarian at my school once said to me as we were walking into school, "Who are we really willing to *really* look at, to *really* see? Babies and someone we're about to sleep with."

What is potentially courageous and hopeful about teaching is our unique ability to be with students, but too often, in classrooms, we look away, pass out papers, take attendance, look down at our desks, and miss the opportunity of what students (and we the teachers) desperately need – to see and be seen (at the coffee shop in which I often sit, most people in line are on cell phones. No doubt I might be too if I were in their shoes). The classroom

can be one of the last places people really encounter and talk to one another. It makes us relate to one another in ways we wouldn't ordinarily do. And in ways, we might like to, if we knew how.

The simple enjoyment of encounters emerges partly from proximity: the parent/child, audience/actor, and student/teacher relationships are bound in intimacy. However, those ties are stretched at this moment, because of the pressure from the marketplace (for plays to make money, for students to achieve high scores, for parents to get their kids to keep up). There is an imminent danger that teaching and learning, which should be open, big, and wide, will become more and more confined within impermeable pre-set ideas. In other words, what we teach, how we teach, what students learn, and how they do it will become more prescribed and restricted than it already is. By thinking about teaching and learning as art and as a day in school as a play, I wish to return the project of education to its rightfully dramatic place.

B. Psychology: From Domination to Interdependence

Jessica Benjamin's (1988) book, *The Bonds of Love*, a psychological and feminist analysis of intimacy and domination, discusses how the last 100 years have brought a dramatic change in the way we think about identity and relationships. In the 20th century, Sigmund Freud laid down the foundation for how we think about identity: the child moves from dependence to independence, oneness to separation. Benjamin posits a different theory that she calls inter-subjectivity. Inter-subjectivity re-conceptualizes human beings in relation, versus in isolation. From the moment of our births, we are poised to be social beings. The mother and child engage in a dance alternating between what she calls "recognition" and "assertion." For Benjamin, this back and forth is a "paradoxical mixture of otherness and togetherness: You belong to me, yet you are not (any longer) part of me. The joy I take in your existence must include *both* my connection to you *and* your independent existence -- I recognize that you are real" (p. 15). In our current educational paradigm, we may recognize that students have real

lives, but we still see teachers as largely bodiless and lifeless, outside of school (and sometimes in it too). This is ultimately a disservice to both teachers and students. Human beings are more dynamic when they are not confined to living above the neck.

Case in point: years ago a former student saw a colleague and me at Lollapalooza (a music festival) and said in a panic, “Mr. Lessing?” I nodded. “NO FUCKING WAY!” he cried, and ran the other way as if out of a burning building. It was as if the cognitive dissonance of seeing his teacher dancing sent him into an irrevocable tailspin. Yes, it was *very* funny, but later, it troubled me. It seemed to be me a far more natural and productive relationship would include the possibility of existing and relating in manifold settings and roles. When I worked at a theater institute for a summer in Berkeley, I found that I had far more sway of the kids that slept in my wing. We woke up together, brushed our teeth together; as a result, it was much easier, while working, to be authentic and direct, and offer meaningful instruction in a way that wouldn’t have been possible if I only saw them during, say, 7th period.

Both Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Hegel wanted to understand how we perceive our own needs and alternately assert them or focus on others’ needs and give in to them. They assumed that those tensions cannot endure and will eventually lead to a slave-master dialectic, endless aggression, and the desire to be omnipotent. Benjamin too submits that domination may be our default mode, if not our destiny. In her book, she primarily discusses male domination, but we can certainly see its application in terms of teachers and students.

For Benjamin, though, there exists the ability to live into the dual tension of both asserting oneself and recognizing another’s subjectivity is the dance that results in mutuality. As a teacher and a parent, I can neither bend to all the wishes, whims, and desires of my kids, nor overly dominate them with my own authority and power. The former gives children a false sense of the world, a world without limits and consequences. The latter leaves them without a voice, an identity, a secure self.

Benjamin's (1988) theory of mutuality has other important implications for the classroom. It reaffirms the following: (i.) learning happens through relation, not in competition, (ii.) the academic and the social are intertwined, not separate, and (iii.) the teacher student relationship can be one of recognition or conversely, one of domination. Of course, subjecting teachers and students to endless tests, threats of job loss and school loss is a form of domination as well -- by the state. At my school, the impositions are minor in comparison to the schools where some of my friends teach. When a fight broke out in my former student teacher's classroom, the principal called a meeting with her, which he convened by saying, "What in your classroom management encouraged this behavior?" Later he surveyed her grade book and said she didn't have enough marks. "I want 9 more grades by the end of the week," he said. The implication was that if she didn't she'd be *written up* or worse. This anecdote is emblematic of the current batch of reform (Race to the Top, using standardized testing to evaluate teachers), trends in Education (outcome based), and catastrophic attacks to collective bargaining (Wisconsin), that further depersonalize teachers work with students in a time we desperately need closer, more intimate, relationships.

C. Philosophy: The Phenomenological Encounter

Martin Buber (1970), a German, Jewish, philosopher describes the dichotomous relations of dominance versus interdependence in more ontological terms in his book, *I and Thou*. Buber asserts there are two kinds of relations in the world, *I-You* and *I-It*. The *I-it* is a relationship that binds us to the mundane world – a world of transactions, predictability, and objects. It is a relation of objectivity and utility. The status quo is maintained at the expense of wide-openness.

The *I-thou* (or *I-you*) relation is boundariless, pre-conceptual, and outside of language. It mirrors Benjamin's *recognition*, that another person is also an *I* just like *you* are. In fact, Buber argues one cannot be an *I* unless he or she recognizes another *you*. The *I-You* relation

is therefore co-discovered in the presence of *the other* becoming a *you*. For Buber (1970) the *I-You* is an end in itself, and unfolds as a kind of ongoing reciprocity (p. 67).

Though Buber himself was not interested in applying his theory to specific social contexts, one can link his ideas to Freire's (2000) notion of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. The oppressor himself cannot be a subject (for Buber, an *I*) unless he recognizes the oppressed as another *I*. Otherwise he is dehumanized into an "it" like the oppressed. Of the *I-You* world, Buber writes: "Our students teach us, our works form us. The 'wicked' become a revelation when they are touched by the sacred world. How we are educated by children, by animals! Inscrutably involved, we live in the currents of universal reciprocity" (p. 95). For Buber, what we learn from our students is not a discrete piece of knowledge, but the gift of the relation itself.

D. Curriculum Studies: Why This Matters in a Classroom

But how can a question like, *what will transpire*, inform and generate a teacher at work with students "in the trenches³," or design a well-executed thematic unit? In fact, Huebner's theoretical question, "What will transpire?" has directly impacted my teaching in a concrete way. A few years ago, by now a veteran teacher, I remember sitting with my student teacher who had been meticulously trained to use a technique called *bell ringers* to begin class. As soon as the bell rang to begin class, the teacher was supposed to immediately give the students a quiz as a way of testing their knowledge and maximizing the time (at the end of class you were to give an *exit quiz*). This maximized efficiency. "It's called teaching from bell to bell," she said. Oh yeah I thought? I call it a demeaning, Pavlovian, measure to trick students into a false engagement through completely extrinsic devices. It artificializes the teacher student relationship, put exclusive power in the hands of the teacher, and places emphasis on testing.

³ William Schubert (2009b) has repeatedly pointed to the preponderance of war metaphors in education.

I wondered what would happen if I not only dispensed with an undeniably staged beginning, but did away with any beginning at all? What if, like Peter Brook, I stripped away the adornment of managing the classroom experience and focused on the already-alive happening in the room? On a practical level, with the students waiting for *me* to begin class, it was hard. The first thing I noticed: it had been days since I had seriously looked at my students closely, so preoccupied had I become with what *I had to do* – papers to assign, assignments to pass back, ideas to clarify and talk about. For the first time in awhile, I really saw them: Peter’s inquisitive features, the way he wore his nervousness more comfortably these days. Shenequa seemed a little shrunken into herself. Had things at home been wearing on her? Beneath her school smile was a deep sadness. There was a kind of elation just looking at them, not so different from the feeling I get seeing my own children, or the way my mother and father used to look at me with a kind of endless fascination, curiosity, and hope. And it is in those moments when students look back at *me*, the *me* beyond my role of teacher, that I feel their innate wisdom waiting to be expressed. In moments like these, I think people are brave to show up to school at all. Perhaps I only have this feeling because as a father I’ve dropped my three year old off at preschool, seen firsthand her shaky look, and felt her clutching hands. I think we make a big mistake if we think that feeling ever totally goes away, even for high school students, even for teachers.

Erin, one of the normally quieter students, looks up after a couple of minutes and says, “What are we *doing* today Mr. Lessing?” That quieted the room. I turned to my student teacher, “How’s that for a bell-ringer?” She was not amused. What did I say next? After all it was my turn now to seize *the teachable moment* (another slice of teacher jargon that could mean so many things it ends up meaning almost nothing). I did not say, “What will transpire?” which would’ve drawn skeptical looks and crossed glances. “What *are we doing* today,” I asked them? To watch the students’ amazed, bewildered, nervous, and enlivened faces is to understand what Peter Brook was trying to illustrate in his book. What happens when a man or woman crosses a stage while we watch? What does it feel like to be in the

classroom together? Who decides what happens next? What is *really* possible within a school? What happens to teacher-student and student-student when we come into an *I-you* relation? All of those implicit questions, so long ignored, now hang high up on the flagpole, proudly flapping in the wind.

We need not begin class with me shouting, or with a worksheet, or a *bell ringer*. Better to begin on equal footing, even if it's me who's on the stage. How we begin and end matters. Later, when we discussed the Jumpha Lahiri story, the discussion flowed from a genuine sense of involvement rather than through my role as teacher-in-charge. They dictated the questions, co-led the discussion, and constructed what they wanted to learn.

The students become the main actors and I their audience. It may result in role confusion – just who's in charge – and a fair amount of lost time. But that is not necessarily a bad thing. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1979) wrote, “May I venture here the greatest, most important, and most useful rule of education? It is this, not to gain time, but lose it” (p. 93). Respect, too often an empty catch phrase in school, in part, means sharing the weight of what happens (or transpires) even if that co-construction is continually more time consuming, difficult, and scary than the teacher deciding beforehand.

The larger challenge, for me, is finding continual ways to live into questions (Tillett 2011) like “what will transpire” so that it's not just one strange moment in the beginning of class, but gets infused regularly in the way I live in the world, the way I teach. As a teacher I'm not only teaching subject matter, I'm also inviting a conversation about how to be in the world. This doesn't involve a set of instructions nor is it removed from our subjective bias. I too participate with the students, instead of apart from them. I wonder aloud, question, backtrack, make mistakes, and discover new possibilities. I do this as their teacher, but also as another person who is also trying to live in the world, and live well.

None of this is meant to eradicate or annul the work of teachers who would argue our most important work is to prepare students to test well and succeed in college. However, if our response, particularly to the achievement gap, is solely a technical solution; for example,

to teach students discrete skills so they achieve better outcomes, than we miss a huge chunk of what education can achieve.

Teaching and learning is essentially a relational act. And that work often involves reaching into what is new, open, and unsure, what Anna Deavere Smith (2007) calls “the crossroads of ambiguity.” Not just for the students but the teacher as well. This mirrors the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1998), and his religious idea of a leap of faith: we jump without knowing what’s next. We are committed to not only knowing more about what we already know, but also knowing more about what we know we don’t know – skating bravely along the edge of what we don’t know we don’t know.

A theoretical framework devoted to inter-subjectivity invites new ways of thinking about the teacher, the school, and our curriculum. For instance, van Manen (1997) calls for us to come to terms with our assumptions (p. 47) in order to record our insights more faithfully. Kieran Egan (2002) suggests that “curriculum should be a set of stories that we teach rather than objectives to be met” (p. 397), while Elizabeth Vallance (1991) prods us to “examine life for intrinsic worth, it’s wonder, color, sounds, etc...” (p.158). The phenomenologist, the storyteller, and the artist, are not simply eschewing more rigorous forms of research; rather, they are embracing, equally difficult, new kinds of research. In using phenomenology as a framework to write fiction, I wanted to write a narrative that is both philosophical and entertaining.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Methodology cannot be prescriptive or predictive when writing a novel and a personal, speculative essay. It can offer guidelines of how to proceed but cannot map the road, or drive the writing forward. Narrative writing, phenomenological description, and personal essay writing are all inward methodologies. They operate in an intuitive, self-recursive, and spontaneous way. My writing resembles painting more closely than fieldwork. The success of the work will not solely depend on how I have simply understood the methodologies, but rather on my ability to be creative and innovative within those disciplines.

I have noticed a tendency to over-simplify when it comes to discussing research orientations. A typical conversation between two beginning graduate students goes something like this.

“I’m doing ethnography. You?”

“Critical race theory. And eco-urban portraiture.”

“Cool.” Orientations get bandied about like lunch recommendations.

My tendency is to counteract this by speaking only about the individual writers I want to emulate i.e. J.D. Salinger. Yet, it would be equally naive to think writers draw their ideas out of a vacuum or do not work within a particular discipline. Especially in the social sciences, but in fiction too, we are influenced by what we read and what others think -- by the collective field. Even the writers I love for their startling originality of method arrange their own ideas, in part, by sorting through the idea of the writers they love.

The challenge then is to both acknowledge and understand the disciplines in which I am working. Or, as Anna Deavere Smith told me once, “Do it different. Be you. Be new.”

The body of the dissertation is a cohesive autobiographical novel about one day of school from a teacher’s perspective, a fictional Avi Lessing. In addition to writing a fictionalized narrative that will span the length of a school day and will include a portrait of

one teacher's life-world there, I will also focus on the contours of his intra- and inter-subjective worlds. Here phenomenology also becomes part of my methodology as I try to unpack the meaning of a given moment with thick description. I will follow the novel with an essay that will speculate on and interpret some of the questions the novel raises, which I will formulate and discuss similar ideas and themes in a more explicit fashion.

A. Why Write a Novel

My impetus to write a novel about a struggling, but well intentioned teacher was partly a decision to write in a way that wasn't for or against schools, for or against a certain curriculum, for or against the teacher. I wanted to describe and depict the world of one teacher rather than say why he was good or bad. I did this because from my experience most teachers are good and bad sometimes within one period. I also wanted to write a piece that articulates what it felt like to be in a school: the constant flow and intermixing of peopling, happenings, emotions, and interactions, none of which conforms to easy categorizations (happy, sad, effective, ineffective).

Of primary purpose was my wish to entertain my readers with the feelings and thoughts that school stimulates in me. Novelists will often say that the job of any novel first and foremost is to entertain. I am hoping that the book will be evocative in a way that anyone who has spent significant time in a school will recognize. By writing into the complexity of the life and work that teachers and students share together, we may find that our educational system is in fact "working" better than we thought, or that the way it works or runs is not the thing that matters most. The goal was to tell a different story about a teacher who was neither a hero, a loser, a master teacher, nor an incompetent loony.

In my novel, the protagonist both witnesses and participates in the oscillations and transformations that mark the human encounters within a day. There is enough drama, conquest, reversal, and conflict there to sustain a narrative without the incessant need to

heroize or demonize. I explore how, like the students, I too exist within the tumult of partial understanding, doubt, and wonder.

The illusion that teachers are separate from students, or can predict and control what happens fundamentally misunderstands the phenomena of school-life. It may make us feel safe and warm and fuzzy but it distorts the natural, more elemental relation that teachers and students occupy. It deprives students of seeing what adult life is like; that we like them, are also still figuring out who we want to be, that we too, make thousands of choices every day, and that the act of being educated, as David Foster Wallace (2009) says, does not mean learning how to think, since we're doing that all of the time, but rather learning how to exercise control over what we are thinking moment to moment.

Qualitative research is far more effective than quantitative studies at describing the way people make meaning within an experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). By emphasizing my subjectivity instead of eliminating it, by examining my thoughts and perceptions instead of dismissing them, my readers will see the teacher student relationship and school in its rich lived-in fluidity. While it may only be describing one particular set of characters and circumstances, I'm hoping it will evoke in my readers their lived experiences of school. Instead of offering either a series of solutions or a grand narrative, I offer a deceptively simple message: teachers have the most to offer students by learning to be in direct relation with them.

I am not just a teacher. I am Avi. You are not just a student. You are Alex. And our lives are bigger and far more complex than the roles of teacher and student.

The novel does not delineate my core standards, or how I keep students accountable, or my learning targets, or any other piece of teacher jargon that litters our field. It does tell you how this particular teacher thinks, what he is like. And what we are like, our sense of humor, and our tone, what the phenomenological and educational thinker Max van Manen (1990) called our *lived experience* is paramount. Focus only on the outcomes and we'll miss the living experience itself. In the current climate of school reform, this can fall on deaf ears.

The idea of doing something for its own sake, like worrying about the future sustainability of our planet, gets dismissed as irrelevant liberal blather.

Books like *A Kind and Just Parent* (Ayers, 1997), television dramas like the *Wire*, and films like *The Class* effectively bridge different genres (the sociological and the personal, the dramatic and the systemic, etc...). They explore how people make meaning in their worlds (prison, the street, the classroom). Part of their success emerged from our love of the characters and our eagerness to find out what happens to them. This dual interest in character and meaning but also plot and occurrence can be elucidated through George Saunders' (2007) awkward and astute analogy about the relationship between writers and readers. In his essay about *Huck Finn*, he says there are two parts to fiction writing: the People Mover and the Dirt. The People Mover focuses on the journey of the reader. It is the plot. And the dirt is what the writer wants to write about i.e. the relationship between a white boy and a runaway slave. The plot hooks us and keeps us reading but by the end we realize that all along what we really wanted was the dirt (p.3).

The dirt of my novel is the *I-You* relation and the plot is a day in school. This allows me both to focus in-depth on the life world of the school and the encounters that happen there, while still bounding forward. I am hoping the reader has the same experience reading the book that a teacher has during his day – ongoing, overwhelming, and exhaustive.

Vladimir Nabokov says fiction is massaging the details. The plot is a composite of several experiences I've had or could have had. Using my own name, creating a character named Avi Lessing, heightens the meaning, stakes, and sense of subjectivity of the scenes in the book. Writing it this way also means that fact and fiction, truth and lies comeingle on a purposefully blurred edge.

There are dozens of literary precedents that squeeze a time frame in order to heighten the human encounters. The most famous is James Joyce's *Ulysses* that tells the day in the life of Leopold Bloom. More recently, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* followed the significant

day in the life of a neurosurgeon. Perhaps, J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* offers the most instructive tutorial on life-world and time. The whole narrative takes place in less than 48 hours and this squeezing of time helps achieve a deeply personal portraiture of Holden's life. The effect is a reiteration of Margaret Mead's idea -- through close examination of one life-world we come to understand our own too. The significant obstacles Holden faces such as alienation, the search for authenticity, a sense of loneliness, one might argue, are the issues that all humans, especially teenagers, encounter.

Salinger writes each scene in *Catcher in the Rye* as if they were the particular rooms (moments) that make up the house where he lives (his life world). Though the circumstances are somewhat mundane -- a rich boy who has just gotten kicked out of yet another prep school -- and Holden's experiences on the surface seem insignificant (meeting a friend at a bar, lying to an acquaintance's mom on the train) they contribute to our understanding of him because of the brilliant way Salinger juxtaposes what happens in his outer world with what happens in his inner world. And since Holden is ultimately trying to reach a kind of inner authenticity he keeps becoming more and more unhappy with the way his outer experiences ring falsely. He's not a moody, disaffected teen as he might first appear; he is grieving the loss of his brother and his life is at stake.

All of this is a useful template for my novel about the day in a life of school. First, I teach Holden's age group. Second, as Salinger recognized, school and adolescence are the perfect place to examine the disconnect between our outward appearance and posturing and our inward quest for truth. Third, the protagonist is a literature teacher and he teaches the novel. And finally, I too am searching for a kind of authenticity, which paradoxically may be more accessible through fiction than other genres.

Fiction heightens reality. In exploring one day of school, I'm both investigating the mundane and the extraordinary. Every day at school has its own eventfulness. Yet, this is the very thing that schools seek to deny: with its regular bell schedule, rules and procedures,

and mapped out calendar. We can become convinced that nothing happens at school, that they are the same everywhere.

Schools are a grind. The schedule is unrelenting: five classes a day, plus a supervisory duty, means I'm interacting with 150 students a day, five days a week. As opposed to the university setting, we're also operating, mostly, in a one building structure. We don't come and go as we please. And the schedule rarely differs. As a result, one day can feel like all the other days. First thing in the morning, I often recall the paunchy, little mustached, guy from those Old Dunkin Doughnut commercials. Exhausted and beleaguered, he stands up and wipes his barely open eyes. "Time to make the doughnuts," he deadpans.

But this laxity and tiredness has itself become a cliché: who can forget the soporific teacher in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*— "Buh-ler? Buhhh-ller? There's a teacher at my school who tells me the number of days remaining in the school year as a kind of casual greeting when he passes me in the hallway.

"Hey Ron."

"112 days left Avi. 112 days."

The numbed-out-stupor look from students, the overall mood in school that everything has already happened and that anything left to happen has been prescribed and predetermined sometimes leaves me deeply discouraged. Writing the novel invigorated this deceiving mundane quality. It imbued the day with both the tedium of regularity, along with the immediacy and urgency of our lives. Of course, both are present within the school day.

If Buber's *I-Thou* sets the context, phenomenology provides the means, and narrative is the mode for my writing, then theater is its living embodiment. The goal in theatrical improvisation is to explore and heighten the truth of human relationships in a compelling way.

Improvisation, as a pure theatrical form, emerged out of Viola Spolin's work in the 1950's with Neva Boyd at the Hull House. Spolin created hundreds of improvisation games based on Boyd's work at the Hull House, which later became the foundation for Chicago's

Second City, the most noted improv comedy theater in the United States. Boyd, not surprisingly, created her games for little children, who love to play, imagine, and make up their world.

It's adults who want everything fixed, set, and final.

Spolin's precepts for her games are at once phenomenological and educational. The games prize true involvement over showmanship. At Second City, students learn how to bypass their conceptual minds and listen and create environments, relationships, and scenes with their bodies as well as their minds. I remember one particular lesson taught by the director of the training center, Martin de Maat. He asked us to remember our childhood desk (or any large object). For the next 20 minutes he guided us through an exercise in which we were simultaneously remembering and recreating in the empty space in front of us its every aspect (from the texture, to the broken knobs, to color, to the sound the drawers made when they opened) until it seemed we could actually feel the weight and heft of it. At the end of the 20 minutes, he asked us to walk through the desk. I could no more walk through it than if my real childhood desk was in front of me. I have made use of this level of attentiveness, specificity of imagination, and creative layering as tools for writing into scenes that comprise one day.

Another helpful theatrical tool for the novel comes from the work of David Ball (1983) who was literary director at the Guthrie Theater, in Minneapolis. For him, plot, character, theme, exposition, imagery, motivation, conflict, and pacing can all be understood through the analogy of a game of dominoes. The dominoes represent the action of any play. One domino falls which causes another to fall (like George Saunders people mover metaphor, it is describing action). In any analysis of a play, he says, you have to find out the cause of a domino falling and the effect that each domino has on the next one. He says that's why scholars tend to misread Hamlet as a man who is afraid of taking action. As he goes domino by domino he shows how Hamlet is actually taking action all of the time. I think there is a similar correlation in schools – we think nothing is happening at first glance because we see

and take in so little. There are so many interactions, encounters, and moments that it's hard to see clearly what has occurred.

And finally, in a larger sense, Freire's idea (2000) [that Boal (1995) later theatricalized] that we are all actors with agency, lends the project its important underpinnings. Theater and fiction are serious endeavors that make us freer. Michael Rohd (2002), a former company member of Lookingglass Theater, and current professor at Northwestern University, said in a lecture once that our most precious commodity was metaphor. Without metaphor we are locked into a way of thinking that is limited. In the world of symbolism, invention, creation, and imagination (Kieran Egan 1992), we experience ourselves at our deepest roots. Boal's revolutionary idea (inspired by Freire⁴) is that we are all capable of action that can change the circumstances of our lives.

Boal's work offers two clear bridges from the world of theater to the world of school and my study. First, he worked with communities or individuals engaged in struggle. He thought of the participants, sometimes illiterate, often marginalized, as actors, or spect-actors, meaning they were not passive, but potential agents of change in their own drama. The kinds of theater he created, *Theater of the Oppressed*, *Forum Theater*, and *Invisible Theater* (to name a few) all sought to catapult the fundamental idea of Freire – that in order to change any kind of existential situation, we must learn to name it, and then think of ways to transform it. Adolescents are constantly waging battle against adults in order to carve out their own niche in the world. Erik Erickson (1980) called this counter-dependency, whereby a child shows his or her dependence through the force of his or her resistance. We need to stop seeing children as passive receptacles that we make deposits in (Freire, 2000) and start seeing them as individuals trying to make sense of their lives. In liberating the teacher out of the mold of two useless polarities (the do-gooder and the incompetent), the student too

⁴ When Freire died Boal said, "I am very sad. I have lost my father. Now all I have are brothers and sisters."

emerges out of the stagnancy of a corrosive stereotype (the empty receptacle or the lazy adolescent).

Second, Boal (1995) thought of modern civilization as an essentially capitalistic mechanism. In order to de-mechanize, we not only have to deconstruct the scenarios that bind and oppress us, we have to de-mechanize our bodies. Here's an example: in a game called Colombian Hypnosis one participant follows another around a space. Her forehead has to be six inches away from her partner's palm as they move around the space together. It's a childlike game with serious ramifications around issues of power and trust, leading and following, seeing and blindness. Boal (1992) knew from working with participants that one couldn't free someone's mind without freeing their body too.

Our best educational experiences don't just free our minds but our bodies as well. And conversely, oppressive environments and relations mechanize our bodies. In extreme, adverse situations, our bodies store trauma. For example, Adam Gopnik, who wrote about prisons in "The Caging of America," offered this way of understanding prisons. "Lock yourself in your bathroom and then imagine you have to stay there for the next ten years, and you will have some sense of the experience." Schools aren't prisons, but I often think when teachers are slamming kids for being late, why don't you try sitting in these desks 9 times a day for 48 minutes, and then fight through the hallway 9 times a day with 3000 other people to get to the next tiny desk and see if your priority is timeliness. Schools, like jails, factories, and dictatorships are often oppressive environments that limit the freedom of the body.

All of this raises significant questions for my novel: what is the teacher's connection with his body while he teaches? What is his relation to the students' bodies in the room? And what are the students' physical relationships to each other? What dictates the way they touch or do not touch each other in the school? And what about the teacher? Does he come in contact with his students? How?

Art has the ability not only to mirror our world but also to create a world that *might be* or *might have been*. Wallace Stevens (1954) captures this idea through his poem, “Large Red Man Reading.” In it, people who have died come back to hear a poet read.

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases,
As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae.
They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more.

There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life,
Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them.
They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality,

That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost
And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves
And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly

And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae,
The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law:

Which in those ears and in those thin, those splendid hearts,
Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are
And spoke the feeling of them, which was what they had lacked.

B. The Speculative Personal Essay

“Part of our trust in good personal essayists issues, paradoxically, from their exposure of their own betrayals, uncertainties, and self-mistrust.” (Lopate, 1994 p. xxvi)

The second semester of my senior year, I wrote an honors thesis on death. That first semester, my advisor suggested I sign up for an independent study. A month in she said, “Give me what you got.” I had written a twenty-five-page treatise on death. I felt reasonably assured of a positive response. After all, I not only quoted Freud, but Hannah Arendt, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche too!

She handed it back to me a week later. I remember one particularly jarring piece of feedback that she wrote in the margins: “Your poetry is awful my friend. Return to prose.” Quoting famous writers and pontificating what they meant wasn’t going to cut it. What I needed to do? I still had no idea.

The next week was torturous. I wrote hardly anything at all, except a semi-truthful comical piece from the perspective of a six-year-old boy confessing his fear of death to his Mickey Mouse stuffed animal, who has recently been maimed by the six year olds older brother. It ends with Mickey saying, “What do you want me to do? I can’t save you!” I gave it to my advisor as an afterthought. It ended up being the opening anecdote in my one hundred fifteen-page page personal essay on death. I still included Freud and Nietzsche but their ideas were helping explicate my own ideas and story, instead of the other way around. For the first time in my short writing life, I wrote from multiple parts of me (intellectual, emotional, comedic, etc...) and I found what I wrote had both feeling and thought intertwined.

I found those connections in the construction of the piece. Much of the power of the personal essay comes from the essayist’s discoveries (Epstein, 2007, p.15) while writing. For me, I was inspired by the idea that my college, academic experience could help make sense out of the terror I felt in my life. I did not have to have it figured out or even half figured out to write about it. In fact, for personal essay writing, it’s best *to not know* completely what you have to say. The essayist is inspired or disturbed by her encounters in the world and tries to make meaning from them. The profundity that arises often from mundane, dull, dark, or obscure places the essayist enlivens with new imagery, detail, and meaning. Though

the personal essay limits the claims I can make about schools in general, my expertise in the small, infinitesimal corner I teach in is unlimited.

Another strength of the essay is the latitude in form. In *Reflections: Personal Essays by 33 Distinguished Educators* (Burlison, 1991) each essayist writes in a distinct style. Some begin with narrative; others include none. Some explain what they're going to explain; others meander more loosely until they reach an insight. This latitude opens the possibility for new content, not hamstrung by a particular style of jargon, discourse, or even method.

Elliot Eisner (1981), in his essay about teaching as art, writes, "The arts emphasize attention to detail, but not detail detached from context." Teaching, Eisner suggests, should never be separate from the larger whole of the child's life (p. 143). He compares teaching to art making, where process informs the product and vice versa. His insights are amplified from his own journey as an art teacher. The plasticity of form, a mix of varying style and trope, in this case, narrative and analysis, allows a reimagining of teacher. Narrative stages and performs ideas. Their validity cannot be separated from the mode in which they are conveyed.

In the introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Philip Lopate (1994) argues that the personal, intellectual, and the historical are intertwined so tightly together, that they are almost impossible to separate (p. xxxvi). The way the writer perceives, connect to, and makes sense of the world can transport us beyond the writer's specific and distinct landscape to a shared past or some larger idea that we either had not considered before or had considered but could never articulate (Lopate, 1994, p. xxviii). The sheer amount of encounters in a school day mean there is plenty of untapped material for analysis and interpretation.

Personal essay writing, in particular, is a great vehicle in which to write about experiences that are seemingly insignificant or mundane but mean a lot to the person who experiences them. I have stories from my classroom experiences that initially seemed minor or benign – I hardly knew why I wrote about them initially – that, upon reflection, became

quite important and quixotic to my eye. As Epstein (2007) says, analysis and insight in personal essays is ongoing and often contradictory. Sometimes it is explicit and sometimes it is assumed within a narrative (p. 22).

The personal essayist, at her best, can transform a person, or a place, or a thing from an *it* to an *I*. Narrative often illuminates and intensifies the ideas a piece is exploring. I care about ideas more when I know the person who thinks them, and the story behind it. More than that, it's a different way of thinking about ideas. They are embodied, connected to time and place and person.

The best essayists capture relatively brief, but intense encounters. Their insights are almost always in opposition to the accepted clichés (Lopate, 1994, p.xlii) (especially prevalent and corrosive in the discussion of teaching). Bertrand Russell (1997), for example, subverts the climax in his essay about his friendship with Joseph Conrad, and then ends abruptly and poignantly. He unexpectedly sees Conrad who is quite old and frail on the streets of London but loses courage and doesn't talk to him. The reader expects this piece to be about regret and missed opportunity.

But Russell finishes by saying that it did not matter; he considered him one of his closest friends. He writes that Conrad shone like a star in the sky seen from the bottom of a very deep well. He wishes he could make that encounter shine for us like it shines for him (p. 42). The juxtaposition of seeing a star (glorious) from a very deep well (dark, lonely) unhinges our notions of friendship e.g. how often you see one another, how long you've known one another. And in its place, a rougher, more intimate experience emerges.

One of the central features of the form is the philosophical riff. Montaigne, who is considered the first personal essayist, similarly called himself an amateur philosopher (Epstein, 1997, p. 11). William Schubert writes: "I sustain my experience of play in childhood through playfulness in teaching and writing – both of which bespeak improvisational journeys – theorizing both on the fly and in reflective interludes" (Schubert, 2009a, p.63).

There is latitude to explore what is immediate and at the same time cast one's net to what is far-flung and purely speculative (Schubert, 1991).

Essayists riff from narrative to memory to insight to self-effacement to self-parody to meta-cognition without having to tie them together through a single narrative or argument. Instead the through line that binds the writing is the writer's point of view. A good essay can be disjointed as long as we are connected to that disjointedness through the narrator's conscious leaps. Since a personal essay is about the person who is writing the piece, it need not follow any particular path. Best if it follows its own unique internal structure.

Readers enjoy essays that are both personal and speculative not because they offer answers but because they get to vicariously join the writer on a journey into his or her experiences from an intimacy often absent in other kinds of writing. A reader's own life is illuminated while reading. What we get or learn is the totality of the essay itself, our pleasure and our own thinking and feeling while we read it, and the way we may think and feel differently later for having read it.

One of the best aspects of the personal essay is its investment in sincerity. The personal essayist is not hiding behind a mask or purposefully being duplicitous. The personal essayist has entered a pact to be honest with the reader⁵. This does not necessarily mean that the writer uses the personal essay as a kind of place for confession. In fact, the best personal essayist invests in irony and mystery like the best of fiction writers (Lopate, 1994). It does mean that the essayist is trying to squeeze out the space between his human persona and his writer persona.

The best essays in this genre are not trying to solve a problem or even answer a question. At heart, the essayist is trying to flesh out the contradictions within his own experience. He also wants to have a good time doing it. For instance, here is one such contradiction of joy and despair in the moment my school day begins.

⁵ Which of course includes what you're not going to be honest about. As Ayers and Schubert have both said to me, just be disclosing about what you're not disclosing.

The second I walk in any school doors, particularly the ones where I now work I often feel a pang of dread. *I'm trapped!* Sometimes it is of the airy and ironic variety. *I spend eight to ten hours a day in a place I mostly loathed half a lifetime ago.* Other times it is more morose. *This hallway is brown. I wonder if this is how death feels.* I wish I were less ambivalent about being a teacher. I'm not a first year teacher for Christ sake. Why the low level anxiety cooking a hole in my stomach? Not unlike my own experience of high school where chunks of the day seemed as if they were purposefully scheduled to be terrible.

Amongst the throngs of students, guys puffing out their chests with bravado, girls strewn out on the stairs, talking away, I feel secretly and solidly alone, so that even the idea of climbing the three flights up to my room fills with me exhaustion. I hear, "Mr. Lessing, what are you doing?" (Apparently, while I've been thinking all of this I have not moved from the corridor area). *What am I doing? Thinking. How embarrassing.*

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Well I was just thinking how depressing it is to walk into school."

The student, a girl in my American Studies class named Franny, says, "You're so random Mr. Lessing." But I see in her face a kind of approval of my randomness, as if it has alighted her own ambivalence about *being here* too. We can experience the senselessness (which she calls randomness) of school together. In this odd and off-kilter encounter, I feel less alone, even ebullient.

In the personal, speculative essay I've written, which follows the novel, I write narratively, theorize, and contextualize my fascination with intimacy (I-you) in the classroom. I place it in historical and political relief. And I tie it to my own personal narrative. Throughout I make connections to other fields (neuroscience, mindfulness, therapeutic models, and theater) to help explicate some of why I do what I do in the classroom.

C. Phenomenology

“Treating the present as a burden, as something that must be overcome. There is little dwelling in such living.” (van Manen, 2001, p. 123).

van Manen encourages teachers to both attend to and describe the smallest units of time and space in the teacher’s life. That means examining the classroom within the consciousness of the teacher. For Edmund Husserl’s (1980) consciousness is always connected to temporality and intentionality. Thinking, he argues, is always thinking which addresses *something* and exists in a body *somewhere*. Here’s an example of my own phenomenological writing.

This morning, my wife leaned over and turned off our noise machine. The second she did I could hear my son crying. I picked up my phone – seven o’clock exactly. When I went upstairs where he sleeps, I stepped on a sharp wire and noticed the mess from my wife’s art project the night before. I went through a familiar thought routine: (i.) blame (her, myself, our marriage, and the state of the world), followed by self-recrimination (Why am I so uptight? Why get worked up?), sliding into absentmindedness (Where’s my wallet? I need to buy a new watch).

It was cold in his room and the blinds weren’t drawn. No wonder he woke up. I looked in his crib and he had poop coming up his back. Instantly, as if by allergic reaction, I too suddenly had to use the bathroom. I was now standing on a bunch of crumbled cheerios. I crushed them beneath my curled toes.

In my mounting misery I thought, this is like teaching when there are five things happening at once that will all require more of me than I have to give. I could write this into my methodology! I had been in the room for a full minute. Only then did I peer into my son’s crib. Two big eyes were shining back at me, as if to say, I’ve been waiting.

Examining phenomena beat by beat through a whole day has a cumulative effect: the teacher’s consciousness becomes the transmitter of a school’s life world. Phenomenology, as

a methodology, like the personal essay, may raise similar objections. Why do I care about one day in school? Why do I care about poop up my son's back? Life-worlds, though, are like the tectonic plates beneath our conceptual world. Yes, I am just one more overwhelmed dad changing his son's diaper; however, in retelling that experience, there is more than the action.

I change Rafi and strip the bed. Bindi, my wife, always tells me to use fewer wet wipes. Now, every time I wipe my son's butt, I can hear her saying, *use less wet wipes*. My back twinges. I have a particularly troubling self-implosion mechanism that triggers under duress: *I'm in pain because I'm doing too much too quickly so I will react by doing even more even faster*. I clean the entire room. The art project. The books. The toys. I head downstairs and close the gate on my son and fetch the vacuum cleaner. I vacuum the carpet and my son trembles and wails in fear from the commotion, from the look on my face. I am impenetrable to the pain, his and mine, because now that things are bad, I want to make them worse.

What happened to the fun idea that I could write about for my dissertation? It turned into a less fun idea that I *still* have to write into for my dissertation. My writer friend Yos said the best stories don't make you look good. Which is a good thing, because most of mine I feel inclined to explore don't. It's hard to navigate the world of self and others without a whole range of paranoia, paralysis, fear, and resentment getting in the way of seeing and experiencing in a more attuned state. In the recognition of these obstacles, I tune back into the pre-conceptual perceptions that Husserl called reduction. I can hear, see, feel, smell, and taste more acutely.

We cannot understand pedagogy outside of human behavior. We cannot learn to teach without learning something about how to live. And the complexity of living in the classroom, of breathing, thinking, moving, feeling, intuiting, and relating is the most complicated experience of all. All of our theoretical ideas can be traced back to the

encounters we live-in. We ignore their import at our own peril; our teaching philosophy will inevitably not match our teaching practice. It's difficult to explain the multitudes of people, encounters, and perceptions I have in one day at school. It must be described slowly to understand the way interludes of inexplicable, heightened consciousness puncture the otherwise clockwork functionality of a school day.

Here's an example of that kind of experience about a camping trip, by Abba Lessing (1971).

One morning I woke up suffering from an attack of vertigo. I had never had such an experience before. I turned my head while still lying on my sleeping bag and went into a terrifying spin. I stood up, staggered out of the tent and found the entire earth turning into a slant. My feet gave way and I fell down. Very scared indeed, I woke up my wife and she comforted me. I lay down for a while. Later I tried getting up again. Again my earth with its sky, trees, bushes, shrubs, clouds spun slowly and sickeningly away from me. I felt as if I had suddenly been tossed into a raft in the middle of the ocean (p. 52-53)

This is not so different from my hallway experience – the feeling of being out of the world and then back in it again (his vertigo disappears as suddenly as it comes). That mirrors my experience of being alive. One moment hardly seems connected to the next. The “I” who talks about an experience is different from the *I* who initially experiences it. What phenomenology can do, especially in the context of fiction, is to illuminate how our subjective worlds paint so much of the way we live, what we believe, and how we think.

van Manen (1997) describes how to use phenomenology as a research methodology and offers examples of this practice. He says (paraphrasing Heidegger's question), “Ask not what we can do with phenomenology, but what phenomenology can do with us” (2001, p.47). For van Manen, research is not an objective act upon the research subject. Rather the

researcher, too, is impacted subjectively as well, which must be expressed. A phenomenological novel does not require objectivity; in fact, for the phenomenologist that is an impossibility. Instead I want to express, even emphasize my utter subjectivity. Only then will I have a measure of what I perceive.

It was not until I described in writing my morning experience that I even began to grasp what happened. I had been too busy assessing blame, feeling sorry for myself, and making retributive plans to muster up enough courage to actually see what happened. And what happened is steeped in relation, time, and body and should be described in that way. The description of course may also be only one version of how I tell that short anecdote. Undoubtedly, there are things I missed, or downplayed, or exaggerated; however, the description strikes me as authentic in its devotion to detail, and to the shifts of mood, temperament, and circumstance.

Unlike applied sciences like anthropology and sociology, phenomenology as it was first conceived purposely stayed in the theoretical, which means there were dozens of books about what Phenomenology is, but few applications of its methodology (van Manen's work is the exception rather than the rule). For examples of that," my father told me, "you'll have to look to fiction and theater." Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine* is a great example of phenomenological writing. It's a first person's account as he rides up the escalator to work. He analyzes each moment (people, objects, thoughts) as if they were utterly foreign to him and the reader. Mundaneness is made extraordinarily fresh.

The second issue with phenomenology is that different philosophers have different visions of what it is. Again my dad: "The key thing to understand is that each writer's notion of phenomenology differs. Husserl's phenomenology is quite different from Merleau-Ponty and even Sartre disagrees with Merleau-Ponty about a good deal of things. Heidegger is something different altogether."

"So phenomenology was coined after all these guys lived, right?"

“No, Immanuel Kant used the term phenomenology 200 years before but was referring to something quite different.”

Even within Curriculum Studies there exists division on what phenomenology is and how it can be used in education. van Manen (1997) thinks phenomenology is the best way to explore our innermost experiences. Willis (1991) challenges that assumption. He advocates for a more connoisseur-like approach where phenomenology is just one of many available methodologies to understand human perception. Ultimately, like the fiction writer, the method must work on each researcher individually as each researcher works upon it.

One commonality is that all phenomenological thinkers imbue their work with drama. By drama I do not mean they include characters or story necessarily, but that their deep interest in the living moment *is in itself* a radical starting point in which existence is recognized as dramatic and descriptive. And in describing a school, or in this case, a school day, I too must find adequate dramatic language to express the natural tensions in its life world.

For instance, I walk in the main entrance of school.

Or:

I walk in the main entrance of the school and there's Scott Rupal wearing brown pants like mine. Less wrinkly though. He's a science teacher, younger than me – not so uncommon anymore. Should I say something, like, “brown pants...” and then nod or maybe skip the words, wave, and then point down. I should really go down to lunch and eat with the science teachers. What does a science teacher like Scott think about? What percentage of his thoughts can be in some way connected to science? I should read more neuroscience.

Does he notice my brown pants? Maybe he's looking at the structure of the school and analyzing how it was built. Wouldn't that be cool to know? I could ask at lunch!

We need dramatic language to describe the eccentricity and wonder within the teacher's life that drew him to teach in the first place. What language do we possess for stillness and thinking deeply and thinking about thinking? For the crestfallen face of a student, overwhelmed and glassy-eyed? For the glances of sympathy, care, and love that pass between you? For our short lives and how we may live them? For bursts of magical thinking and the ensuing bouts of listlessness when we must muddle through? Phenomenology captures a sense of interiority that makes up our life world.

Another advantage to phenomenology is that I cannot so easily slip into platitudes and generalization. When trying to understand the complexity and dynamism of how I may encounter my students in a day, attention to nuance is vital. I try and capture moments of dread but also times I feel as if I'm looking at the world from younger, less knowing, more naïve eyes. When, without warning, I feel an expansive stillness spread in my chest. Those moments feel important, separate somehow from the rest of my life, like there's something good in the air I breathe. The juxtaposition of those heightened moments alongside the everydayness in which our lives inevitably sail on will capture an oppositional essence about school – its dueling intensity and drudgery. *I-you. I-it. I-it. I-it. I-it. I-you.*

Lastly, I can better criticize the current culture of outcomes and objectives if I speak to what that sort of orientation does to our sense of the present moment. It distorts and reframes our main role – in loco parentis -- to that of an office manager. As van Manen (1991) repeats in *Tact of Teaching*, teaching is not about the future but about the present (p.67, p.75, p.92, p.178). The phenomenological lens investigates the present whole-heartedly with as few assumptions as possible.

D. Fictionalized Autobiography

"It is in storying ourselves that it is possible to remake experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990).

As Clark and Rositer (2008, p.61) point out, we make sense of our lives through the stories we tell about them. We learn through narratives. And though the claims I can make

through fiction are small, or none at all: the premium on imaginative storytelling helped me think about how narrative writing and meaning making are never separate. As Nel Noddings (1991) said, “Stories have the power to direct and change our lives” (p. 157).

John Dewey (1938) thought teaching should focus, in part, on the “possibilities inherent in ordinary experience” (p. 89). And, “Every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences” (p. 38). “The business of the educator is to see in what direction an experience is heading” (p. 38). Fictionalized autobiographical narrative speculates on how each action relates to, contradicts, juxtaposes, or impacts the next. How the dominoes of the day fall.

Fiction is not the answer to a question but how we live into the questions day after day. Bolton (1980) says that from the mass of ideas, hopes, problems, fears and images that our everyday working lives provoke we set down a narrative that explores the depths of each (p.60). More powerful than trying to remember one particular day of my life at school – an impossibility in any case -- is to try and offer a story that captures what a day feels like, to write a story more true than what really happened. Tim O’Brien (1990) writes about the nature of memory: “A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth (p. 84).” Stories can capture the essential truth of what happens to us sometimes more than our real recollections.

William Schubert (2010) has often lamented that we use the word *myth* negatively to describe things that are false. Myths offer powerful ways of classifying and ordering our society (Bolton, 1980, p. 61). Bruno Bettelheim points out that we do not tell our myths; they tell us (cited in Bolton, 1980, p. 62). Each time a story is told, it offers new ways “for us to deal with our complex, strange and often scary inner psychological worlds” (Bolton, 1980, p. 62). And so the fiction writer is illuminating a world, which is not yet but could be, or was.

Jonathon Franzen (2011), in a recent essay about his friend and writer David Foster Wallace’s suicide, distinguished fiction from non-fiction. “We now understand a novel to be a mapping of a writer’s experience unto a waking dream” (p. 87). The novel, as opposed to

ethnography or case study or even memoir, has the capacity to imaginatively explore the inner life of the teacher.

It is because I am so drawn to teachers' stories (Schubert and Ayers's *Teacher Lore*, 1992) more than I am to the Efficiency model (Bobbitt, 1924) that I naturally gravitate to narrative studies with contradictions (Ayers 2010). For one thing stories tend to prize irony (the best historical writing is no different), truth telling, and vulnerability of the speaker; this in direct opposition to the relentless argument making that marks academic writing.⁶ Narrative grounds theory and ideas in characters and events, whereas argument pieces, especially ones that carry an agenda, try to offer proof. Stories have agendas too but they are often purposefully ambiguous, tentative, and up for interpretation.

People are people but can also be characters that hold symbolic resonance. Relationships, identity, and experience are often contradictory. When the contradictory intersects with the biographical there is an opportunity for an art that values absurdity, humor, and doubt as much as clarity, certainty, and solutions. My hope is for our love, appreciation, and fascination in teachers and school will grow not in spite of these contradictions, but because of them. In reveling in each other's humanity we feel our own. There is drama in the cracks of our lives where we least suspect them. Buber describes that gift in philosophical terms; my novel approaches it through narrative. I want to show what happens in a classroom when we loosen the rigidity of our role, tamp down the drum of our expectations, and ride what the great teacher educator in Westtown, PA, David Mallory (personal conversation, June, 2007), called the river of the classroom.

The obvious disadvantage to fictionalized autobiography, and the reason I will follow it with a more "this, I believe" essay, is that readers with an academic background may be skeptical about the saliency of a novel as a form of research. Though there has been a shift in orientations over the last fifty years to make this kind of endeavor possible, it is still

⁶ Incidentally, a recent study (Cohen, 2011) shows that we use argument more as a weapon to win arguments than to formulate truth; instead, we often find that through intuition.

outside the norm, and just as teachers try to prove their worth through their students' performance, anyone writing their dissertation feels the pull of doing research that is verifiable, replicable, and generalizable.

A second question readers may raise is how can something be autobiographical if it is fictional? Tim O'Brien's (1990) *The Things They Carried* offers a kind of benchmark for writing that is both fiction and autobiographical. O'Brien is transparently aware of how his storytelling plays with notions of fiction and truth, happening and illusion, the real and surreal. Fiction is never wholly made up and non-fiction can often ring falsely.⁷

Lastly, even for readers who may grant that such a project has merit in its own right and offers imaginative substance, what conclusion can one legitimately posit about teaching, or education, or Curriculum Studies? For me, fiction has the ability, perhaps more than any other methodology, to rescue teachers from the bland, embalmed, two-dimensional world of caricature. In good stories, we get to experience the full range of human beings, and we are moved by what happens to them because as readers we project our own hopes and fears unto them. Unwittingly, we reinvent the possible lives we may possibly live.

Phenomenology offers a way of dissecting in close detail the small, almost imperceptible shifts in our inward states. As Schubert (1991) has pointed out, the Personal Essay, with its emphasis on imaginative and speculative thinking, has great philosophical potential (p. 64) a way of understanding the narrative. The experiences then can be separated from the analysis.

E. Contribution to the Field

I want my dissertation to be a piece of art -- intuitive, poetic, and evocative -- as well as a picture of an unconventional teacher. I hope the combination of fiction and non-fiction inquiry shows how I often find myself in-between worlds as a teacher. Between students and teachers, feelings and ideas, energy and exhaustion, hope and despair. It is this in-between

⁷ One only need to see the unreality of a reality show to understand what I'm talking about.

status that gives me access to empathy, a notion I borrow from Ming Fang He (2003), which she describes in reference to being in-between cultures.

We often ask in meetings, “What’s best for the kids?” That question drives me crazy. For one thing, it feels like a gimmick, a rhetorical question meant to seize the debate. But even if we were asking it genuinely, it should not be the only one we ask. We should be asking not just what’s best for the kids, but what’s best for all, including the kids and the teachers, the administration, the staff, and parents, and the community, and the world. If we withhold our own interests and needs, beliefs and values, we deny our involvement, participation, and humanity. We remain hidden behind the great curtain.

Dwayne Huebner (1999) writes: “The problem is that the language and the practice of education are nearly independent (p. 242).” He called upon theorists to seek out new language and new forms especially political, ethical, and aesthetic ones. We kid ourselves if we dismiss the everydayness of the high school as merely teen drama. Part of why I wanted to be a teacher in the first place was because I never felt wholly myself in school. I was always on the lookout for someone to shame me. So many of my fears and hopes I kept secret. A more immediate portrait of the physicalized, temporal life-world that teachers and students occupy addresses the undercurrents of our school experience.

Booth, Colomb, and Williams’ (2008) raise the question -- is what I want to say worth reading? Who would read a book about what one classroom feels like? Readers have to care what you think and believe it is relevant to them (p. 127). To respond, I remember the words of one improv teacher who said, “If you’re having a good time on stage so will the audience.”⁸ The commitment for me is to find meaning in everything I do, not just that which can be measured. I want to rescue myself from the drudgery that school can impose on our life-world, with the narrow role teachers have been assigned. Teaching is a captivating vocation. Our stories evoke a sense of liveliness that permeate a teacher’s life.

⁸ What she actually she said was “Just commit the shit out of what the fuck you’re doing and they’ll fucking love you!”

In a recent conversation with my cousin he said, “You know there used to be this question of which dystopic vision of the future would come to fruition and everyone thought it would be Orwell’s, 1984. But it hasn’t happened. We haven’t needed a totalitarian state to rule over us because we’ve done a fine enough job doing it to ourselves. Huxley’s *Brave New World* where everyone is numbed out by choice turned out to be closer to the truth.”⁹ I love this example for a couple of reasons. One, it points to the way fiction can form a basis for thinking about our society. Fiction, indeed, precedes historical study, ethnography, and all the social sciences. Second we use fiction and narrative as a way of describing our reality all of the time. And that fiction becomes a kind of predictive prophecy or description of a world that may be coming/could be here now. Every time my father went somewhere new and said that it was “something out of a T.S. Eliot poem” or when he described someone’s face as “something out of a Dostoevsky novel” he was recognizing something that the great critic Harold Bloom (1998) has said about Shakespeare – great fiction invents us rather than the other way around.

This idea, that I can see my life not a series of gains and losses, pleasures and annoyances, successes and failures, but as a story with meaning practically saved my life. My junior year, within a span of 4 months, my brother got married, my dad got prostate cancer, my freshmen year roommate died of a brain tumor, and my two best friends got hit by a car – one of them was killed, the other was in a wheelchair for a year. The next semester, still reeling, mostly numb, I took a meditation class at Naropa Institute, the Buddhist College founded by the Tibetan monk and Oxford scholar, Chogyam Trungpa. Class began with 40 minutes of meditation and concluded with a dharma talk. The words spoken there felt like they were coming in surround sound. Not just because they were meaningful in themselves,

⁹ Although you could certainly argue that both writers were right. Take the microcosm of my school. The school forces kids to wear ids (Orwell) and teachers don’t question it (Huxley). In fact one of my colleagues dashed off an angry email recently: “Some of my students are saying that *some* (italics mine) teachers are not enforcing the ID policy. I don’t care who you; start doing it.”

but because they were connected to the practice we had just done. They were embodied within us.

My teacher, Dale Asreal, talked about the impermanence of the world. She said, “We must learn to like a child with illusion once again.” Being a child means attempting to live without our concepts continually hijacking what we see and feel. It means keeping my heart open to what is happening in any given moment. It means I know little and what little I know is all I need to know a little more. Giving oneself over to illusion may not answer questions, but allows us to live with them hanging over us. As Wallace Stevens intuited, we may get back the feeling we often lack.

The fictionalized autobiographical novel that follows is comprised of condensed phenomenological descriptions focused on one school day. A personal and speculative essay will follow that analyze what emerges from those descriptions. In the fictionalized autobiography more attention is paid to the teacher’s perceptions and encounters. The interpretive essay broadens the context of the narrative to include analysis of the implicit ideas. The novel and the essay serve different purposes. The novel, which is entitled *Spitting Image* is meant to show a well-intentioned teacher floundering. The essay shows a similar teacher thriving, looking back at what he once didn’t know, but now does.

V. INTRODUCTION TO SPITTING IMAGE

My friend Yos, who's a writer, once told me, "Avoid telling stories about yourself that make you look *good*." The hero of my novel, *Spitting Image*, is somewhat inept and out of sorts. He's having a particularly hard day. He is significantly less prepared, and more out of sorts than I am, but there are parts of him that are in me, even if the events are made up.

He is a version of me that I'd just as soon forget.

Which begs the question: why write a novel that spotlights a not so great version of yourself having a not so great day?

My training at Second City answers one part. We don't want to see ordinariness on stage. We want to see what's extraordinary. This is such a day.

I am also scratching a particular itch. The itch is to see the teacher in all of his nakedness and effort, in moments he tries and fails.

When I tell people I'm a teacher, they sometimes respond, "Good for you!" They mean that because I am a teacher, that means I am doing something good. They are also saying: you are doing something good, which is nice for you, but not great for me, because doing good things for others is nice, but also for *shmucks*.

I hope my novel address the appalling misunderstanding of why some teachers teach.

The presumption that I am sacrificing what could be a more successful life because I want to serve others is insidious. It may be true, for instance, that I am not exceptionally altruistic, and got into teaching because I wanted to be around young people. What if I became a teacher not because I thought I could save kids but because I know kids can save me.

VI. SPITTING IMAGE

Spitting Image

By

AVI LESSING

“AVI,” MARTIN SAYS, and shuffles some papers across his desk. Behind him floor to ceiling bookcases are filled to the brim. Above the door to his small windowless, office hangs the standard, circular clock. In every classroom, office, gym, and lunchroom they all say the same thing: 7:38.

Martin went to Woodstock, but his DNA is more working class Democrat than touchy-feely folk. He’s writing a book called *The 18 Most Egregious Decisions by the U.S. government from the Revolution to Present Day*. His daily attire, wire-rimmed glasses, starchy white shirts, indiscriminately colorful small-knotted ties, braided belts, and khakis, suggest a guy living in the 1970’s. It’s all offset, though, by a full head of hair, a pleasant face, and an ironic, wry smile that makes him look like a kid. He possesses a deliberate thoughtfulness that I envy. I trust him.

“Avi,” he says again and grins. This is the way all conversations go with my division head. He’s saying my name in a way I’ve heard my name said all my life. The cacophony of voices cast in charge of me, say, *I enjoy you, I am amused by you and mostly like you*. Also: *what am I going to do with you?* I smile back, trying to weather the blow, absorb what his face says. From the neck down, I am numb.

It’s when Martin says this second “Avi” that my hand frantically and involuntarily reaches for where my wallet should be. Is it still there? Moments like these, my life distills down to the weathering of an inexhaustible series of tasks, a mitigating of news, a survival of the moment. The wallet is there, this time. I sip my coffee and eat the last bit of bagel and cream cheese. Crumbs fall on my pants. I’m not unaware of the way most of my worries live in my head and rarely match what is happening. But the insight comes later when it’s safe to laugh at myself. By the time my wallet, keys, or phone disappear again, the insight is as distant as good advice in hard times.

I keep aspiring to be one of those people the Buddhists call awake, aware, and available, but I think what I end up being most of the time is absorbed.

“Avi,” Martin says one more time. “Yes?” I say.

There have been many *Avi* talks with Martin. *Avi*, you start your freshmen English class by falling off a table. Backwards? And they pass you back? Isn't that crowd surfing? You want to start a teacher group that talks about the students that *trigger* you? Trigger how? What merit does an English elective have that's not academic? This is a school, you do know that ... *Avi*. It's the ironic, slightly twisted grin that kills me because it could be a frown. I don't know. Maybe when you get your PhD from the University of Chicago, you enter a well of irony so deep it reshapes your face. Martin's inscrutable, facial tics form a palette, like a dense text I have to decode and figure out for myself. When he wants to make a point about his life or mine, he'll tell a story from Melville's *Bartleby* or Conrad's *Lord Jim*, or anything from Philip Roth. He'll retell a portion of the book, quote a line from memory, or sometimes pull it off the shelf, lightly rubbing the binding. Then he'll smile significantly, restrainedly, and bring his hands onto his desk, blowing air into his cheeks. His look says: *isn't it self-evident what I'm trying to say?*

What he is trying to say is as complex and oblique as the novels he loves, where I think, wait, what happened, what did I miss? In this way, Martin is like my dad, who, from the time I was eight would say things like, "I like your friend Eli. I mean Jesus Christ, he has a face straight out of a Dostoevsky novel." Or, "this video arcade is like something straight out of Kafka." Later, I'd read Kafka and Dostoevsky and understand how modern life is absurd.

But then I would think, why couldn't the arcade just be an arcade just this once.

"*Avi, Avi, Avi*. Nobody has better evaluations than you do. And nobody has worse." He pauses dramatically to see how I'll react. I blink dumbly. Speak man speak. Am I getting fired, written up, warned? I know in my head I won't be getting any of those things. But I also believe whole heartedly that it's only a matter of time before my demise. "It's far more good than bad, look at these." He turns a small stack of paper 180 degrees. They're all anonymous. The gist is I have a sterling reputation for connecting with students. I *really* listen, I engage. There are even some rhapsodic evaluations calling me 'the best teacher ever.'

These, Martin has kindly highlighted in yellow. Some others: “He really cares about us.” “Mr. Lessing is dope, man,” and “He’s not like the other teachers who just care about their paycheck.” That one kills me. I doubt any of us are in it for the paycheck. Still, I think I make a good living, even if it’s squat to the people I grew up with in north suburban Elmwood.

The negative ones, Martin has highlighted in blue. I’m disorganized. I pick favorites. For example: “I notice that he wears jeans a lot and that when the students are entering his class, when he should be greeting us, or putting the homework on the board, he instead is SLOBBERING over some nasty food that has spilled on his face.” Others: “He’s not an ENGLISH TEACHER!” “More like therapy.” “WE didn’t learn ANYTHING!” In short, I’m a mess.

The good comments stay anonymously warm inside my belly, like the bagel and cream cheese I just devoured. The bad ones make me paranoid, give me heartburn. I assign specific comments to individual students in my head. Karen Friend is getting back at me for that C last semester. That’s what you get for adhering to the school’s accountability and rigor movement – you downgrade them, they’ll downgrade you. Sam must have written one of the glowing ones; he’s the sort who’s willing to fill out the optional written part. I furtively steal a glance at Martin. His attention is respectfully removed, as if I had just found out someone died.

The less I can feel in my body the more I can’t stop thinking. I run my hands through my hair and flakes appear on my collar. Unless I wear light shirts, Bellboy, my best friend who’s also an English teacher at the school, usually has to dust me down a couple of times a day. And it’s only going to get worse – my dermatologist, who I saw because he was our high school’s Valedictorian, says it’s probably Psoriasis. Which in a way is better than dandruff. A disease is way better than a condition. What can I do about it? More likelihood for sympathy, less chance of derision.

Should've worn a button down, I think, especially the day of a meeting with your boss. No matter how much he might say he likes you, it makes a bad impression. Can I really depend on his good will just because we both happen to be Jewish intellectual types, because he finds me funny, once in awhile? Self-deprecation can only take you so far, I reprimand myself.

Martin places the neatly typed transcripts back in a manila folder labeled with my full name: Avram Lessing. He places my file neatly between Aaron Johansson and Terrence Lowenberg, the guys I stand in-between for the yearly English department picture and graduation.

Paranoia has a snowball affect; it seems to feed and grow off itself. What has he left un-highlighted and spared me from, for now? Accusations of daily slips of grammar? Ridicule for Buddhist meditation with students, in class? Condemnation for assigning too few papers? Or perhaps the students have ventured further into my level of preparation, mood swings, my general appearance and odor. Why did I pour water on Jon Hill's head? Is that my idea of pedagogy? Of humor? Who knows, maybe they're talking about my red, irritated gums that puff out too much over my teeth, what else is in that file? I eat while I teach isn't the half of it. I eat all day long. I eat when there's not enough to do, when there's too much to do. Who does that? It's rude, it's unprofessional. I shouldn't do it. What else is in that goddamn file?

Maybe the elective I created was too good to be true. It's all well and good in the proposal stage. "I'm going to make students' lives the text we study." "I will augment their social and emotional well-being, create pathways for positive life decisions." But what does that look like in practice? Martin approved it, with misgivings, only after he gave it a suitably academic sounding title: *Experiments in Reading Literature and the World*. Even though we read almost no literature, and we certainly don't read the world. Whatever that means. In any case, kids don't call the class that anyway; they call it *Feelings*. Which is teenage speak, I admit, but shorter and catchier, something I could never have come up with. What it lacks

in sophistication or even accuracy it gains in marketing. This year, *Feelings* comprises more than half my course load.

In all my classes, the kids know a lot about me. They know I'm Jewish. They not only know my dad is a Holocaust survivor and a professor of Philosophy, but I also do imitations of him all of the time in order to say the outlandish things he says.

They know I'm married to a beautiful Indian woman, that she's a nutritionist. That I fell so hard when I met her, I couldn't move. I lost my nerve that day we met in San Francisco. Couldn't even approach her. That two days later I saw her at a music festival among 10,000 nameless people and when she said, "Do I know you?" I started speaking gibberish. The gibberish part I make up but it makes the story better, a trait I learned from my dad.

I didn't clam up, though, I seized the moment, got the email, wrote a two page letter, which my friend Heather, encouraged me rather shrilly to cut down to three sentences, which, later, my wife told me, was still *too much*. Too much? It was three lines! Yeah, she says, but you wrote *sometimes you have that feeling about somebody*. She has a point; it was a little much. Another thing that I'm paranoid about.

I tell the students how the next day I checked my email – back then it was much harder, you had to dial up, and hear that weird noise, like circuits colliding, like a submarine sending a secret code, bang-hawanha jangha-wa-bangha - and after the second time when I still hadn't heard from her, I remember clearly thinking, this is my life, my life is on the line, whether she replied or not felt like life and death.

On the third check, I saw that she wrote back. I was saved. Two years later we were married.

They know more than just the good parts of my marriage. Also the humiliating moments – for instance, storming down the beach on our trip to Greece.

"I want to sit in the sun," I declared.

"Well, I prefer to sit in the shade," she responded.

Before I know it, I am 100 yards down the beach?

What if Martin asks how this story even fit into the teaching of English? Would I have an answer.

I stare at the evaluations as if I'm reading them carefully but I secretly stockpile reasons to the question I think Martin will ask. I'm not good on the spot. *Breathe!*

Sharing stories, or even better, having an experience with a class is what best gives students the chance to merge their intellectual and emotional life. *That's pretty good.* What could be more important to the teaching of English than internalizing some of the principles great books epitomize – above all else, mystery, irony, and wonderment. *Good, work in irony for sure.* We become kinder, more creative and insightful people when we enter into books, classrooms, and essays with all of ourselves. *Don't get too fruity. Think U. of C. Stay paradoxical.* Why can't high school be a good place for the soul? *It can just don't tell Martin that shit.* What's more personal than reading and writing? Than thinking? *Martin wants you to be less personal and more prepared. Less you, more them.*

I can't help it. Like my dad told me once while we sipped our first gin and tonics when I was 21. "Who do you think the most fascinating person in the world?" he asked and paused significantly. "The girl you're dating?" I said. "Not me. I think it's myself."

The way I sold the class to the administration was not by talking about vulnerability but through *will* statements. Students *will enlarge their self-awareness.* Students *will gain social and emotional skills.* Students *will improve decision-making.*

I never really know how I am perceived by anyone, in particular, by colleagues. With students, though, you mostly know. The ones that love you scream out your name, and the ones that don't will reserve their judgment for a meeting with your department head that will be annotated carefully and placed in a file that will follow you the rest of your life. Of course, some students fluctuate between those two poles but they mostly go to the extremes. It's why I love teaching high school, there's so little middle ground. Life is enough of a

humdrum moving walkway towards oblivion that at least the people you spend time with should be characters bursting with life.

7:53. Martin in finishing up some last minute emails. I am no longer reading what's on the page. I am down on myself. And then I get down on myself for getting down on myself. Then a third voice. *Remember the practice you learned in meditation class.* Even with Martin right across from me, I can let my thoughts go with my out-breath, practice mindfulness, label thoughts as thoughts and try to go with the flow. Every time I begin meditating I think about my cousin, Ben. He's a brain of sorts, he got his 1600 on his SAT's is what I tell everyone, which is not true, it was closer to a 1400, but it makes everyone's reaction better if I say the score was perfect. The first time I ever took him to meditation class, the teacher explained the prescribed method of how to let go of your thoughts and connect to your breath. Ben said to her, "What if I don't want to get rid of my thoughts? What if I want to think them?" In the parking lot, I said, "Ben, it's not getting rid of. It's letting go." "Yeah, but if you let go," he said, "they might not come back."

And now I'm doing the very thing my teacher warned me about. I'm thinking about my cousin Ben when I'm supposed to be meditating. I say *thinking* and try to let go of Ben and his SAT scores that I made up. I visualize my thoughts glued to my breath, but they get only so far as my throat, before I swallow them again. I have swallowed my visualization of my cousin. *Be friends with yourself*, I hear my own voice saying; *your vulnerabilities are gifts not injuries.*

Martin is waiting for me to talk. It's my turn. How will I react to this news? I think about my pants: I have plenty of new pants but mostly wear old ones. Larry, my mentor when I first came to this school, told me that when I'm tired I should wear nicer clothes to compensate. But I am always a little tired. So I mostly ignore his tip and wear my old pants. And this is one of the student criticisms, no doubt, the kind of pants I wear.

“I’m glad it’s more good than bad and not the other way around,” I finally muster. My mom, who’s a therapist, once told me “All marriage studies come down to the following question: is there more good than bad or bad than good?” I wonder if the same principle applies to teacher evaluations.

“That’s true,” he concedes.

“And I obviously have a number of weaknesses I have to work on.”

This clearly pleases Martin. My weaknesses please him, everyone really. Or so I like to think. Like I couldn’t possibly be likeable if I don’t appear self-deprecating. It’s a mistake, of course, but the mistakes I’ve invested in for so long are the hardest to undo. I’m not overly penitent, mind you, just enough. The balance I shoot for is self-reflective enough to be interesting without confessing too much as to be burdensome. A certain amount of sensitivity is attractive but despair is unseemly. Plus, I’m pretty overwhelming to deal with as it is, like I said before, I really have to monitor myself in almost every interaction I have. That’s because I always find myself wanting to go a little further than the person I’m talking to. My old roommate said to me once, “Yeah, you like to cross the line just barely and then have a party on the other side.” What if school could be more like a party.

“I remember when I was in a graduate school class with Saul Bellow,” Martin begins.

“You took a class with Saul Bellow?”

“Yeah, I didn’t tell you this?”

“Nooooo,” I say in mock disbelief, bobbing my head forward and backward in a purposefully exaggerated way meant to signal my excitement. The change of subject is a godsend. I am willing the conversation away from me, away from the evaluation of my best and worst, which I’m guessing would mirror the evaluations I’d get from the general public, if such evaluations were given. I scratch my head, shift forward. Not getting reprimanded today, I reassure myself. Because otherwise he wouldn’t switch to Saul Bellow; he’d say something like, “Now protocol in matters like these ...” Or “I’ve made the decision to...”

The summer after my sophomore year of college, right before my brother's wedding, my dad had major surgery for prostate cancer. We knew it was good news when the surgeons didn't come out for hours, which meant they were able to remove all of the malignant cells. He said to me in his room later. "They didn't get me in 1945 and they didn't get me in 1995." "Do you remember saying that Pap?" I asked him later. "I didn't say anything like that." "You did, Pap." "No, kerel¹⁰, sorry, never, you're making it up."

Martin is a great storyteller like my dad because he takes his time, draws you in with the details of the story. It's not from the story, though, that I cry a little as Martin talks. He mostly loves me, I think, and my stomach makes a gurgling noise like it can finally digest. Even if my performance as a teacher is uneven, he likes having me around, and that counts for something. He'll protect me as long as he works there. But he's retiring soon, though, and what will happen? Who's going to hide me then when I next slip? And make no mistake about it: I will slip. If it's not pouring water on a student's head then it will be for calling a student Little Greeny when they suffer from a thyroid condition and wear the same green shirt everyday. Which is the latest thing I'm hiding.

"You were in Saul Bellow's *class*? *That's amazing!*"

"Yes, in 1979."

"Saul Bellow?"

"Saul Bellow."

"Saul Bellow!" Entertainer me. My default setting with people in authority, even those I like, is low-status: I'll-listen-to-you-mode. The more I repeat back Saul Bellow's name, the more I can celebrate the great story he's telling me, and the improbability and good fortune of having Saul Bellow, Saul-fucking-Bellow as his professor. The Saul Bellow repetition is also a way of returning the conversation to territory I know, the fertile ground of making someone else the subject, investing all of my attention on Martin's life (which is quite fascinating, especially if you're in the mood to listen to a good story). Repeating is a

¹⁰ Affectionate Dutch word: chap or little guy

way of taking on a personal intensity while keeping the overall mood light. But he doesn't join me in my repeating fetish, why would he, why would anyone?

For someone who requires as much attention as I do, I'm a pretty good listener, not just because at certain times I need to deflect attention away from me, but because I am genuinely curious about peoples' stories, and I like to find out the minutest details.

Listening to Martin tell me about Saul Bellow surely will ratchet the conversation away from the considerable damage these evaluations have done to my boss's estimation of me, because let's face it, in school, it's better to get all good news than awesome news sprinkled with a little terrible. It's better to keep all of the patients somewhat healthy than restore the majority, but kill one. That one will rise from the dead just to bring a lawsuit that threatens to shut the whole hospital down. No news is always good news for school administrators.

"Yes, Saul Bellow," Martin says, somewhat mystified. As if I really couldn't hear, or didn't really believe, what he was saying. "Once, he said to us in class that the best teachers never teach in public schools. They can never make it there."

"He said that?"

"Yeah."

"You don't think I'll make it here?"

"I want you to, Avi. I know how hard it can be though."

"Yeah." I feel like crying again. My boss is telling me how things stand. The Saul Bellow conversation, it turns out, has turned the focus back on me. I'm getting fired after all. And later people will laugh about it. 'Remember,' they'll say, 'when that Jewish, English department head used that anecdote about that Jewish writer to fire his Jewish teacher. That was something.' Being Jewish has nothing to do with it, I think. And yet, being Jewish, I reason has everything to do with it. If I wasn't Jewish, I would be neither provocative nor scared. I could live a normal life, socialize, work hard, and believe in the future. And if Martin weren't Jewish, he wouldn't have hired me. That's a fact.

And why shouldn't he focus on me? It's pretty glaring, you don't need a spotlight to see what a mess I am and yeah, isn't everyone, but others seem to know how to hide it. Judging by the mustard stain above my crotch I can't even dress myself properly. The bell, which is not a bell but a dulling sound, more dreary than alarming, goes off through the whole school, and like one of Pavlov's dogs, I am already standing up, worried about first period.

Martin looks up at me and says, "OK Avi" pretty sympathetically, purses his lips, and brings his palms gently down on his desk, blows air into his cheeks, this time not meant to shift the conversation, but to indicate we're done. All teachers bow to the bell. In school, you don't need an excuse to walk away from someone. This has its advantages. When a close-talking colleague with acrid breath just wants to bitch, you throw your hands up in the air in an annoyed fashion, as if to say, dammit, you'd love to stay and chat all day, but that darn bell, you have to go.

Martin nods one last time and I open the door. "Leave it open," he says but I've already begun to shut it. The best I can do without going back and making the exit worse and more awkward is to grab it before it slams shut.

7:58. Martin's office flanks the longest hallway of the school; awash now with students headed both directions. Imagine 3000 people in a skinny terminal at JFK airport, and you'll have some idea of what it feels like to be in my school before class starts. Some students run frantically to class, others stand in clumps, soaking in the last bits of face time. The impending reality of first period, the homework students may or may not have done, the possibility of quizzes, and the physical labor of gathering up books, notebooks, pens, forms, sweatshirts, not to mention all the tasks that have to be done in order begin the day like locking lockers, tying shoes, adjusting backpacks, and chugging off to class are now competing directly with all of the social activity that has preceded this moment, whatever television was on last night, break ups, fights, face book happenings, and whatever else teens

talk about, when adults aren't around, it's impossible to summarize, no matter how I might try to pin it down.

In the scrum, Jamie Lee walks by, another khaki man like Martin, but my age. He always wears a tucked in button down with a pen brazenly fastened through the crease of his shirt, around chest high. I fake reach for his nuts.

"How's it going buddy?" Jamie says.

"I just got my evaluations back."

"Yeah, how did you do?" He's smiling widely which probably has something to do with the fact that yesterday at lunch he told me that Martin called him the *gold standard* of English teachers.

Jamie boasted, "Martin says nobody has gotten better evaluations than me. And nobody has gotten worse." I instantly regret telling him; I'm always saying too much, initiating too often, wary of saying too little when I should be making sure I don't say too much.

"Ooohh," Jamie says rubbing his hands together as if warming them by a fire.

"Good and shitty all rolled into one."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Alright, see you later buddy." He reassuringly pats me on the back. I am jealous of Jamie. He sort of occupies the same role as I do at school: funny, connects to kids easily, and sensitive too. Except he's more universally loved and certainly not loathed by anyone. He's pretty good at being a jerk when I'm up and sympathetic when I'm down. It shouldn't matter that he's not Jewish but it does. It's my dad's voice in my head. The one assessing what's Jewish and what's not. That man walking down the beach. *Jewish*. A symphony orchestra concert. *Jewish*. A baseball game. *Not Jewish*. Same as Jell-O, Michigan, and all physical labor.

I usually see Jamie at lunch, where we talk about sports, and bullshit around. If you knew his response would only disappoint you, I think, why did you tell him, as I make my

way through the nameless throngs to my own classroom three doors down. It's a rookie move to be caught in the hallway during heavy traffic times. The unspoken rule about not bumping teachers in the hallway goes out the window due to the sheer masses of people. I hear, "Yo Jerome!" and "Lisa Pagowski, wait up girl, ughh!" So much boisterous noise, you'd think a rally was about to start.

But look closer and you start to notice what's below the din: the anxious looks of kids carrying overstuffed backpacks and puberty-laden boys gawking at girls, who pretend not to notice or care, but notice and care about everything. Also, you see the ones that haven't slept enough, who'll sleep on the weekends past twelve until one of their parents complain, this is getting ridiculous, wake up, and who protest, *just for once, leave me alone*. A few stand out like paintings. They wear big smiles like bright streaks of paint. Maybe they've gotten good news, or maybe they just exude happiness no matter what they feel. There are kids who aren't a part of a clique and others who don't belong anywhere and resent it.

There are the hundreds that I can't describe because they don't stand out, because there isn't time to look at everyone, I can only sense so much. We all fall back in a school this big into anonymity. From place to place we go without fanfare; the hoards of kids get bumped more than I do. They can't give the watch it look I do, unless they want to risk further physical taunting, maybe even getting knocked down. In a good mood, I might join in the tumult, like a fish in a school. Because if you time it right, you can make it through the hallway feeling elated, like you rafted a river with class four and five rapids.

Today, though, I'm swimming upstream. It's as if I'm watching everything both fly by me and recede in the distance at a speed in which I can't process clearly. Even if there are words to describe what I see, what's inside of me, I forget them the second I become conscious of the next incomprehensible thing. This is my state of mind before first period.

7:59 Students are milling by the door. Kids have a unique sense of space. They bunch and jumble into tight configurations that adults would find intolerable. So many billions of

people alive right now. How many of those billions, even given the time difference, are in school at any given moment? How many of them are bunched against doorways, waiting to get in to rooms they don't want to come into in the first place. "Door's open, guys," I bellow, but nobody is listening. They're barreling into my room while I correct myself, "Girls too. Guys *and* Girls." I have to break that habit.

On both sides I've hung pictures of my family, my wife, my two kids, my parents, even some close friends. To these, I've added a bunch of postcards, some of which are holdovers from art museums that I visited when I lived in Prague. Poems, quotes, newspaper clippings too. It's how I used to decorate my bedroom when I was single, in my early and mid-twenties: back when I thought anything beyond a Michael Jordan poster signified that I was an artistic and aesthetically enlightened man.

The floor is linoleum but I have thrown down few old rugs here and there, a couple of stools from Pier 1, a plain, hulking, beige desk from Ikea – all the stuff my wife didn't want when we moved in together. On the walls are paintings by my Opa (my pap's pap) and prints of album covers and paintings. Bob Dylan's significant head peers out from a blue background, smoking a cigarette and looking somehow both sad and piqued.

No desks here, not since I put them all in the hallway, and replaced them with a bunch of standard-sized, school-issue, green chairs with black aluminum piping. I have five folding-tables, which I take out for group work; otherwise they stay folded up on the far wall. It took me two months to get up the courage to tell Rick, my hallway's custodian, that he didn't have to unfold the tables in preparation for the next day. My go-to organizing principle is the circle, which I try not to fetishize. Being a cult of personality teacher is one thing. Being a cult of personality teacher who believes he's a cult of personality because of all his aesthetic sensibility is another.

"You sure you don't want rows?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yeah, I like them facing each other."

"How do they keep their mouths shut?"

“Yea-eah, that’s a tradeoff of the circle. But mostly it’s a good thing.”

“OK you’re the boss.” I always feel like a small boy talking to Rick. Or gay, or a woman.

Antonio comes in first everyday, and then waits for me by my desk. “Hey Mr. Lessing, I like that shirt,” he says, looking back. “Thanks,” I manage but barely hear him, and when I look up to properly greet him, it’s too late, he’s sitting down, alone. Antonio has a smallish Afro and wears a big gold chain. He’s half Dominican. *What song should I put on for the free write?*

Mamie comes in, squares her body towards me, and waves her hand from 10 o’clock to 2 o’clock stiffly just above her waist. She mouths ‘good morning.’ The next moment, she’s skipping off to Renee. Grabbing ahold of her friend’s hands as if they hadn’t seen each other in months, she updates her about the Best Pals meeting, a club that works with developmentally challenged kids.

Mamie, Renee and Antonio and four others who can be difficult to distinguish, are sitting down, the rest are coming in; you can see how hard it would be to describe everyone in the class. It happens so fast; they’re nearly all here. I should be at the door greeting kids as they come in. It’s part of the Social and Emotional Learning Tips (“SELT”) that the committee, I chaired, recommended. But I never feel like warmly greeting kids at the beginning of the day. Certainly not today. Plus they know when you fake it, always.

I decide on the song I want to put on: *Shake it Up* by Florence and the Machine. I’ve gotten into them ever since another colleague played them for me the night a bunch of English teachers all went dancing. Jamie Lee went all-out that night and got his head all sweaty. But before I do, I gotta find my lesson plans, which I dutifully scribbled in my black moleskin for the whole week two nights ago, right before watching the *Wire*, the gift I give myself after accomplishing work. Every time I watch it, I think it should be a high school

class: *The Wire: How the System Games Us. You know that's on the website What White People I like.* So what, then I shouldn't like it?

There have been a few "Hi, Mr. Lessings" that I haven't responded to while I've been talking to myself. I only know this because one says, "OK don't say hi back," and by the time I say, "Oh, hi," and mumble *sorry*, the girl with tons of red hair, who said it to me, Molly, is now no longer listening to me. I vaguely consider pointing out the dynamics of this non-exchange to her, the micro-nuances of who listens and when, the way absence wipes out presence. But I still have to find my moleskin. I thought I put it on my desk.

I never sit there; it's where I make piles: things to do, things to grade, and personal stuff. Did I even write the plans in my moleskin? *Don't panic and for heaven's sake don't be overly dramatic.*

One similarity between teaching and social acuity is the importance of nonchalance. Students instinctively bristle in response to uptightness. The trick is to offer the impression, even if it's an illusion, that teaching is as natural and improvised as entertaining your teenage nephews and nieces on a Sunday afternoon.

Where is that moleskin? I'm getting close to full lesson freak-out mode, which is only a tad less drastic than full wallet freak out mode. Which means my senses get all out of whack. I make little aimless loops around the room. From the whiteboard to my desk and then along the bookshelves, I circle, hoping it turns up, though I'm not looking too hard, probably because some despairing part of me knows its gone. I often feel like the fuck up my best friend at the school, Bellboy, called me, before we became best friends. I should ask Bellboy if he still thinks I'm a fuck-up next time I see him. By asking the question I have my answer. My Achilles heel is that sometimes I can't hold it together. I get rattled.

"Take out your notebooks," I say.

"The bell hasn't rung yet," one of the four indistinguishable ones says. It's Kirsten Vascar. Died blond hair, cheerful, chews a lot of gum. "It rang a minute ago," I point to the

clock and smile snidely. There are plenty of times I have to impose order authoritatively, but this isn't one of them.

"How are you, Mr. Lessing?" Sam says.

"Good. I'm good." Sam's way smarter than me. The son of liberal lawyers, he's already been accepted to Swarthmore, reads *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* faithfully. He's the one who I think may have been generous enough to have written one of those glowing evaluations. "Actually I have no idea how I'm doing. Is that an American thing, to just say 'good' without thinking?" I ask a curly haired girl named Alex.

"I don't know," she throws up her hands to Sam as if he caused this mess. "Why are you asking me? I'm American."

"Yeah, but your mom is French and your dad is Egyptian. That's like spending time abroad as a kid."

"*How are you doing* is an American thing?" Antonio asks suspiciously, and scowls as if I made him eat my wife's arugula salad. The bell rings, eight o'clock on the dot. Kirsten gasps indignantly. *So I was wrong*. I'm supposed to go to the door and lock it so that everyone who is late has to go back to one of the security stations that are now set up all around the school. Once their tardy is recorded, the offenders get tardy passes, which they then have to haul back to me, and show through the open window of my locked door. All that just to get back into my class, which, let's face it, they may not have wanted to attend in the first place. Who would show up anywhere unless we had to? Struggling students often don't, at least, not anywhere that is recorded by the powers that be: the teachers, the authorities, and the machines. It's because school, even schools like mine with one of the best reputations in the state, still evoke a mix of obligation and despair.

If only I were so cavalier as to fight the power indiscriminately. I don't follow the tardy policy, but not out of resolve, since I don't challenge it publicly either. A mixture of laziness, guilt, and fear makes me equally resistant and ambivalent. There is a whole slew of

tasks I abhor: attendance taking, grade posting, request forms. Anything bureaucratic and I cut corners. Of course I don't tell this to anyone, not even Bellboy.

Roughly half the class is listening. I don't have to say, *we're starting* to start; only raise my voice a little to signify we've begun. The conversations are already in progress; the goal is to make it one. A teacher merely formalizes the role of audience and actors, injects subject matter, sets up the form, and engages the performance of teaching and learning. "When I was in Prague" – I hear myself talking aloud now – "I would say, 'How are you' to my landlord and he would give me this insane look, and say, 'What iz zis *How Are Y-oo?* You do not care how I *am.*" Mamie sush-es the last talkers. The heavy accent I give my old landlord brings everyone into the fold, except Alex, who is probably waiting for me to answer her question/statement: I'm American, why are you asking me?

"Well, good morning," I say, hike up my pants, and sit on Pier One stool that I grabbed from my old apartment. I gaze out at all 25 of them as if they were endangered species. Or mountains. Or a single river with 25 rivets, dips, and currents. A class is a force of nature that elicits awe in me. "That just sounded very teacher-ly. Good morning, pupils," I repeat even more nerdily to cancel out the first one. "Sam, thanks for asking me how I'm doing. Until the moment you asked I wasn't doing too well."

"Why not?" Jazmyne says, and though she probably doesn't mean it, she comes off a little snotty. Her nose scrunches. "Well, not to be too self-indulgent but I had a bad meeting with my department head. Anyway, thanks, you woke me up out of my script."

"Script?" Jazmyne looks around. "What the hell you talking about?" She looks at the kids around her, not to see if they know, but to make sure the others agree with her assessment that I'm acting like a dumbass.

"All of you are real. Have you ever had a fantasy that you were the only real person on the Earth and everyone else was robots?" *When things feel weird, make them weirder*, my improv teacher once told me.

"What does that have to do with a script?"

“A script. The habits we all follow without even knowing we follow them. The recording that goes on in our heads, even though we never press play. The story I tell myself is that my life is doomed and I have to face it alone.”

That somehow appeases them - the examples, rather than the abstraction. “If you hadn’t said, ‘how are you?’ I might have stayed at that meeting. Not physically but you know my head would still be there. And now it’s taken me ...” I look up at the clock ... “two-minutes and thirty-eight seconds to ask a more important question: How are you all doing?”

“Me?” Alex asks.

“Sure.”

“You were looking at me.”

“Yes, because I’m talking to you. So?”

“I’m good too.” I expect her to go on.

“Is that the ‘good, yes, why wouldn’t I be good’ look? Or, the, ‘I’m not good at all but I don’t have any interest in talking about it now’ look? Or ‘I have no idea, it’s 8:00 in the morning, I can’t think, you’re talking too much?’” She laughs or sighs at the last part – I can’t tell. “I don’t know, I don’t know,” she says. I remember how early on in the year, I had told her out of the blue, “My kids are mixed” a little too enthusiastically. She had laughed and sighed then in much the same way and then made a p-u-u sound with her lips.

“Alright everyone, it’s 8:03, if your journal isn’t out by now, take it out and we’ll free write for the next 4 minutes and 22 seconds. The prompt is on the board, but as always feel free to write about that or anything else, for that matter. A grocery list, a love letter, a love letter about a missing grocery list, whatever. Ready, go.” The second they put their heads down to write I see my moleskin on my desk, right where I left it, under my lunch.

Alex’s parents are getting divorced. Her father may move back to Morocco and her mom to Italy. I know this because Alex came in at lunch one day, her eyes downcast. When she’s done telling me she finally looks up, as if telling me while looking at me would have

been too much to bear. Her hands are buried in her shirt. “It’s no big deal. It’s just drama.” I tell her *it is a big deal*, drama is making a big deal out of nothing and you’re doing the opposite.” I write her a pass to class seven minutes later than it is so she can throw water on her face and pretend everything is fine. The next week, she writes a fuller version of the story as a personal essay and includes the details of how she found out: a woman’s voice on the phone after her dad thought she had hung up. As I read it, all I can think about is how I hope I don’t fuck up my own children. One way or another, I know I will. I know all the parenting books say I *only* have to be *good enough*, the same way the teacher books say I only need *to survive*, but I can’t help feeling that will lead me to a place at the end of my life where I think: well, it was an up and down life. I made a lot of compromises, but isn’t that what life is.

The class knows none of this, because she hasn’t yet read the essay aloud. I’ve asked her to but she wants to wait a few days. The students’ lives, or more specifically, the stories they tell, their interactions with each other, and the conversations we engage in are the learning material in this class. I try to get them to consider what it is that troubles and moves them, and to know that those things matter. The goal is to get kids to care about their lives at an age, where there is a tendency to strike a pose that nothing affects them, or nothing should.

The day Alex came in at lunch her voice cracked slightly, she looked down the whole time, and wiped her eyes now and again with her sleeves. “I can’t believe I’m crying.”

“Well sometimes it’s more brave to cry than not to.”

“Mr. Lessing.”

“I know, cheesy. But it happens to be true.”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“It’s not *that* cheesy.”

“No not you. Me.”

“Most of life is embarrassing. Better to be embarrassed than numb.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“When I used to get upset, my mom would draw it out of me. I’d get really pissed at her, and feel like I had no control over my emotions. I’d say to my mom, YOU did it again. YOU made me cry.”

“And now you’ve turned into your mom, Mr. Lessing.”

“Yup, I’m my mom.”

We take a beat. She takes a deep breath and shakes a little. She looks so little. I want to give her a hug but that’s a line I don’t cross unless they initiate, or I know them really well. Instead I put my hand gently and somewhat awkwardly on her arm, and then remove it. “You might leave this conversation and feel embarrassed later. ‘What the hell was I doing crying in Lessing’s room?’” She looks up. “You should know that this is why I teach. And that I not only *don’t* feel sorry for you, I have a lot of admiration for your courage and grit in a bad situation.”

“Thanks,” she says, and I put my arm around her shoulder and bring her in close, sideways. She smiles a little for my sake, then rubs her eyes one last time, breathes in deep, and then heads off into the oblivion of the hallway.

8:05. One of my evaluation comments: *Mr. Lessing thinks everyone has a problem and he’s the only person that can solve it.* The first part rings true and is the inspiration for the writing prompt on the board. *Describe a moment of utter peace or total anxiety.* “One more minute of free-writing everyone.” Alex’s eyes glance down to her notebook, flutter, and come back up again. I look away. When she begins writing again I look back at her. Her hair falls over her face and she seems multiple ages – ten, but also 20. And looking around the room, so do most of the others. Or maybe I look at them the way I want to be seen, not fixed. When I was seventeen, more than half my lifetime ago, I worked with five year olds at Stonetop Day Camp. On the last day, when the last mom came and picked up Joanna, my favorite kid, I went to the bathroom and wept. I loved her and now I would never see her again.

When I was Joanna's age, five, my uncle took a photograph of me that I still have, thanks to my mom, who methodically saves and organizes the images and stuff that chronicle my life. (She not only dated the photograph on the back but scribbled down the location: Uncle Fred and Aunt Roz's backyard.) My body, chest up, is turned away from the camera, but my face is pointed back toward it, as if I have just whirled around. It's essentially a peekaboo shot of my face, which shines with none of the ambivalence or irony or performance that mark photos of me now.

My dream of agelessness is to escape from predetermined-ness, predictability, and endings. It's one of the best reasons to teach, be around young people, to get a whiff of their insatiability, their openness to change. To be reminded daily that we too have inner lives that are tumultuous and unpredictable. I know I'm supposed to be boxed in, consistent, static. Adulthood, Fatherhood, the Teacher: all roles that place you in proximity to potential embarrassment to your wife, your daughter, and your students.

During the entire free write, even though I tell them to keep their pens continuously moving, all I can muster on my yellow pad is *alive at the same time; I can only know now; all ageless in that way, in our momentary encounter, in this living, breathing, moment*. And then below: *I am a fucking hippie*. Another line down: *My foot hurts. Make doctor appointment*. I look out the window and try and flip my pen in-between my fingers like Tom Cruise does in *Top Gun*. My pen, though, ends up on the floor.

My classroom faces west. Mornings the floors have an untrammelled cleanliness. On days like this when fall can barely hold back winter, I dig in the back of my closet for the sweaters that have been packed away for months. The radiators churn and jar themselves back to activity. There's something cozy about being in a school when it first gets cold outside, especially in the morning. What could be better than to be surrounded by interesting, attractive, magnetic young people? Even if I am not like them anymore. If I ever was.

“OK make this your last sentence ...” I say and casually flip through what I’ve written. I nod at a few of the students when they put their pens down, as if they were co-conspirators in what will come next. My handwriting, which looks only a little more legible than it did in 7th grade, always perplexes me, like looking in the mirror. That’s me?

Here’s what I have written in the moleskin:

Experiments: Tuesday, November 9th

1. *Free Write*
2. *Matrix Circle*¹¹ (*start with appreciations*)
3. *Read Personal Essays*

I thought there would be more. “Come back to the circle – make room for Sophia.”

“Are we meditating today Mr. Lessing?”

“We’re always meditating, Cecily.”

“You’re weird.”

“And you’re just figuring that out ...?”

“I think we should Matrix,” Tim says. “I have something to say.”

“That sounds so *scary*,” Cecily says.

“You’re scary,” Tim says and his cronies laugh. Cecily makes an ugly face

accompanied by imitative snorting sounds to indicate that it’s Tim who’s the ugly one. And

I watch it all and have to decide what kind of intervention, as the higher-ups call it these

days, is required. I could potentially

- a. Do nothing. Not exactly pretending it didn’t happen; more like letting it pass, like a brush-up on the playground that will sort itself out.

¹¹ The Matrix, a group leadership design formed by Amina Knowlan offers a way to both form, and participate in, groups that value shared leadership. The fundamental organizing principle is that one person talks to another person while the rest of the group watches and listens. i.e. Tim says, “Hey Alex, so this week I’m applying for colleges and I’m really nervous.” Alex responds to the content but also speaks to the connection between her and Tim i.e. “Yeah, you’re nervous, that’s great because I’m scared shitless and I always saw you as kind of Mr. Cool. That makes me feel better to know that you’re freaking out too.” It ensures that somebody actually listens and responds to both the content of the words and explicitly recognizes the human connection that is usually left unspoken in every social interaction.

b. Play judge. Say something like, “Tim, Cecily, you want to work this out?” This might elicit two semi-sincere ‘sorry(s)’ or one sorry and nothing back. Or worst of all, no sorry(s), with taunts from Tim and Cecily’s friends.

c. Make a joke. For instance: use Kelvin, a likeable go-with-the-flow kid, as a foil, and say, “You have Cooties.” Or, go outright mockery: “Tim and Cecily” (said in therapy voice), “I love the way you handled that. It was a beautiful exchange.”

d. Or I could perform the most stereotypical teacher move of all; by attempting a menacing stare and saying “Enough.”

I choose E, a loose combination of C and D and say, “And . . . scene, gooooo. Great performance.” Right after they laugh, I say, “See me after class.” They’re not really in trouble, which they know, but they’re also not beyond rebuke, which they also know. In pretending they are in trouble, I’ve hopefully conveyed that they should watch it a little bit without browbeating them into shut down mode. I swear teenagers are delicate machines. I’ll never figure them out, thank god for that.

“We can meditate, matrix, and read our personal essays. There’s time.” I look at Alex and can tell she wants time to go away. She wants class to slip by, so that the school day can end, so she can go home and sleep, get it over with, finish this ordeal. Her father, then, can finally end the marriage and end her torture of having to carry so many secrets, so much weight. She wants each moment to come up and steal the moment in front of it. Maybe then she won’t have to confront the stupidity of trying to make any sense of what’s happening to her family.

8:08 “Before we get started, I’m proud of you, Shelby, for reading your piece yesterday, and to the class for holding it. It’s still with me.” A majority of the class twinkles¹²

¹² Twinkle is a hand gesture made by pressing four fingers into your thumb like a mouth closing. Repeated, it gives your hand the appearance of a hungry Pac Man. To twinkle means agreeing with the speaker’s last statement. Its inverse, when you strongly disagree, is ouch, which you achieve by saying, ‘ouch!’

“Let’s talk about the writing. The anecdote to start the piece hooked us, right? That’s how our minds work and connect to issues: it’s the specifics, not the generalities that grab us. It took a lot of courage to tell that story.”

“I didn’t get a chance to read to you what I thought was a really powerful line. ‘I dart off to the bathroom filled with shame and dread. I’m not as perfect as my mom thinks I am, but she can never know.’ I look at Shelby and she smiles shyly. “What lines or images are still in your heads from yesterday?” Alex looks at me and then glances down, her signal not to call on her. “We got cut off yesterday so let’s finish up our feedback. That’s my hint-hint for start talking.”

Caroline is intellectual and curly haired (and not Jewish, as I falsely presumed: *Are you Jewish? Nope. Really? No. Are you sure?* I think I would know). She says, “Shelby, I just want to say that I’ve known you for ten years, and I didn’t know any of that about you. I didn’t know your brother even had autism. I think that took a lot of courage to say.”

Shelby looks a little embarrassed. Why are we talking about her? Wasn’t that yesterday? Does she really have to go through this again?

“How long have you known each other?” Kelvin asks.

“Since we were five,” they both answer at the same time.

“Our moms used to pick us up and bring the same Snack-ables,” Shelby adds.

“I can’t believe you remember that!” Caroline squeals. They giggle at each other and have a quick exchange where they both talk at the same time. I catch, “salami,” “spit-up,” “sticky hands,” and “gross.” Alex tries to smile with them but she can’t. Tim wants to talk too. And what about Antonio? And all of the others I haven’t even talked about. Most everyone speaks up in this class, so if today is not their day, you’ll meet them tomorrow.

8:13 “Alright, Matrix.” After a few quick interactions and words of appreciation, Tim takes a deep breath, flays his arm out, and clears his throat. “Sam,” he says and Samantha turns to look at him. What will happen next is anyone’s guess, which is why we all listen

intently. The kids view this class, and Matrix, in particular, like a crossover between group therapy and reality television. They like the risk and the sincerity of sitting in a circle. They relish the responsibility of listening to each other's stories, of containing the heat of the moment like big stones in a campfire. There are fewer holdovers now who think this is a blow-off class, who like it only because it sure as hell beats real work. For the most part this group is into it for its own sake. "I just want to tell you I'm sorry if I was like, a dick in sixth grade. With everything that happened with ..." He's mumbling an apology without going into the messy details.

Samantha flips her blond hair back behind her head and tells him it's no problem. I want to interrupt and ask the question my Matrix teacher always intervened with: *can you respond with your connection to Tim?* Words are always borrowed, recycled, and reconfigured. The classroom is no different, and it really is true that if you say a word over and over again it becomes yours. As is so often the case when you're trying to prove something, like I am now, the opposite also rings true – say a word enough times and it means nothing.

Before I shortened my name to Avi, introducing myself was a nightmare. What's your name? Avram. Rob? No, Avram. Avslach? Is that supposed to be funny? It's a hard name to pronounce. Maybe you just don't want to. Avram. Avram. But by that time they're gone. By the end of it, I hardly know myself how to say my name, what it means, or why my parents named me with a combination of letters that other people couldn't pronounce. What are letters to begin with, I think disorienting, sounds are so strange, how did anyone originally make sense of anything?

I intervene, or else Tim and Samantha will shyly skim over what happened from 6th grade. I don't quite believe Tim's mea culpa or Sam's shrug off, which is why I say "there's more there," the kind of exasperating, ambiguous line that makes things initially worse, but better eventually, at least I hope. "What do you want me to say?" Samantha says.

"I want you to tell him the truth."

Some look at me now with outright hostility. “Shit, Mr. Lessing just sold Samantha the fuck out,” Antonio says to nobody in particular. Everyone stewes a little in the discomfort of not knowing who goes next. Except for me because I love awkwardness, though if I’m honest, it’s really only other peoples’ that I can enjoy with real abandon.

“OK Mr. Lessing, stop looking at me like that.”

I gesture for Samantha to speak, it’s her turn.

“What are you apologizing for Tim?”

“Aw man, Mr. Lessing,” Tim says, and looks at me. It’s more puppeteering than I want to be doing so I just make the same gesture I made to Sam. The underhand, half-crescent, directive: talk. “Sam, I’m sorry that Zac and I told you Tony liked you when he didn’t.” Sam turns a little red at the recollection. They both look down.

“Samantha?” I say. “Do you have anything you want to say?”

The class is getting a little anxious. Antonio says, “Mr. Lessing! Shame!” Why am I pushing this so much? Let them talk. I am getting tense in my body too. My neck feels heavy on my shoulders, a little tingly.

“What do you want me to say?”

Twenty-five faces turn to me. *What do I want them to say?*

Tim looks at me pleadingly. He’s done his part, right? He’s a basketball player, but he’s thinking about quitting the team. Not enough playing time. He wears his hair short, and he’s dressed in full nylon, Nike regalia. He always has a shit-eating grin on his face, even now, but he’s a sweet kid. The kind who pushes against your line and sometimes just over, but will jump back if he has to.

Give in, I think. Over Tim’s head, Bob Dylan’s head ensconced in blue, seems to be saying, I’m cooler than you. He must be around 25 in that photograph. His hair has a good level of curl, a good hair day. I can get my hair to look like that but I have to wet it down a bunch. But I can’t smoke like that with the cigarette just dangling. I’m too much of a mouth breather. My friend says if I squished my parents’ faces together I’d get Bob Dylan.

But they did squish their bodies together, and they got me instead. Does that mean I could've been Bob Dylan if they had conceived me on a different day? Even if I looked like Bob Dylan, I wouldn't be Bob Dylan. And if I was him, I wouldn't get the pleasure of simultaneously not being *me*. Nobody gets to be anyone else but themselves. People lose sight of that when they want to be someone else.

“Look, I just want to acknowledge a couple of things. One, this is hard. We tend to keep things buried instead of saying them because it's easier that way.”

“Why say it then? Why make them say it?” It's one of the indistinguishables from the beginning of class. Their names are Kirsten, Kristen, Kelly, and Val. They always sit together. I can't tell which one said it. “I mean, why get specific?” I see now that it's Val speaking, the most idealistic of the four. She says it more reasonably this time, like she's genuinely curious.

“Well without sidetracking us too much, it's important to name our world.”

I look at Alex and I know the opposite is true as well. It's important to avoid naming our world. Dissect, psychoanalyze, remember, and experience too much and who's to tell what will come out? Sometimes, compartmentalizing, rationalizing, and disassociating are the way to go, as much as I hate to admit it.

“It's important to name our world because it lets what's scary not have such a hold on us. When I was seven years old, my father took me for a weekend trip to Camp Oconomowoc, in Wisconsin, where he was lecturing. It was a Jewish camp my brother went to. My dad and I stayed in the same room and if I remember it correctly, he left me alone there, at night. Maybe he thought I was asleep, maybe he arranged it with me beforehand. When I woke up, he was gone. The bed was too small and the blankets were too itchy and brown. Anyway, I remember thinking *I am going to die*. Maybe not right this instant but it will happen and then where will I be?”

The class is silent, mostly attentive. I'm telling them without thinking about death. It's a story about death, but I'm not feeling that cold, panic of being seven, not because I'm

37, but because it's daytime. Outside, the wind has picked up, you can see the treetops swaying in unison. Out beyond, I can see the recreational fields where kids are playing ultimate Frisbee for P.E. I do feel a little tinge of sorrow in my chest – hard to tell if it's a benevolent or despairing feeling coming on. And wouldn't that be telling if the very point I'm trying to make by telling my story ends up supporting the skepticism that everyone around me feels.

“I wasn't in control of my thoughts, they were in control of me. Like a runaway truck. Not only will I die, I thought, but also, I'll never live again and then my mind could go no further. Each time I'd be sent up against a wordless, purposeless abyss. Many of you probably have had a similar thought process. This is the existential dilemma that Ernest Becker outlines in *The Denial of Death*, that we read an excerpt from last week. In a similar vein, there's a hilarious and terrifying monologue from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, by Tom Stoppard, that exposes the comedy of it all. I mean fact is, we're all going to die. Why did I think my plight was so unique? Why do I still? Maybe the Woody Allen line that sums it up – ‘I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens.’”

“That's a lot of quoting Mr. Lessing,” Antonio says and slumps his head on his hands.

“Anyway, every night since that camp night I've had this recurring thought-train before I go to bed or in the middle of the night. On the nights I let myself be, or meditate, or just exist, I don't become so terrified. Nights I don't, when I cradle my iPhone like a little pet, or watch too much TV, I usually wake up with a nightmare between three and four a.m. When I'm afraid it's as if my soul wants to leave my body. When I was a kid, the dying thought would hit me with such force, I'd find myself running down the hall to my parents' door, where I would stop, paralyzed, unable to knock. Shit, they were going to die too.”

“Just to wrap up this little story, sorry it's taken so long to answer – these realizations happened when I went into therapy, not the time in middle school, where my parents made me, but when I chose to go at your age. I talked about that fear, and a bunch of others. And I was way less afraid. I noticed after. Not all at once, and not permanently, but it helped. So

that's the goal. It would be great to run from all the stuff that scares us, makes us cringe, upsets us, but - and this is my bias - that doesn't work. It just makes us combust."

There's a brief but painful cringing moment where I hear my own voice. I am well aware of my hypocrisy. Do I live this stuff I am talking about? I try. I also avoid trying. When I was sixteen, I used to read the sports section in the dark, with only my bedside lamp. Now the bedside lamp is my iPhone and all those apps - ESPN, Facebook, Wikipedia, IMDB, texting, New York Times, Huffington Post, the Kindle reader and Yelp - are in the palm of my hand, whispering, *run-escape-run-escape*.

"So Samantha, when I ask you to respond, it's not out of wanting to humiliate you, or put you on the spot, or elicit the response I want to hear. It just feels like there's more there."

"Well ..." she says, and she runs her hands in her hair and trembles a little.

"I'm sorry," Tim says.

"No, it's not you. I mean it was you, then. It was the whole thing. I just ..."

"Can I say something?" Marcus says.

"No," I say, let them finish." Marcus glares at me. Maybe he's the one who wrote on my evaluation: *Mr. Lessing thinks everyone has a problem and he's the only who can solve it.*

Three kids raise their hands.

"Put your hands down. Let Samantha finish what she wants to say. Also, I'm ok with people being mad here. Samantha is allowed to be upset. Marcus is allowed to be mad at me and I'm allowed to tell you to wait a second." She tilts her head to the side a little and grimaces.

"I got teased a lot in middle school," she whispers. "You weren't the only one who did it, Tim, trust me." She sticks out her hand like a stop sign, which makes Tim involuntarily tilt his head down. If you saw her on the street you would think she was in business school; she is dressed a little like Condoleezza Rice when she was Secretary of State. Samantha plays clarinet in the orchestra; there must be a concert today. She's holding it

together, but barely. Even Antonio, who always looks a little self-conscious and out of place, has a serious look on his face, like he's into it, and not because I made him. I suspect this is not just out of respect to Samantha, but out of sheer surprise that she has any problems at all.

Alex lifts her feet off the floor on to the edge of her chair, wraps her arms around her legs, and rests her chin in the space between her knees. Boy-Sam blows his hair up off his face. Mamie's face is a little red and the four Indistinguishables all lean forward.

Samantha collects herself, then spills it out all at once. "My family doesn't have a lot of money. My dad went to prison." Tim buries his head further into his hoodie. Alex lifts her chin and lays it back down. Two classmates tentatively scootch toward her. Antonio is shaking his head slowly back and forth in the 'no' gesture.

"I didn't know." Tim looks guiltily at his hands.

"Nobody did."

Tim bites his lower lip and throws a leg out to the center of the class.

"I knew he worked at the Board of Trade, but I never asked him about work, even when things got bad. Him and my mom were getting into fights all of the time, I mean, all of the time. I'd run into my room, and I'd hear, 'Don't talk to me that way, woman!' Isn't that screwed up? At his most angry, he'd call her 'woman.' Next thing I'd hear was his car screeching down the driveway to who knows where. Later, when he sold his car, I knew things were bad. He loved that car."

"What kind of car?" Antonio says.

"Go on," I say.

"I would sit with my sister in my room, just telling her it was ok. But it wasn't ok. And then one day he didn't come home, and my mom said he would be gone for a while. I was ten."

"When does he get out?" Tim asked.

"Next month."

I look around at everyone. I see a mixture of surprise, helplessness, recognition, attentiveness and anxiety in the room. I am a mixture of surprise, helplessness, anxiety, and attentiveness. I can hear Jeff Snyder, the history teacher, through the wall. We're in one of those partition rooms. Later in the day we'll teach American Studies together, a unit on the depression, and *Death of a Salesman*. When the wall opens up each partition folds into the next, and the Bob Dylan poster, a Rembrandt self-portrait, and a Beatles Yellow Submarine poster all collapse on one another. Moments like these feel like they mean everything in the short term; but in the long term, they don't mean much. But you never can tell. Maybe they do.

I take a deep breath, like I was taught in meditation class, coming up from my abdomen, into my stomach, chest and collar-bone, filling up like a balloon, and then exhaling out of my mouth, collarbone, chest, stomach, abdomen, deflating. *Did I close the garage this morning?*

Samantha looks at me and then glances down.

"It would be easy to just move on to the next thing, or to tell her that everything's going to be ok. Those are our usual responses to bad news. Fix it or run from it. But I think what we're practicing here is something completely different." I pause to let that sink in. From the other room across the partition I hear, "Was Aaron Burr corrupt may not be the right question. This is a guy who punked Hamilton with a cheap shot in a duel and killed him. He started a rebellion in the West. And if that's not bad enough, he's a New Yorker. Is he a *moron* may be the better right question?" A bunch of kids laugh in his room. Which makes a few kids in my room laugh, which makes a few kids in his room laugh, and that combination makes most people from both rooms lose it. Samantha isn't laughing though. *Bring the class back.*

"Actually what happened in the other room is apropos of not ignoring what happens. What just happened?"

"What are you talking about?" Jazymyne scowls at me.

“I’m talking about being ourselves here, that everything counts.”

Boy-Sam says, “Snyder just did his bit where he shreds Aaron Burr to pieces.”

“You have Snyder for history?” I ask.

“Last year, 1st period, Mr. Lessing,” he says sing-songy. Sam belongs in a different century, one where people tip their hats and ride in carriages. Even his small compact features and ruddy cheeks have an historical feel to them.

Lisa, a goofy and loveable blond haired girl who doesn’t know yet how pretty she is, grunts nervously, “I think my dad’s part of the Aaron Burr society.”

Another kid goes, “Who’s Aaron Burr? And why does he have a society?”

A number of conversations break out spontaneously. One pair of theater girls repeats the word *society* back and forth in faux aristocratic voices with their faces pressed up closely to each other. A couple of guys start talking about what they’re going to do that weekend. “That party is going to be off the hook,” one says and the other responds with a quick gesture that makes his hand seem like its own living organism and says something like fly, or smashin’ - slang that makes me feel deficient about slang. I think how Rick Ayers’ slang dictionary book was a great book idea. Will I ever have a great book idea?

So much for bringing the class back. I have seemingly no defense against classroom chaos. Either, I get disproportionately angry, make it worse by joining in, or fly away in my head.

How can I bring our attention back? Is Girl-Sam ok? Tim is rubbing his fingers over his biceps. Alex is slumped over her journal. I can’t tell if she’s reading, writing, or sleeping. Lisa, who started all this looks over at me somewhat accusingly: *Get things back in order; teach, man, teach.*

There’s always a moment if you wait long enough that they’ll police themselves. This time it’s Tim. “Quiet, Mr. Lessing wants everyone quiet.” He says it as if he himself wasn’t talking the second before. And it’s Tim who wants to keep going even though he’s putting it

on me, which is fine, because everyone's quiet; though, there are some questioning looks from Antonio and Letrice, who are sitting next to him. *Who are you telling to be quiet?*

"Everyone, if we can't work it out in here, then how do we expect our government to solve its problems. You saw what happened to Hamilton. Let's bring it back to our work here before we have our own brawl."

Antonio says, "He says brawl all nasal like."

8:38 I look at Letrice, Antonio, Jazmyne, Maurice, and a couple of other black students. The statistics about black men say they know someone in prison, possibly even a close family member. For white people, prison, or even jail, is a shocker, but for people of color, particularly black people, it's a thread that makes up the fabric of their existence. If you're a black man and you don't graduate high school, you have a better chance of going to prison than not. How would I even bring that point up? *Letrice, you probably know someone in prison?* Antonio, are you familiar with Adam Gopnik's New Yorker piece, "the Caging of America." *Excuse me.* You don't? *I think you're making an assumption Mr. Lessing.* Do you know someone in prison? *That's none of your business.* None of that would fly, better to take it slow, tease it out in a different way.

"Let's continue, maybe with a new pair. I think Sam and Tim have chewed off a bunch for the group."

"Can I say one more thing?" Tim says.

"Of course."

"I just want to say to Sam that what you said really changes the way I see you. I mean not change in a bad way. I'm saying it wrong."

"You're attracted to her, you mean," one of his cronies says.

"Shut up," Tim says and stares him down before continuing. "I never knew those things. I would never have guessed those things happened to you. You seem so put together."

“Thanks,” Sam says.

“That was perfect,” I say to Tim, who winks at me. His jock persona safely secured, the order of the universe having been restored, he returns to rubbing his biceps.

“I actually have something that I want to say,” Alex says. The whole class holds their breath a little bit. How much can they take in for one class period?

“Do you have someone you want to say it to?”

“No.”

The class collectively laughs.

“Well, pick someone who you feel like talking to.”

“I’ll talk to Maurice.”

Maurice is a kid who doesn’t seem like a kid. It’s not just the designer clothes he wears, or adult looking he is, it’s his general seriousness. He’s read poetry to audiences far larger than the ones I used to perform in front of back when I did improv.

“Go head, Alex,” he nods confidently.

“I just need to get this off my chest. My dad is such an asshole.” She laughs as she swipes at her eyes with the sleeves of her hoodie. “I know I sound like the typical idiot teenage girl, but really, he really is one.”

Maurice nods and in his nod I get why Alex is talking to Maurice. Maurice doesn’t hate his dad because he has no dad to hate. I half expect him to egg her on. Like, whose dad isn’t? “Yeah, I just needed to say that.”

“Why is your dad an asshole?” Maurice says. And I stop myself from intervening with *where does that question come from?* My concern is that it doesn’t turn into an interview about Alex. That was the revelation of the Matrix training for me, the reason why I use it in class, the power of having every interaction focus not on what an individual says, but on the connection between two.

“He’s leaving my mom. He cheated on my mom.”

Maurice shakes his head slowly and disapprovingly. He’s on her side.

“And now he wants me to come to Morocco for the summer and I don’t want to go.”

“Do you have to go?” Letrice asks.

“Yeah, do you have to?” Maurice says.

“Right, I’m saying don’t go.” Letrice says.

“I’m seventeen,” Alex says. And now the whole class is nodding because they’re all either seventeen or eighteen and the difference can mean everything, even if they don’t have the jargon or know the legalese behind it, they all speak the language of powerlessness.

“Well,” Maurice says, “not that it’ll make you feel any better but I don’t *ever* want to meet my biological father. He’s a punk.” A wave of darkness and defiance passes over Maurice’s face. “Man if I saw that dude on the street…” and he looks over at his buddy, who cracks up in solidarity, “I would knock him out.”

“That’s still your dad you’re talking about,” Letrice says.

“I do not care,” Maurice says, punctuating each word. Alex seems to draw strength from Maurice’s anger. “Dad? That’s nothing but biology right there. You’re a pretty, smart, sensitive person, Alex.” A couple of girls make the “awwww” sound, which makes me a little nauseous. “You’re going to end up on top.”

“Thanks Maurice.”

Tim pipes up, parodying my voice, all nasal and breathy: “How does that impact your connection to one another?”

“Me and Alex? Me and Alex are cool.”

“Talk to Alex,” Tim says continuing the parody. Extra nasal. More laughter. I’d interrupt, give Tim a look, but fact is, he’s doing a nice job facilitating.

“Talk to Alex,” I say.

“You and I are cool, shit.” He’s got a little attitude that I’m making him go through this extra step but he’s strictly playing with his anger. It’s not the punch his father in the face anger. It’s a half-mocking, half-serious response to my insistence. He’ll do what I say but he’ll say it in his own time, in his own way, in a way that feels natural to him. “Alex,

you're my girl, you know that. I'm sorry you're going through all of this but you'll be strong through it if you're strong inside of it."

"Perfect."

"You see that?" he says to his Letrice? "I'm perfect."

"Alex is laughing a lot too." I exhale. 8:44. "All right, let's check out," I say.

"Can I say something?" Nelson, a pudgy, disheveled white kid asks.

"Actually Nelson, we're out of time today. How about we bookmark it for tomorrow?"

"I *really* need to say this."

"I don't think it's a good idea Nelson. And I'll tell you why."

"Because it's *me*."

A few folks groan. "Go ahead, Nelson," Alex encourages.

"No it's *too late*," Nelson sulks, which elicits a full-throated groan, this one filled out, more mob-like.

"Nelson. Calm down and hear me out."

"We *still* have five minutes."

The gulf between what I want to say and what I should say seems too large to cross. I turn to Alex and immediately feel better. Is it because she's a beautiful, olive-skin, sensitive, smart girl whereas Nelson is a short, pudgy, slightly stinky, white boy? Or is it because her pain is pure and vulnerable and Nelson's is more dirtied and indirect. Am I denying him the very chance I gave Alex and Sam, Maurice and Tim? Which is it? Do I dislike Nelson because I sense he's lying when he talks or because he's unlikeable? And isn't it so much easier to like Alex than to like Nelson. Am I still angling my way closer to people I find cool and attractive and further distancing myself from what's ugly and unmanageable? None of it changes the fact that there are only five minutes left. And I know what Nelson wants to do, share his story, get in on the action.

I've learned from experience that it's best not to bring up new material when it's only

likely to unsettle people further, before they have to go off to Chemistry, P.E., their counselors, to the business that makes up the day. Ever since a parent accused me of “*disorganizing* the kids,” and I consulted with the social workers, I try to leave a little buffer time before the end of class.

Nelson’s head is turned away. Pouting. I had told his dean a few months back that I didn’t think this would be a good class for him. He put him in anyway. And now he was spoiling a really good class. Or did I spoil it?

8:45: “I’ll start my check out by saying how impressed I was with the interactions that took place today. It’s a privilege to be in the room with you all. And Sam and Alex, Maurice, and Tim, you shared a bunch today. You might feel a bit of doubt when you leave, like, ‘why did I say that?’ Just remember, we were all listening. And I want to acknowledge that Nelson didn’t get to share what he wanted to today. And I know I shut you down pretty hard; let’s try again tomorrow, ok?” That’s all I can muster.

“Thank you,” he says. But sanctimoniously, so my face burns.

“All right let’s check out, yes? We’ll start with Boy-Sam and go clockwise. One word or phrase that resonates with you or that you’re taking away from today’s class.”

“Hey, did you see the Hawks game last night?” Snyder asks me

“Yeah, the last few minutes,” I lie.

“That 4th line has been unbelievable. That’s the 7th time in the last 9 games they’ve either had the game tying or the game winning goal.” “Hmph,” I say. Toni Miller, a French teacher comes in, big bag slung over her shoulder. A changing of the guard. Got to clear out of the room 2nd period. She teaches here. I go to my supervisory.

“Hey Mr. Lessing.” It’s Lizzie Pritikin bounding by. She whirls around. All her energy shoots out and up. “Is that Salinger paper due tomorrow?”

“Yep,” I say in that automated way, without really even knowing whom I’m answering

and what I'm saying. I go back into my room worried that I forgot something on my desk.

"Let's see, what do I need to take with me to the computer lab?"

"What are you *doing*, Mr. Lessing?"

"You're still here, Lizzie?"

"Are you talking to yourself, Mr. Lessing?"

"Looking for my papers. I can't believe I lost my moleskin again."

"You are talking to yourself. Mr. Lessing, you're crazy."

I point my hands at each other, like two like puppets. *Make things weirder*. "Hello, Mr. Lessing, how are you feeling today? Well, a little sad, winter is coming soo-on."

"Oh my god, Mr. Lessing, you are the weirdest person in the entire universe."

"She thinks we're really weird," one puppet says. The other says, "But she doesn't know everyone in the universe. She doesn't even know everyone in her class."

"Good-bye, Mr. Lessing, oh my god," she says. "Mr. Lessing." She's back. It's just her head peering in the door. "We're still meeting at lunch, right?"

"Yep, let's meet here."

"Cool."

And from the hall I hear, "You're never going to believe what Mr. Lessing..." and then is drowned out, which gives me great pleasure, because as I said, I love attention.

"I'm going to take off, Lessing," Snyder says.

"Yeah, great Hawks game last night"

"Mr. Lessing, do you *even* know I'm here? I was *hoping* to talk with you about what about happened in class today?" Nelson says.

"Nelson! You scared me. Don't hide in the corner!"

"I'm not hiding."

"You're behind the door."

"But not hiding."

"How about you come in at lunch, I've got to go." That seems to be my answer to

everything these days. *Come in for lunch, email me, we'll talk in a bit.* Everything a deferral for later.

“I was hoping for privacy.”

“Nelson, I have to go. Lunch back here, ok?”

When I dislike people I never really know why. I can never justify my intense feeling of physical discomfort and strangulation that creeps up and crawls all over me. I can feel the words *Shut the Fuck Up* bubbling like bile in the back of my throat. Why do I hate this kid? *You don't hate him. You dislike him.* Fine, but right now I hate him. I don't like him on account of being a little stinky, disheveled, insecure, ghoulish, boy. *But why hate?* I don't know. *Maybe you just hate the circumstances.* Maybe.

The intensity of my dislike unsettles me. It's unseemly in a teacher, in any adult who works with kids. So his clothes are worn and too big. Maybe he can't afford clothes. Maybe he's homeless. Maybe he has not hot water. I chastise myself. Maybe he's overweight because of a hormone imbalance. Do I really know? What kind of teacher am I? What kind of person feels hate for his own students? Especially one espousing love all the time.

Shut the fuck up I actually say out loud to nobody in particular and everything and everyone in general. Profanity has its place in school too. It's the unhealthy treat I give myself as I head out into the long hallway, which is getting filled again from end to end. I'm stuck in the hallway again, amongst the masses.

Most students walk with their head on a swivel looking side to side. Most teachers walk with their heads down or straight ahead. It's the difference between having a social life at school and having a job to do. Over the tops of the students' heads, a ways down the hall, I see Ben Tucker approaching. Great reputation. Martin calls him the best practitioner in the department. Like Martin, he wears khakis and teaches AP English. And like me, he teaches American Studies. What's unique about Ben is that his students' blog. And second semester seniors can call him by his first name.

“Hey Avi,” he says and keeps walking. I feel myself subject to automated replies and not enough space. My brain feels scrunched. When I don’t know what to do or say I start talking to myself. I must look like one of those Hassidic types praying by the Wailing Wall, except I’m not praying. I’m berating.

You should grade 5 papers, check weekly plans for Experiments, and pass back the essays -- also, don't forget to introduce the third essay. The college one? Yeah, the college one. What about some leisure time? You didn't take this job for leisure. Take your break when you poop. In the bathroom? That's where I get my break? The bathroom can be relaxing. Not in a school. If you do it right, it can be. And what would that mean? It means reading the sports paper for 7 minutes. I guess you're right. See, trust me. Also, don't forget to call the plumber, get a better estimate than 1200 dollars or you can kiss that trip to San Francisco goodbye. How am I supposed to relax if you keep giving me tasks to do? Hey, stop complaining about problems that 99 percent of the world doesn't have. You're the 1 percent motherfucker.

I see Bill Clement, an administrator. The less I want to talk to people the more I sometimes perversely head towards them, like some kind of dark, magnetic force. I suppose those are the same reasons Nelson comes to me. In this case, I say, “Hey Bill,” as he passes, which was unnecessary, because he didn’t see me, or if he did, he wasn’t angling to talk. I don’t especially want to talk to Clement because he’s my boss’s boss, because he’s going to fuck up my self-talk, and because I have to use the bathroom (I have a very small bladder).

“Avi, can I talk to you for a second?” And when he says, “Can I talk to you a second,” my heart feels unnaturally loose in my chest cavity.” *You're not getting fired.* But that’s what it feels like. *Just focus.* Like the end, like death. It could be anything: a complaint from another teacher, a parent, a student, an administrative error. It all feels like a wave coming in the distance, when you’re too far out in the water to get back to shore. And, on top of it all, I may be having a small, undetectable heart attack that will nevertheless shave a year or two off my life. NPR had an interview with this New York Times Health writer that

revealed the latest science about work related stress. It can reduce a person's lifespan by 3 months to 5 years depending on the severity of the external pressure and the resiliency of particular individual. *That doesn't help you know.* Hey, sometimes nothing does.

Bill has one of those voices that confer knowledge and gravitas to everything he says. "I wanted to talk to you about some of the SEL work you've been doing and perhaps tie it to student outcomes across a longitudinal study that we're doing with students of color in English classes."

"Oh, cool," I say. It doesn't sound cool at all. But in the moment it does kind of sound cool, like Bill may be bringing me into something bigger than what my limited mind can grasp.

"Let me ask you a question." Even though he's only a shade taller than me, he has good posture and wears a tie every day, which makes his status feel more pronounced. "How do you tie your SEL work to student outcomes?"

"Hmm," I say to give me time to think it over, but quickly blurt out remorsefully, "I'm not sure I do tie it to student outcomes."

"Hold on a second. Let's start over. Do you have learning targets?"

"Like goals?"

"Targets. A shared map, easily discernible to students that indicates three things: where to go, how to get there, and a landmark that proves they've gotten where you said they would. That work, Avi, you're already doing. You just have to make it more explicit."

"I am? I do?"

"Do you articulate conditioned targets to students in a learner friendly, student-centered, daily-mapped-out-plan per instructions on the shared drive?"

"I mean I hope that's one of my strengths, really getting to their level. Freire has this whole theory about naming your world..."

"And do you find ways to measure their participation, their habitual outputs, and whether or not they are achieving the results indicated in SIP?"

“I haven’t necessarily set up a way of ...”

“You could substitute a whole host of other measuring devices in the mix, the POINT IS, Avi, you’ve identified targets,” (one finger jabbed in the air), “you’ve nailed down the scaffolding that drives learning,” (thumb juts out) “and you’ve ferreted out the underperformers, and assessed for whether or not you’ve arrived at the place you said you were going to go.” (The middle finger triumphantly raises up, eye level)

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” I reply weakly.

“Would you be willing to share some of your data-driven work with the faculty?”

“Sure, I mean...”

“Good, I’ll be in touch with you regarding faculty wide protocols, PDF formatting, iterant steps, and get you linked to the Professional Development Team that will be coordinating your efforts. In the interim, stop by Debbie’s office and let her know that Bill said you will be presenting to the entire faculty on December 22nd.”

“Cool.” And because there is nothing left to say, I shift topics. “How are things otherwise?”

“Living the dream.” His jaw tightens a little and we walk on in separate directions.

I see Dan Verona, another close friend, in his office and even though I’m running late – it’s 8:52 -- to my supervisory in the tutoring center, I duck in for a second. Dan is handsome, short, and Jewish. His shortness doesn’t stand out though because he’s built, but not overly, with good posture. Ever since he started on a diet consisting mostly of fruits and nuts, he’s stayed at a good weight. He’s a damn good dresser too, with an assortment of shoes and zip up sweatshirts from trendy Wicker Park resale shops. He has dark-sinking, sad eyes, and a low, melodic voice.

I like to talk to Dan because we can assume a baseline of misery, both real and pretend.

Dan's got a sweet gig where he doesn't have a teaching load, per se. He negotiated a position as resident poet, activist, and social worker; the guy's worth his weight in gold, though, there's nobody like him. Like me, Dan has his share of detractors, the students that say sarcastically, "Oh yeah, *he saves lives.*" The universally loved teacher is a rarity, if not an outright myth. The moment I start to compare myself to Dan, I feel some dread. Will I ever be as competent as he is? As good of a teacher? As recognized? As beloved? That's when I think what does it matter anyway since we all perish, and then I remember what Bindi, my wife, told me once when I turned away from her in bed: "Don't turn to death, turn back to me, to love."

I want to talk to Dan for a couple of minutes but I can't make up my mind. I start talking to myself again. *Talk to him for minutes. And then go to Supervisory for God's sake, you have to grade.* You're hard on me. *I have to be, if it was up to you, you'd waste the day away.* I'll keep it short. *You promised paper grading.* At least the Experiments class is planned through the end of next week -- remember how it used to be? *I remember half the time you were a wreck, you want to go back there?* Give me a minute. *You've got a list of things to do that could take you a lifetime.*

I kind of feel spacey after my interaction with Clement, like I may have the flu. I'm not paranoid often but when I am it can be pretty intense.

I turn slightly and fart against Dan's door and that makes me feel better, as if that were one less thing I had to do. "Dan. What's going on?"

"Did you just fart?"

"Yeah: Watson. Too much cream cheese."

We call farts Watsons ever since we were in the parking lot talking and Dan farted just as Michael Watson, the head of the history department, walked by. The stench was palpable, and when Watson was safely in his car, we laughed in the way you do when you're in third grade and get kicked out of class, but it's so funny, so fantastic you laugh even more uncontrollably, without effort, and for those moments, you don't even care what consequences you have to face as a result.

Dan is at his usual spot, swivel chair at an unusually low rung, slung back, low rider, tapping away at his computer.

He doesn't look up. "I'm pretty busy." I start to leave. "What about you Avi?"

"Yeah, not much." I don't want to get into it.

"Alright," Dan says. "Can you talk at lunch?"

"Of course."

There are a group of girls hanging out by their lockers near Dan's room. They're friends with Lizzie, the one who stopped by to ask about the Joyce assignment. They look up, smile warmly, and return to the tight grip of their little circle. They're all wearing loose tops over tights, with required brown boots, and they look closer to 23 than 17. I look at them and then feel embarrassed to have done so.

Popular girls: a timeless breed. They sit in a tight knit clump in the hallway mostly oblivious to the attention and heat they are radiating. There's considerable traffic around them. It's not just how they look but how they carry themselves; it's like a reality television show without any cameras. One-second hysterical laughter, the next pained expression of stress. Big textbooks are sprawled on their laps: Chemistry, Physics, and Statistics. One minute they're flailing about at each other, all speaking at once, and in five minutes they'll be solving binomial equations in Math class.

Another one of my voices is like a personal manager. He tells me where to go, what to do. *Get out of the hallway; get back to your list.* I am, I'm going, don't rush me. *No you're not, you're gabbing and stalling.* I just got to work. *Yeah, and after you'll go home where you'll have more work.* More? I can hardly handle what I have? *Can we stop the pity party; what have you done?* What about the light bulbs on the stairs? You forgot that didn't you. *I wouldn't call screwing a light bulb in an accomplishment.* Well you didn't see how high I had to reach.

"Bye Mr. Lessing!" the girls call out in unison as I pass.

They all look young in a way I still remember vividly, but don't feel anymore. When I was young, I would dismiss observations about artificial divides like young and old as sentimentality or unintelligent. Like my students, I tired quickly of the pathetic clichés sad adults used to hurl at us: *enjoy yourself now* and *those are the best years of your lives*. Don't blame us you because don't have a life, I'd think. I still loathe the phrase, "the real world." Life's realness or surrealness depends just as much on situation and psychology as it does on age. Realness isn't just going to work. It's going to work and what it *feels* like there. Like a terrible commute with other fools, or like a ride in the stream of humanity. What's surreal can make you fall in love or commit suicide or want to take up art. There is no one real world; we're making it together. Which is why I love to teach.

But there did come a time when I woke up and knew for certain that I wasn't young anymore. People stopped looking at me in the same way and I began to feel a little bit frantic at the idea that life was draining from me. I now think more regularly that the choices I've made can never be eradicated, the possibilities have shrunken -- this is the hand I have to play. I am what I am: a high school English teacher. Bellboy recently told me that at 38 we had to stop going to rock concerts. I've got one more year.

When I was 16, I would've given anything to be with a popular, pretty girl. All my friends had girlfriends back then, they went on dates to their country clubs, where they ordered club sandwiches poolside. Some of my friends were even taken on vacation by their girlfriends' families. Meanwhile I festered in the fantasy world of my bedroom, alternating between excessive sports watching and talking on the phone with girls I'd only managed to turn into my friends. Friends are well and good, but what I really wanted was someone to lie down with, someone I could look in the eyes, and not have to look away.

I blamed my misfortune on the way I looked. If my hair wasn't so messy, if I didn't have a weird blond streak on the top of my head, just maybe Shelby Leib would have taken my hand at a party and gone to one of the upstairs rooms where, I imagined, real life happened. What was imaginary is what kept me surviving what was real.

I drag my fingers lightly along the lockers as I make my way to the tutoring center. The lockers are blue and orange with an occasional drawing of our mascot: the malamute. What does blue and orange have to do with a malamute? Did Birchwood used to have wolves roaming the land? I should read *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild* again. People don't read Jack London anymore. I wonder why.

Memory and longing are bedfellows; they make everything around me seem further away; a little dream-like, flimsy, which makes everything sadder, but more significant, less habitually patterned. I walk down the hall and see Richard and Elena, both juniors, who were in my class last year. She's from Slovenia and he's from Poland, I think. They share an Eastern European bond, at least that's what I tell myself. She wore a sideways hat with the bill cut off each day until the security guards told her to take it off or they'll confiscate it. He has a leather jacket that never comes off. I smile and say hello, and her face barely registers me, merely shifts my way as if I were taking a picture of her. He shakes my hand rather formally.

"Elena, Richard, how are you doing?"

"Fine, Mr. Lessing, fine," Elena says. The bell rings and the student announcements start. Five minutes of buffer time. Second period doesn't officially start until 9:00.

"That's good although I don't believe you."

"Why don't you believe me?" she says in her slight accent. "And why do I need you to believe that I'm in a good mood?"

"You're Eastern European and you're Slovenian. Nothing's ever fine."

"Slovenia is the name of my country, not of me, and has nothing to do with what you're saying." Her voice drops a register and she smirks at me warily.

"When I lived in Prague ..."

"I'm from Slovenia."

"I know it's not the same."

"They are different countries."

“Really, I didn’t know that, Slovenia.”

“Stop calling me that,” but Richard laughs and so does Elena, so I think I’m OK pushing it a little further. Ninety percent of kids love nicknames, but you have to watch out for the other 10 percent that don’t. Like don’t call someone with a thyroid condition *little greeny*.

I tease further: “Prague is not a country. It is a city, did you know that?”

“Obviously.”

“Then you know that both of you have a similar vibe as some of the Czechs that overthrew their government. You’re revolutionary. You’re up to something.” She nods seriously. “When I would ask Czechs *how are you* I would get this great look, like *look asshole you don’t care how I am so don’t ask.*”

“You don’t. And you told me this story already. You need to expand your repertoire, Mr. Lessing.” It’s true, I do get a lot of, *you’ve told me this already* from everyone I know.

“You are right. I don’t. Life is a series of doomed propositions. People are boring and repetitive. Authenticity is impossible. Everyone wears a mask. And at the end all that awaits us is oblivion,” I say in a deadpan voice.

Richard is slapping his own knee laughing but Elena is holding out. Though it feels like she is constraining a full-blown smile now.

I can’t help myself. “What is so funny Elena? Stop laughing. There is no humor in the world. No joy. Look at these prattling idiots running and laughing in the hallway. Don’t they know that their life means absolutely nothing?”

She claps her hand together once says in an altogether more formal and confident voice. “Bye Mr. Lessing.”

“Bye Elena. Nice seeing you Richard. And remember: the revolution is imminent! Soon we will all hide away in smoked-filled-cafes deciphering the meaning of life!” They don’t turn around. Because they haven’t heard me? Because it embarrasses them, or because

they can't make sense of it? Or maybe they've simply moved on to something else. Not for the first time, I wonder whether I enjoy people more than they enjoy me.

There are 3000 students and 300 staff and faculty at my school; I know probably 200 people by name, tops. One of them, I spot and know, Scott Rupal, a science teacher, wearing brown pants just like mine, except they are considerably less wrinkly. He's younger than me – not so uncommon anymore. Should I say something, like, "Brown pants..." or just wave, then point with both hands to our matching pants. I should really go down to lunch and eat with the science teachers. What does he think about? Is he too noticing the similarity of our pants? Or is he on an entirely different wavelength; is he analyzing the way matter comes together and matter comes apart? Wouldn't that be cool to know. I could ask him at lunch.

Behind him 20 paces is the business teacher; we're around the same age, I think his name is Joe. But I'm not positive so when I see him I call him nothing, sparing myself from the embarrassing apology: *Why did I think it was Joe? Sorry about that, Frank.* Meanwhile, he calls me Ari, which is worse than if he called me Bill, because it's so close to right that I can't correct him. Plus he's called me that enough that the window of correction has closed.

We look up and see each other from afar, and because we've seen each other, we now face an unmanageable distance to navigate before we engage in what will be an inevitably, meaningless greeting. *How's it going? It's going.* I feel agitated, even aggressive, and as he gets closer, it strikes me that we hate each other: that if there were no laws, customs, ways of acting in the world already established and kept by sane people, that he would want to fight me. We pass and nod, though it's less an acknowledgement than mechanical. He makes eye contact, I lift up my head, he lifts up his head, and I mumble a barely audible "Hey," from the back of my throat, which he doesn't hear, and now that that's done, my life no longer in peril, I can continue to the tutoring center for my supervisory duty which I'm late for.

Another tone sounds, the announcements are over, and all of the students left in the hall are officially late. No matter how fast they scurry off to class, policy dictates that they'll

be locked out. There's a certain pleasure in knowing the rules don't apply to me. Even if I were teaching a class, what sense does it make to run? To be all sweaty and ruin the nonchalance factor so important to quality instruction? Bellboy was right. I am a fuck up but what he doesn't know is that lots of times I fuck up on purpose to preserve what I think is right. All the orderliness, protocols, and management that go into schools drive me nuts.

9:03 A good bathroom experience makes all of the difference in school. Most of the bathrooms have a private, enclosed bathroom within them. A little closet bathroom. What you gain in privacy you lose in air. I usually like to hit the bathroom in the middle of a period (when I'm not teaching) but the rush of the passing period can't always be avoided. Jordan, one of my favorite students, is at one of the urinals. I give a few stalls as buffer and unzip my pants. Privacy has never been a prime concern for me.

"Hey Jordan, how are you doing?"

"I'm good."

"Folks good?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"You think so?"

"I mean I haven't talked to them yet today."

"Ahhh"

We are done talking. I wash my hands, which I have done more carefully the last couple of years, ever since one of the deans, Shade Murray, laughed at me in front of the sink. Shade is a beautifully statuesque former college athlete who dresses immaculately and who everyone likes.

"That's how you wash you hands?" he said to me a few years back in this same bathroom.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you just essentially turned on the water and flung your hands around."

“How do you wash your hands?” I watched him wash his hands. He was thorough I have to admit.

“What’s your trick? You really get inside all of the crevices.” I used the *enthusiastic* voice, the one I used with Martin when I wanted to change the subject away from me. Sometimes I think this is what’s most likeable about me, how much I like people.

“It should take you as long as it takes to sing happy birthday twice.”

“Twice?”

Twice is too long, but I now shoot for once. If I don’t hum Happy Birthday though, I revert back to my normal method of getting my hands wet and leaving. The sink operates through sensors and like the mechanics of washing my hands, I can never get the movement right to get the damn water to turn on. Undoubtedly, Shade, with a precise movement, would send the water cascading down unto his manicured fingers, but in my frustration and ineptitude, I wave my hands up and down over the sensors haphazardly. I don’t trust machines, I have no competence in operating them, and when I begin again, quietly berating myself for this deficiency, I look up and see myself in the mirror I’m unsettled by what’s looking back at me.

When I first started teaching more than 10 years ago, I couldn’t believe how much embarrassment over the way I looked -- a semi-forgotten scar from adolescence -- became prominent in my life again. Like I wasn’t supposed to even *have* a body. Most adults easily camouflage themselves by ascribing all of the awkwardness, shame, and doubt onto students. But even now, I can’t deny, as much as I wish it were otherwise, that the way we look and sound may have just as much impact in the classroom as any curriculum plans we subscribe to.

I throw some water on my hair. The blond section is on top, unnoticeable, unless you can see above me, which is rare, since I’m 6’1. *It’s not dyed*, I insist, to everyone who thinks I’m lying, *it’s natural*. *It’s a birthmark: there’s no pigment there*. The science alone rarely convinces. My hair is the exception: on good days, it can really make up for lackluster parts

elsewhere. It's the defining feature of the artist-as-teacher look I am trying to hone. The hair, I hope, makes up for what can only be called a disappointing effort elsewhere.

Though, I think, dabbing more water on my hair, I don't look half bad these days. For a guy entering his late 30's. My skin could be better. The pimples and the discoloration in the crooks of my nose are off-putting. I keep waiting for that weathered, handsome look to come and it doesn't. The folds under my eyes used to poof out so heavily that friends from high school called me *poof*, but they're not as bad these days, though the two little pouches are still there, if you look closely.

I'd be cast in a movie as the hapless and funny best friend but not the lead. I have a largish nose that comes down one way and then changes direction. My gums aren't as bad as they used to be. And my teeth are now whiter thanks to my commitment to brushing, but they're far from perfect. I vacillate on whether I'm handsome or not. There's a part of me that thinks I am. When I dress up. Or when something really good happens. Then, I'm pleased to look at mirror. Looking at myself ranges from mildly amusing to deeply disappointing. A middling body, a peculiar face, what does it add up to? I wish I had the unquestionable beauty of someone like Paul Newman, like my friend Yos. Or at least wide shoulders.

9:13 I finally get to the computer lab.

"Hey, Avi, good morning, nice of you to grace us with your presence," Diane, who works at the desk of the tutoring center, says to me.

"Hey."

"Hey, Avi, decided to come on time this morning," Ethan Rosenblum, a math teacher, says from an adjoining table.

"Yeah, I figured you might need my help in Calculus."

I read the lead article in the *New York Times*. How can I grade papers, after all, while people are blowing up children halfway across the world? I still have these absurd, narcissistic daydreams that I'll visit Israel, get arrested in Gaza, learn Arabic and bring peace

to the region. I look around the various little tables that are scattered around the big rectangular room. I pull out the *Catcher in the Rye* papers. I look out the large, oval windows, the best feature of the room. The view is of a long alleyway; outside, it is fall in earnest. The wind blows against the trees and below in the near distance a woman walks her dog. It makes me think of a Van Gogh painting called *Leaves Falling From Trees* and the walks I used to take during college to clear my head. The first *Catcher* paper starts with this sentence:

“Holden is clearly an incandescent character, capable of both achieving transcendent joy, but also resplendent agony.”

I grimace, recognizing the way I used to comb the thesaurus to show off. In the margin, I write, “Do you know what these words mean?” Will what I say make much of a difference I think. *Does that even matter, just do your job.* Yeah, but this kid Josh Drexler is pretty full of himself, probably thinks I’m a dumbass who couldn’t hack it in a real job. *You’re just bitter from the morning.* Listen, most students flip to the back of their papers, see the grade, and then stuff it in their locker. *That’s not true, have you ever even asked them, you’re merely submitting to the cliché that students don’t care.*

I re-count the stack. I look out the window at the alley that stretches blocks and blocks. The leaves are blowing off the trees like crazy; it really does look like that painting. My neck cranes out and my shoulders drop slightly. I should do more yoga.

You worry about the bombs in Afghanistan but one look at the alley and you see your life as a gift from the universe... Well we should cherish life more. *Because there are seasons?* Because our life is temporary, look outside, it gets colder later in the year and leaves fall off the trees. *So what?* It’s beautiful. *It’s also a way of procrastinating the real work.* This is real work. *Looking outside?* Yes, it takes a more sensitive observer to look out and daydream. *Do you want to be in the world or out of it? Which is it going to be?*

“Both,” I whisper just barely out loud, but Rosenblum hears me, and says, “What are you doing over there Lessing? Talking to yourself again?”

“Yeah, to all the parts of me.” He shakes his head so as to be rid of me and looks back at his Kindle in the few free moments before more students crowd his table for Math help.

I grade two and a half papers and then the bell rings.

I am once again thrust against the throngs of nameless people. I have the usual narcissistic waking dream that I am the only human walking amongst machines. The opposite is true, though. The kids are more human since they are younger. They’re changing more than I am. Chances are, they will live longer too.

I’m hungry. The thing to do is have a bag of Sun Chips from room 372. Administrator offices, with their leftovers from meetings, are perfect for a secret snack. If I walk in on one side and leave out the other it will be like I was never there. It’s when I start thinking about class that I start thinking about all those essays I haven’t graded.

Each day, they make the commute back home with me; each day, they stay in the bag. I counter this negativity with something a Bill Ayers’ essay says: stop waiting for the day when all of the conditions of your life are perfect and get down to the work. First, chips.

A bunch of thoughts bombard me at once. Don’t forget to get your mom something for her birthday. Be more sensitive about students’ nicknames. Is being Bill Ayers as fun as it seems? What would the world be like without gluten? I also think about the tumor removed from my neck 15 years ago, and my daughter’s missing tooth from the time her stroller flipped over. I worry that I haven’t accomplished enough. I wonder whether or not I’ve zipped up my fly; I periodically do a fly-check, because with tasks that happen in sequence - first pee, then zip fly, buckle belt, wash and dry hands - it’s easy to forget a step.

I anxiously walk past my old classroom – the one without windows that was so dark, my class lobbied successfully for the school to paint yellow. They also did research on how uncomfortable desks are. Which is how I wound up with beanbags in my room for a couple of years, until the school deemed that they didn’t meet the fire code. It would be lovely to take a nap. I am hyper aware of looking at students and being looked at by them. It is

pleasing to greet the students that I know and like. They smile or wave hello and we move on, hurled inexorably forward by the inevitability of the next thing.

The hundreds of students I don't know fill me with wonder. I want to sing: "Look at all the people. Where do they all belong?" I am, I realize, again and again, addicted to the possibility of attention. I am always managing how much to come out of my skin and how much to stay folded in it. The clockwork of the day momentarily disintegrates when you encounter people like Slovenia, but for every Slovenia, there may be two or three Bill Clements that make you want to hide like a turtle.

The next Experiments class clumps at my door. I'm running late - it's that kind of day. They are so happy to see me. They say things like, "you're late," and "Damn, Mr. Lessing, why you gotta lock your door."

"I didn't."

"Yeah, right."

"Alright everyone," I hear myself almost shout as I walk into the classroom. I could get their attention without all the volume, but I need the jolt of hearing my voice. I'm not immune to the distraction that occasionally overcomes those of us who spend our lives in school.

9:51 "I want to start with a four to 1. Rank them worst to best. Here are your choices. Choice one, you know you won't die young. Choice two, when you see pictures of horrific tragedies either in a newspaper or on-line, you neither look away nor get buried by their enormity. Instead, each day, you take an action, which may not help the victims in any direct way, but will make the world safer in the future. You get no credit or fame, but your feelings of hurt are compensated by the positive impact you're going to make in the future."

"Why you gotta use a bunch of big words?" Justin Van Abel says. He likes to sit in the back corner, on the back of his chair. He's got a blond crew cut, and sometimes I call

him Eminem or Jayson Williams, this basketball player who's no longer in the NBA whose nickname was white chocolate.

“How many of you understand what I'm talking about? Hold up 10 fingers for completely and two fists for nothing and something in-between for something in-between.” I get a lot of sixes and sevens. “OK that's good enough. Anyway, that's choice 2. Choice 3 is you can freeze yourself in time by clapping your hands once. That day you're guaranteed a heartfelt interaction with the person closest to you at the time of the clap. It may lead to a romance, a friendship, whatever, but *something* will happen and you'll feel more alive because of it. And choice 4 is that each day you wake up and look in the mirror there's a message hanging in the bathroom, which is the exact thing you needed to hear that day. The message may be as simple as don't forget to print out your English paper or as general as you are loved or as strange as take a different route to school today. But whatever it says, the message acts as a guiding principle for that day, and no matter what else happens, you at least have that. Four to one, worst to best, build the tension,” I say, bringing my palm up to signal something that escalates.

I've found it's a good way to start class: in the realm of fantasy. They do their 4 to 1's with the person next to them. Their answers, like most sporting events, are anti-climactic. But the excitement leading up to answering, the social interaction, the immediate engagement are all worth it even if what follows has nothing to do with the question. There's a communal power in everyone considering a weird question that has nothing to do with learning per say. Which is why they like it. I think of it as the break after the passing period, which is less like a break, and more like a train wreck.

Todd Dennison raises his hand. Todd covered his whole bag in duck tape a few days back. His hair flops across his forehead in a way that suggests a surfer. “Mr. Lessing.” He dives in without skipping a beat, as if his hand were raised not to request permission to speak, but rather as an indication that he was about to. “Can we talk about something that was brought up yesterday?”

Angelica slumps in her chair and flips her hood over head. “Not the drug talk again.”

“Seriously though,” Todd says, “We didn’t finish it.”

“What’s there to finish?” she says, and scowls.

“I just think there’s more to say.”

“Well then go ahead and say it already. Damn.”

“I’m not saying I should talk Angelica.”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“So.”

“So?” “God!” “Ughh!”

Two kids enter late, Asiah Washington and Will Rivera.

Will says, “Why is it so quiet UP IN HERE?”

Asiah smiles warmly at me, hands me a pass, and says, “Shut the fuck up” to this kid Victor, whose only offense, as far as I can tell, was to look up at her. But who knows, there’s so much history to untangle between most of these kids it would take years to understand. I rub my fingers gently over my corduroy pants like a child playing with carpet. I choose to let it pass.

Outside, it’s grown a little darker. It may rain early. And the rain may turn to snow in a few weeks more. Maybe I should stop class and have all of the students watch it pitter-patter down the high windows. What can at the time seem most inconsequential, irrelevant, and illusory often ends up to be what is essential, what matters, what counts.

“Obviously, there are some unresolved feelings from yesterday,” I reason. Angelica raises her eyebrows at me. Her look says, *feelings? I’m talking about being straight up angry.* Or maybe something more along the lines of *you have to be shitting me. Again?* Ordinarily, I might simply ask what her look is trying to say. But I know I can expect an unresponsive shrug in return, which would get us nowhere. A couple kids look up dumbly. Lucia watches me somewhat anxiously, lips twitching, eyes darting around the room, body erect. Theater kid.

“Let’s start with meditation.” They respond with a collective groan but it’s sit-com-like, all at once and then done. The natural balance of a classroom dictates that if some root for, others must root against. “Graham, turn off the lights.” He does. “OK close your eyes.”

When I ask them to close their eyes, I close mine. While they’re closed, I think about whether or not the garage is closed. I also reach for my phone but not as desperately as I reached for my wallet, two periods ago. My eyes flutter a little. “Relax your shoulders. Put your feet flat on the ground.” My shoes are half off and I look around the room. Most everyone’s eyes are shut. There are some notable exceptions. Cherina has her arms folded and her legs splayed outward. We make eye contact and for a moment there’s an inscrutable moment that passes between us, before she balks, busts into a smile despite herself. I close my eyes and open them in demonstration of what I want her to do. She smiles again and closes her eyes.

Casey Feldman has pretty severe Asperger’s. His leg shakes, and he plays with his shoulder length hair. When I look over at him and repeat the movements that I just pantomimed to Cherina, he laughs out loud, making half the class laugh with him. I say, “Bring your attention inward.” Casey starts to laugh again, but I point at him and shake my head back and forth until he looks genuinely concerned that he might be in trouble.

When I sit still, I can make my head ring as if an electromagnetic pulse were throbbing between my ears. The left side of my face is still numb from when I had the tumor removed. Irony of all ironies, I was writing my senior thesis about my fear of death, and midway in, I developed a growth in my parotid gland. It was benign and when we found out my mom made phone calls and my dad wept on the last patch of sunlit grass in the front yard.

“Bring into focus your friends, boyfriends and girlfriends, the people you like best in the world. Take a couple of deep breaths and let them fade out of focus. Do the same thing with your family, and with the kids from your last class. Now picture the faces of the people sitting next to you. Imagine looking at them and being looked at by them. Now let us too

drift out of focus as if in a dream, drifting further away. Bring your attention again inward. Feel your toes in your shoes and the feeling of your shoes on your feet. Wiggle your feet..." I go on like this for quite a long time. I have them notice different parts of their body and let them relax. They visualize the rain outside. The Earth below them. The heavens, etc... Then I tell them to focus on their breath. They focus on their breath and I focus on mine.

"Twenty percent of your attention should be on your breath." As I'm saying this, I start thinking how the Chicago Bulls need more scoring options besides Derrick Rose at the end of games. I play out a familiar fantasy from when I started playing basketball at age 11. In it, I am miraculously the missing piece in my favorite sports team's championship run, in this case, the shooting guard for the Chicago Bulls. The fantasy ends the way all the worst personal essays do, as the hero who wins the game at the end.

I open my eyes slightly. Not only am I not the hero of the city, everybody seems to be deep in meditation, except for me. I say, "If you've drifted away, that's ok but now come back to your breath. Let your thoughts be like the passing landscape that you see outside a passenger train. You acknowledge everything and let it all fly by. Name what your intention will be for this class day. Remember that an intention is different than a goal... an intention is what you hope for and can be internal." *Your intention should be to wake up buddy.*

What I say has an element of rehearsal and memorization. I can hear my voice getting softer, closer to the stew of feelings in my chest, and when I look up at the dimly lit students and listen to the rain that in waves and bursts slams against the windows in sideways gusts, I feel more real than I have all day. Hemingway called the feeling of readiness to write *juice*. It's the same for teaching, I imagine. The feeling of liveliness and electricity only of a room full of high school kids makes. A readiness. When I can hook into that feeling, it makes me try harder, meditate more carefully, teach more precisely, care more fully.

I try and let my attention blow out towards them as if there were no kinder act than sending my out-breath into the air, hoping it reaches them. This is hipper than my moment with Weisman where I whispered "both," but I don't care, that's just a thought too. And I

blow it out. “Take a last inhale,” and exhale out your mouth. Some kids blink and open their eyes. I say, “Slowly open your eyes, but don’t interact with anyone yet.”

Angelica rubs both of her eyes with her palms in a way that makes her seem like a little kid. The kid who turned off the lights looks at me meaningfully. *Time to turn them on?* I nod. My whole class squints as if waking up after a long sleep. “Look around the room,” I tell them. “Like they do in the Brady Bunch credits.” A small handful of kids get the reference; the rest don’t really care. They look rested and noticeably less agitated.

I collect their essays, take attendance, and while they silently read Junot Diaz’s “How I Discovered My Mom in a Time of Trouble” or catch up on the Jonathan Franzen essay called “Retreat” from the night before, I conduct a few writing conferences. “Your homework, for those of you that can’t read surrounded by 25 other people reading is to try to write a dialogue of the best talk with a family member you’ve ever had.”

10:17 “Alright let’s continue talking about drugs, Todd.”

“He’s direct,” Andrew, who plays baseball, says to Kaitlin, who plays softball. “You got to give that to him.”

A silence hangs in the air, and I get a perverse pleasure in folding my leg over the other leg and waiting.

“OK I’ll go if nobody else is going to go,” Abby Kellett says.

“Wait,” Kelly says, “We’re not doing Matrix.”

“No Matrix. The girl’s trying to talk,” Andrew says. “Damn.”

“OK whatever,” Abby says. “Anyway, I just think this whole subject is stupid. We all do drugs, we all know we do drugs, so let’s not pretend...”

“Speak from I ...”

“... and just get over it. Huh?”

“Speak from I.”

“He wants you to speak from I,” Andrew says. Andrew is a translator, the kid who delivers the teacher’s words in kid-speak. The translator kid always gets on students’ nerves because he usually just says what the teacher said, but louder.

“Yeah I heard him. I don’t get it.”

The class erupts in a cacophony of “I!” “What is there not to understand?” “Right?!” “He SAID...!” And, “Come on!”

“Why is everyone getting so mad? Fuck.”

I take a deep breath. “On two separate occasions we’ve tried to open this conversation and on both occasions, for whatever reason, we couldn’t do it. This is an especially difficult topic to talk about, especially in school, not on the level of race or sexuality but close. Which, in part, makes those things more important perhaps to discuss. Otherwise, where can you talk about them critically and seriously? The things that are easy to talk about casually can sometimes be difficult to talk about in situations like these.” My little speech evokes a look of – that’s all you got? Useless platitudes? I find students are the most attentive when you’re not trying to teach them anything.

“I remember in high school, the three things everyone talked about were who hooked up with whom, who fought whom, and what substances people drank, smoked, or took. But the purpose of this conversation is not to gossip, or revel in the thrill of it.”

“Next year, you’re going to college, or getting a job, or going out in the world where any night of the week you can get drunk, get high, take drugs, in short, make choices. That’s first. Second, the reason that I want you to speak from *I* is because these things are so easy to generalize. Oh everyone does drugs, or *we all think this is no big deal*. Well that’s not true, right? Some people in the room have never tried drugs; some people in the room have tried them with their parents. There’s a whole spectrum here, right? That’s why I say, speak from *I*.”

Another long anguished silence. I wish Abby would know instinctively that I want her to pick it up from where we last left off, but it’s not at all evident to her, and I think

three thoughts at once. I think how clueless some kids can be to an obvious dynamics in a conversation. And I think how often I've gotten feedback that being with me can be a confusing and dislocating experience. Finally, I think we're all sitting silently trying to get up the courage to talk. I nod at Abby and she looks back at me accusingly and says, "What?" in that way that really means *stop*. *Shit*, I think. She may be hurt, too injured to talk. Which may mean, for all my talking of leaning into the discomfort, that we can't have this discussion after all.

"Abby."

"Don't."

Abby's crying now and wiping her tears with the sleeves of her sweatshirt. They are drawn protectively over her hands. As soon as high school kids cry, they cover themselves. A generalization I know. I do all sorts of things I tell my students not to. As my non-meditating cousin likes to say, generalizing is fun.

More silence. This time there's no perverse pleasure in the silence just a feeling of my own impotence mixed with worry.

"Is there something else going on?" I quietly offer.

"Give me a break," Abby says. "Don't give me the therapist bit ok?"

"I sound like your mother?"

"Yeah."

"Her mother is a therapist," I tell the rest of the class. "I know you don't usually care when a whole room is against you so I assume there's something else going on. Is that more direct and less mom-ish?"

She croaks and leans forward, still crying. And that's about as much as Abby is going to take on today. I know it's the reason students and teachers caricature the class. The crying. You have to cry to get an A. They say things like that. That's ok. As far as I'm concerned the more we can cry without any shame the better. As far as I'm concerned there

should be more crying, laughing, eating, dancing, etc...; the classes scare me are the ones as quite and sterile as the ones in the ICU.

Todd Dennison, who started this, or wanted to, raises his hand again and then remembers that he doesn't have to raise his hand in this class, puts it down, and says, "There was this article in the New York Times." He must misread my look because suddenly he stops and says, "Sorry, I... was reading the New York Times," and laughs goofily. I love Todd in this moment and by extension all of them. Everyone looks a little floppy and unpredictable and I guess this is the way I essentially see myself, ill-equipped and hapless, but loveable. "In this article, it says that all drug use is down except for marijuana. Down as in, not as much," he clarifies.

"We're not idiots, Todd," Cherina teases.

Todd continues, unfazed. "Alcohol is down and heavy drugs too. I thought that was kind of cool because we ... well I like marijuana. I mean I don't drink, and pot's not heroin you know?"

Seven hands shoot up.

"No need for hands, just talk, share the mike," I say somewhat lamely. I never say things like share the mike. The phrase I've been using is *respect the mic*, which I heard Dan use in a Spoken Word meeting.

Kelly, who's half white, half black, with an almost supernaturally high voice takes a deep breath and says "OK" as if she were a wind up toy. The words spill out at the top of her breath, after she winds up her thinking to the spot where you can't wind any more. "I've thought about his topic a lot. Like a lot. And my parents have both done drugs. They were like hippies or whatever. They lived in California. So... I know that pot isn't heroin. But it does affect your short-term memory. And like..."

"How does this come out of," I stupidly intervene.

" I was getting to..."

" ...your experience?"

“ ... that part. Hold on.”

“I just don’t want to get into a policy discussion, or a biological conversation about the properties of marijuana and other drugs. You can do that in Health. It’s just not what we do here.”

“OK.” *Another windup.* “I’ve tried pot a few times and I didn’t like it. Like I have panic attacks. And that didn’t help.”

“You panicked,” Andre asks her. “Really? For me man, I just kind of lay back and enjoy myself.”

Nick Rivera starts laughing like a hyena, so I throw him my significant look and he immediately straightens in his chair.

“No seriously though I be dealing with a lot of shit in my life,” Andre says, and Kelly gives me a look that says, *but I wasn’t done*, and I give her look that I hope imparts that Andre never talks and we can come back to her. “And what I like to do,” Andre continues, “is smoke a little with my boys and just let it all slide away. That’s my way. You know what I’m saying. I turn on some of my music and I’ll like paint and just chill.”

I nod like I know. But I don’t because I don’t paint. I also don’t have boys anymore and never really did. My first few times drinking and doing drugs mostly involved a pantomime of what I imagined a person might act like around friends when drunk or high. Of course, in the end it was a stupid exercise because my friends really were drunk. They really were having a good time. Unless we were all pantomiming each other. Still, I like the image of Andre and his boys painting. “I would love to see some of your work,” I say.

“For su-re Mr. Lessing,” he says, as if I were a colleague.

“I’ve never tried drugs and I don’t think I ever will.” Kelly says.

About one third of the class twinkles.

Rebecca Johnson, a big boned girl, who’s going to Howard next year, twinkles and says, “I just don’t want to do it. I don’t have a reason. I just don’t.”

“You have a reason,” Andre says.

“No I don’t.”

Andre scrunches his face, furrows his eyebrow, brings his eyes to the back of his head, and draws some phlegm, as if gathering up all that disappoints and disgusts him in his throat.

“What are you looking at?” Rebecca asks.

“You,” Andre says.

“I mean, my daddy’s in jail because he couldn’t keep himself away from that, and I ain’t fittin to be like him and like, a LOT of the kids from my old neighborhood, you could just tell, I mean, they were heading in that direction and I’m just not doing it. But that’s just me. That’s my decision. I mean I don’t have anything against it. It’s just not me.”

“Sounds to me,” I say, “like you have every reason to be against it.”

“This conversation is making me *angry*,” Rebecca says, her voice goes up at the end.

“That’s good. Use your anger,” Mike Isaac jokes. He’s imitating a line I used in rehearsal last year during *Rhinoceros*, but this is class, that’s after school, different kids, and a different vibe. It’s an inopportune time, which he realizes the second it’s out of his mouth and immediately casts his head down.

“Some people have no idea of the consequence of their actions,” Rebecca says shaking her head.

“Are you talking to me?” Mike asks.

“No, I’m not talking to you...”

“... Thank god...”

“I’m talking about my fucking dad.”

“Ahh, I see.” Mike is still joking. Rebecca isn’t but doesn’t pay Mike any mind.

“I have a pretty good idea about the consequence of actions,” Heath Summers says. “My brother just finished his freshmen year at Wooster College. He figured he didn’t need to pay for pot when he could sell it to his friends and smoke for free. So he started getting packages in the mail and yeah. So one day, he was walking on campus, and the DEA picked him up.”

“Shiiit,” Rebecca says.

“Yeah, they put him in this car and interrogated him and said he could go to jail for like 10 years unless he told them who his source was.”

“So what happened?”

“He did, but that was just pot and they wanted more so he told them he could inform for them, you know, give up more serious drug dealers, things like cocaine and crystal meth, when in reality he didn’t know shit about shit.”

“Damn.”

“After that, I don’t smoke pot much anymore. It just made me feel weird.”

“I bet.”

“Hey Mr. Lessing, I’ve always wanted to ask you this. Have you smoked pot before?”

“Thanks Heath.”

“Answer his question.” Asia says.

“Well, just like I encourage you to share what you want to share and not share what you don’t want to share, I think ...”

“Lean into the discomfort,” Abby yells out.

“OK this actually makes me want to *not* say anything at all. If I shared it with you, it would be to add to the conversation, not so that you could go around saying, ‘Did you know Mr. Lessing has been high before?’ And to be honest, after so many people in our class have just kind of laid out their lives like that in front of us, it’s demeaning to turn the class into a kind of joke. Got it? The answer, Heath, is of course, and not anymore.”

I am lying, but only partially. The fib feels close enough to the truth and not too reckless. The right balance to stave off a panic attack afterwards. Then I turn to the whole class. “Look, I wish that we had more conversations like this in high school, because I could’ve avoided some horrific experiences I’ve had. One time my friend Luke and I went to a fraternity party and everyone was getting high off 7-foot bongos. Looking back on it, the way

we drank and smoked was stupid. You couldn't get a little high, you had to get excessively high.

So anyway, I was the type of person everyone thought was fearless and a huge partier, but truth was I vomited the first time friends egged me on to do a keg stand, which I first attempted by doing a handstand on the floor. Yeah, then had to play it off like I was only joking. Maybe if I displayed more control over what I thought and I did, I wouldn't have done a 7-foot bong hit. Because that was a terrible, *terrifying* experience. I remember walking home that night and losing consciousness every few seconds, like literally blacking out. And when I wasn't losing consciousness, I was praying to God that I would survive. And so why did I do it? Why did I continue doing that sort of thing? Of course there were times where it was fun, and I felt safe, and I was, as my parents encouraged us to do, experimenting. So that's the short answer of where my bias is – I think most things in moderation are ok and I think some level of experimenting is almost to be expected.”

There's usually a moment in each day where I imagine myself getting fired. Now it has happened twice, although the first time with Martin, it was paranoia for what I might've done, and this time, it's regret for what I am doing. It's not that I've crossed any particular line of my own. But, twenty-eight 18 year olds know that I've smoked pot. They've known anyway but now I've said it. We have to give them access to these kind of conversations, I reason. That tempers my anxiety, for about seven seconds. Will they even get the nuance of what I'm saying? What if students misread my credo about experimentation and use it as inspiration? Didn't my parents encourage me to experiment? Or am I only making up this in my head now that I've experimented.

The rain subsides but only a little.

“I didn't mean to hijack the conversation. And I hope I didn't make anyone feel uncomfortable saying what I said. That wasn't my intention.”

“That's bullshit, Mr. Lessing.” Andre says.

“Excuse me?”

“That’s some straight bullshit.”

“No I’m serious.”

“No man. You were trying to make us feel uncomfortable. You always say the goal is to be uncomfortable, not unsafe. Well, so now we’re uncomfortable and maybe you’re a little uncomfortable and that’s just the way it is.”

“You’re ri-ight Andre. That was brilliant.” I’m using the complimenting voice to hide the feeling that this eighteen-year-old kid just saw straight through me.

“No seriously, you think I’m talking about how my dad’s a piece of shit to my friends, or even to my cousin. You’re teaching us to be *soft*, Mr. Lessing. And that’s a dangerous thing. Because I don’t live in this classroom. Out there,” at which he points significantly toward the window leaving his arm extended “if you’re soft, they’ll take advantage of you, they’ll punk you. In here, I feel...you know what I’m not even going to say how it makes me feel. If I got to be soft in here so do you.”

Abby raises her hand: “I’d just like to say thank you. To, like, everyone. I came in here feeling really shitty and now I still feel shitty but it’s good to know that there are other people who have shit too. That made absolutely no sense.”

Carrie indicates he wants to talk by repeating “umm.”

“Go ahead.”

“I want to say thank you too.” He flicks his hair with his hand. “I was really mad when I came into class because my brother is a real JERK.” Here he laughs goofily and I smile and shake my head in amazement.

“What Mr. Lessing?” Carrie says and laughs more.

“You crack me up Carrie.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean I can’t tell if you’re serious or not. But I think you are.”

“I am.”

“That’s good.”

Carrie looks down and a few other kids go. And I say, “Well we’re running out of time, but it looks like there is more to say on this subject.”

“No!” Angelica says. “Not again.”

I nod exaggeratedly. “Perhaps,” I say in the voice of a patronizing teacher, “we should devote the entire semester to discussing drugs!”

“Mr. Lessing, why are you playing?” Angelica says. I cackle wildly like Gargamel from the Smurfs and flail around the room. The students pretend to be weirded out. Although that’s pure hubris. Some of them are freaked out; they don’t know Gargamel, and their teacher is jumping around the room. Especially the boys. I always have a fear that the non-Jewish, white boys dislike me. It’s partly a residue from high school. The boys that were the hardest edged disliked me instinctively. I was a little too weird, a little too needy, not manly. Maybe now I’m still threaten by them, or think my presence somehow messes with their outlook but they always feel a little distant, a clump that never becomes individualized. One particular white boy, whose name is Stuart, but who I mentally refer to as round face, is currently looking at me with a blank stare.

The ten tons of energy that was in the room, or in me, or in most everyone, was enough to forget that that’s just one period and the next one is now upon us. Then the bell rings and they are gone. Everything is about to change.

I check ESPN.

I use the bathroom.

I shift piles on my desk.

10:44 The last section of Experiments kids come rolling in. There are 28 in this one, too.

“So what stupid shit are we doing today?” Derrick Lerner says when he comes into the class.

“Derrick, when you say *stupid shit* I’m temped to make you walk out and back in again like you are a seven year old. Is that what you’re going for?”

“No, sorry about that Mr. Lessing.”

“OK, I don’t believe you but ok.”

“Don’t believe me. That’s not my problem.”

“Why did you take this class?”

“I had my reasons.”

“I’m serious. I’m really just curiously asking.”

“And I’m really just telling you – I had my reasons.”

“Doesn’t sound like they were the right ones.”

“And what are the right ones, Mr. Lessing?”

“Because you’re interested in the kind of human being you are. You’re hoping to know who your classmates are. You want a better sense of the kind of person you want to become.”

“I’m trying to graduate.”

“And I’m trying to teach. You know you make it difficult sometimes.”

“Whose fault is that?”

“What did you say?”

“I said whoosse faault issss that?”

“I just told you.”

“You’re saying I’m not interested in bettering myself?” Nico Mercer and Horace Topps, his boys, have now gathered around with interlinked arms clasped tightly. “I’m offended Mr. Lessing.”

“I’m glad you’re offended. That’s good – maybe you’ll do something to change the impression that you’re making. Now go sit down.”

“That’s not my job, Mr. Lessing, that’s yours. Would you even say this to anyone else in the class besides me? Why are you always picking on me?”

He has a point, but not much of one. There are always one or two kids in a teacher's schedule that they dread seeing. We go through all the stages with them. Denial, Victimization, Rationalization, An Opportunity to Grow, and if no progress is made, Frustration, Fear, and Reprisal. I wonder if I'm tougher on him because he's white? Would I treat a black student differently? Of course, but how. *Think about that later, get started.* Am I too hard on the white males and too easy on black males and end up doing a disservice to both? *You don't have time to think about this.* Why not? *Because the bell is about to ring.* The bell is always about to ring. *And you always have to answer it.* I need a minute to think. *You don't have a minute.* I need a second. *Seconds up.*

"Damn," one of Derrick's boys says. "Take it easy."

"Derrick," Horace says.

Derrick stands by his desk. "No, what? All I'm saying is that it's the teacher's job to find the potential in all students and to treat them fairly. That's what he's supposed to do."

"Go sit down, Derrick."

"You heard the man," Nico says. "Sit the fuck down."

"Nico, thanks, I don't need your help."

"Don't worry Mr. Lessing, I've got you covered."

"Don't touch me, Nico," Derrick says.

"I'll hold him back," Nico says to me.

"Ow, watch where you're going." Amy has been trying to get past the boys who are all over six feet and muscular.

"Come on guys. Let's go sit down," Horace says.

Leah, a pretty girl, with short blond hair, who's going to University of Chicago next year, says to no one in particular. "Can I read my essay aloud?"

"Sure," I say, even though I haven't even really heard her question. Truth is, right now I'd like nothing more than to shove Derrick against a locker and give him a good talking to. If I had that sort of presence. My social group in high school had several Derricks in

high school. I never hung out with them much one on one, though I admired them for their cockiness and strength, the way they could pick up girls, not in spite of those traits but because of them. The feeling that nothing can touch them. In high school, I would try to remember their negatives: They work out too much; can't commit to anything; they act atrociously towards girls.

I momentarily wonder whether I want to hit him because he's being a punk in my class, or because he's likeable despite that, or because I can't tell the difference between what I felt in high school and what I feel now.

"Alright, let's get started." I curse myself for saying a hackneyed teacherly phrase like, "Let's get started." Truth is, I don't want to get started one bit. All the momentum and communal feeling from the last class has evaporated. "So we're going to start with Leah reading her essay and then..."

"... Are you ok Mr. Lessing?" Amy asks me. Amy wants to be a songwriter. She's cool, but wary of me, of males in general, I have to remind myself, at times when it feels like she's wary of only *me*. Amy wrote this great essay about the way subtle competition between her parents affected her. In it, she used this image of standing in front of two shut doors down the hall from her room. In one, her mom is doing yoga. In the other, her dad is watching TV. And she doesn't know whether she wants to go in both, neither, or one of them.

And now here I am barred behind a door that I locked myself.

"No, he's not ok" Nico says. "Derrick was annoying the shit out of him."

Leah glares at both boys contemptuously.

"Shut the fuck up, NICO."

"You shut the fuck up, DERRICK."

"Both of you shut the fuck up," Horace says.

And Rachel Dejesus says, "Such language, boys, tsk tsk tsk."

"It's not my fault that Mr. Lessing is a pussy," Derrick says underneath his breath.

“What did you *just say*, Derrick?” It’s not good when I’m in this mode of reacting. Teachers win procedural and technical arguments. Students win the street fights.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“Clearly you did.”

“Clearly you should mind your own business,” Derrick says under his breath.

How much time passes in complete silence? Five seconds? A year? “OK so Leah is going to start off today reading her essay and then maybe if some other folks would like to...”

Derrick snickers. I snap.

“Get out.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Me too?” Stephen wines.

“No, just Derrick.”

“This is bullshit.”

“Maybe so and maybe not. But at this point I don’t care. Get out.”

“Where am I going?”

“I don’t really care.”

He mumbles something more underneath his breath, like *fucking retard* or maybe he calls me a pussy again, I don’t know. I’m practically hallucinating and my heart is beating like crazy, and that’s when I go over and sit at my desk. Some moments pass.

“You all-right, Mr. Lessing?” Stephen says.

“Yeah, why?” I say.

“I don’t know. You’re sitting at your computer by yourself.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” Amy says.

“I’m fine. I’m taking attendance.” Without looking at her directly I say, “Leah, get ready to read your essay.”

“OK” Leah says, and dutifully reaches into her bag.

“Mr. Lessing, don’t take your bad mood out on us,” Amy says.

“I’m not in a bad mood. I just don’t like dealing with disrespect.” I loathe everything I am saying, doing, thinking, looking at, feeling, remembering, and sensing. Amy looks at me closely and I look at her. A part of me wants to add, “Kind of like right now,” and amazingly we both hold off from saying more. In my reoccurring nightmare each year before school starts, I kick a kid out of class and then, all of the other kids leave the room in protest and head down to the Superintendent to tell on me. That alternates with my other school anxiety dream the week before class starts, in which I inexplicably light up a joint on the first day in order to build community.

I stand at the podium not saying anything. The worst silence, the kind that subverts and humiliates everything you think you are i.e. a reasonably enlightened, mostly in control, teacher, who is not subject to the usual antagonists, and predictable stonewalls that the average adolescent boy throws up in your face. My lips are crusty and my scalp itches. The doctor said stress wasn’t good for my psoriasis.

“Mr. Lessing?” Someone is speaking to me from a faraway place.

“Can we do a check in?” pipes up another.

“I don’t think Mr. Lessing cares at this point.”

“Mr. Lessing be needing a time out.”

“Let’s start on our own guys.”

“Alright well I’ll check in fi-irrst,” Rachel Dejuses says. “Well I’m a 7 . . .”

“Seven?”

“...out of 10. Well, we just got a new dog ...”

My head hurts. *Make it worse.* That’s my maniacal demi-god voice, my inner Iago. I’m an underground man taking perverse pleasure in butting my head on a familiar wall.

Some people react to disappointment, heartache, injustice, and even tragedy, with resilience and grit. For instance, Bellboy. He says things like, what am I going to do? Make it worse by crying about it? *Yes, I tell him, that’s exactly what I do.* Well that’s dumb, he says.

Of course, it's dumb. You've just got to exercise a little self-control. *Who says I'm always in control.* I didn't say always I said sometimes. *The hardest time to get it is are the times you've lost it.*

My belly shakes with vitriolic rage. I walk out of the room. I mutter *good job, homework is on the board*, on the way out. The Rumi poem, "Two Different Intelligences," I taped on my door over the summer now seems there mainly to mock me. Derrick Lerner is gone. The hallway is empty and too clean. A clean, quiet school is the loneliest place on Earth. For all my talk about intimacy and connection, happiness and responsiveness, isn't the truth of the school, I think, the truth of our lives, the utter anonymity and inconsequential-ness of living, the foolishness of trying to recognize and be recognized by anyone. And that even this philosophical outrage is really just a mask for a humiliating temper tantrum. *Make it worse.*

"Hey Avi, how are you doing?" It's Carrie Hoeg. Carrie is one of the coolest counselors in the school. I've always wished we were friends. She took her family to live in Japan and Mongolia for a few years. Her husband wrote a novel about a teacher that got published last year. It hurts me how happy, well adjusted, successful, and cool they are. Gore Vidal is right when he purportedly said: every time friends succeed a little piece of us dies. When I see Carrie I always think the same things: how she spent time in Colombia, that they went abroad with their kids, and her husband wrote a novel. My mind dances like this for a lot of people I know. I trace back through the few details or observations I've made about them. Carrie is good looking and her husband is extra handsome and athletic. No paunch on that guy and no neurosis either. Ivy league, really tall, a star basketball player in college, and an iron jawline too. No onset of a double chin.

I tell Carrie I'm fine. But I'm not fine. Where could Derrick have gone? I see Roy -- he's just finishing up writing up tardy tickets. He sees I'm waiting for him. "What can I do you for, Mr. Lessing?"

"Hey, have you seen a kid Derrick Lerner roaming the halls?"

"Derrick who?"

“Lerner.”

“Nope. What does he look like?”

“White. Tall. Hair all in one direction.”

“I have not seen him, Mr. Lessing.”

“Thanks.” I almost turn around and tell him to call me Avi, but that seems like it could come off as condescending. I’m a white teacher and he’s a black security guard. If I tell him to call me Avi, it could sound as if I’m bestowing on him the privilege of calling me by my first name. Who told me I could call him Roy? That’s just what he goes by. I’m starting to think my casualness could be another item on the white privilege article Peggy McIntosh wrote that I give my kids when we talk about race. Privilege number 38: *I can insist on being casual with people who have no interest in being casual with me.*

The sound from my shoes echoes off the hollow lockers in the narrow windowless hallways. I’ve left my class, which is technically illegal, and worse, it’s not a part of my plan in the moleskin, some kind of intervention to make them grow. Instead, I feel a little bit bloodthirsty. Must punish Derrick. Must punish Derrick. I think, why did I ever think I could be a teacher in the first place? My destroy the world voice: *It’s the Derricks of the world will lead to the fall of the human race. Why? They sneer at you. They have multiple girlfriends who they are cruel to. They think they’re hot shit.* That hardly seems to indicate...**HE’S HUMILIATING YOU!** Should have held it together enough to call security! **HE GOT THE BETTER OF YOU!** What consequence is there if I just kick him out with nowhere to go? What does that accomplish? **NOTHING, YOU’RE A FOOL, A CHUMP.** *He’s probably at Tasty Dog by now chomping on some fries and slurping down a coke.* I had to, what else could I do? I had no other options. *You should’ve sent that you do not tolerate this kind of behavior in the classroom.* I did. *You didn’t.*

So easy to hate the school when it’s in the way, and hide behind it when shit goes bad.

10:56 I speed-walk down to room 272, which, as it turns out, is not the discipline office anymore. It’s Lost and Found and looking at me quizzically by the time I figure it out is

Violet Eldridge. “Hi Avi, Where have you been?” she says to me, and with each word it’s as if she’s wagging a reprimanding finger. I seem to have this relationship with many of the older, white women in the building. I’m 37 but they treat me like I’m ten. It’s both a comfort and a hassle. She keeps all of the records in a big, brown book that she opens with immense pride and caution. The edges of the paper are fraying and going brown. Apparently, word processing hasn’t made it to Violet’s world.

“I’ve been around. This isn’t the discipline office anymore?”

“This has been Lost and Found room since 2008. Jeez Louise, Avi, where have you been?”

“I guess too much in my head. Wow. Well, I guess that’s a good thing. Means I haven’t had much trouble.”

“Til now.”

“Yeah, til now.”

Ken Wonderlove, has so many titles, Discipline Officer, PSS Leader, Student Interventionist, Classroom Management Head, but everyone just calls him Wonderlove. With a name like that you kind of have to. He dresses like Michael Douglass in that movie where he has a nervous breakdown on the highway. Short sleeve button down and tie. He’s stocky, wears thick glasses. His face is pocky and he’s got an affect that demands a lot of eye contact. I like him though. I mean I sympathize. All day people come to him with problems. The only people he sees have problems. The kids have problems. The adults. Everyone.

“Hey Ken.”

“Avi,” he wraps a paw around my bony shoulder. “What brings you to this neck of the woods?”

“Well, I’m actually checking in to see if Derrick Lerner has been here?”

“Derrick who?”

“Lerner.”

It’s then that I start to feel chest pains, nothing too overwhelming, but distinctly present. I’m getting distracted and can’t concentrate. Why did I leave my class again? *To track down Derrick Lerner*, but he’s not here, so what am I doing here, *what is anyone doing anywhere?*

“What did this Derrick Lerner do? Did he steal somebody’s wallet?” He laughs in a way that indicates I’m supposed to laugh with him.

“No, nothing like that. Never mind, I’m sure you have more important things to do.”

“Nothing more important than having a little chat with the great Avi Lessing. Come in, come in, you’re not doing anything, are you?”

“Me, no, sure.” And we walk in the office and he sits in his leather chair that makes all those leather chair sounds and when he rocks back, I know I’ve made a big mistake.

“You know how many referrals we get each day, Avi?”

“Ten?”

“Fifty. A day. Avi. A day.”

“Wow, that’s unreal,” I slip into the complimenting voice. “You know I have this idea for a play where I interview everyone who works in the school, and ask them about their best and worst day at work.”

“I wouldn’t even have time for that, Avi”

“Yeah, well I should let you go.”

“Sit down. How are things going in Avi’s World this year?”

“You mean the Experiments class or my actual world?”

“Sure.”

“I think they’re going well. I mean I’d like to think that students are having good experiences. My other world is up and down, like chutes and ladders, you know. I’m not a believer in . . .”

“That’s cute. Up and down. Like chutes and ladders. The farther we go up the further we go down. I like that.”

“Did someone say anything to you about my class...”

“You’re fidgety, Avi relax. Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I’m all right, I mean ... in the grand scheme of things... today I got this evaluation from Martin...”

“No I meant, do you have an itch you have to scratch?”

My butt does itch, how does he know? He knows because I’ve been sliding up and down on the upholstered chair, a technique meant to hide itchy butt syndrome, post swimming at the beach, but one which has only called more attention to how bizarre I am: and isn’t this life, you try to mask one problem with a set of behaviors that attract more unwanted attention and shame.

“Relax.”

“Yeah, no, things are good. I’m looking forward to time with the little ones.”

“Yeah, my little ones are all grown up, Avi. All grown up.” He gathers some papers and collates them like a deck of cards. “They grow up and then we get a bunch of discipline referrals written up on them.”

“Yeah,” I say, “I wish I could write referrals sometimes for my two year old.” I try to laugh in the way he does but it doesn’t work. What I really wish is that I could get the hell out of this office. I wish that I could rewind my life, maybe even back to the end of college. All the way back to the night my friend Brennan got killed and my best friend Eli almost did. Take myself back to Highland Park, call up Eli in Boulder and say, “Hey, remember those tickets that I helped you pick up for the Avalanche, Hawks game, the one for Brennan’s birthday. Why don’t you skip that game? Or go and don’t drink. At the very least, don’t cross that on-ramp like all of those other yahoos. Brennan, don’t die, Eli don’t have your legs smashed up so bad that you have to be in a wheel chair and have metal plates in your legs.”

Take me back *before* then. Before things soured. Back before that time that I had sex with that girl and didn't use a condom and was convinced I had AIDS for a week.

Or before then when that guy smashed up my nose for talking to his girlfriend. Take me to the moment before that happened.

Or take me back to any of the many times my dad flew off the handle and stormed out of the house and peeled out of our gravel driveway to who knows where. Take me back so I never had to stand at my door and hear the car start up, then run to my window to watch him go, then back to the door to hear my mom sniffle and pound. Then silence.

All of life is corrupted, I think, compromised, all of the time. There's no going back and there's no shining time where everything is perfect and right and easy. So I might as well finish this talk with Wonderlove, get back to my class, and if I'm lucky, my students are actually checking in, or have finished checking in. Maybe it's not total mayhem. Just maybe it's salvageable. Maybe life can be hopeless *and* still pretty good.

"Fact is Derrick Lerner was here, Avi. Or is here. We put him in the container room. Hahaha. It's not really a container but it is kind of small."

I don't know what to say because I'm starting to have a little panic attack. And what constitutes a panic attack really? Is it merely tightness in the chest or does it have to do with the thoughts that shrink my ribcage airtight. Do the thoughts cause the panic or does the panic cause the thoughts? It's a circle not a line, there is no point that could explain or justify another. Their only connection is that they happen next to each other in my head.

"Avi, I want you to listen to this next question really closely." He leans in so close I can smell the Old Spice. "Avi, did you call Derrick Lerner a motherfucker?"

"What? No. Is that what he said?" Does thinking constitute saying?

"Avi, Avi, Avi, relax. I didn't say that you called him that. I asked you."

My butt really starts to itch. Something small has gotten bigger. An itch, a referral, a beef. One interaction can ruin you. Itchy butt becomes itchy anus. "I have a class right now."

“I know you have a class right now.” I start to get up but he waves me down with two fingers. “I have you covered. Don’t worry. Avi, do you know how I know that you have a class right now, Avi? About two minutes ago I got a call from Ray who said there were a bunch of students outside your classroom who were disturbing Mr. Kahanek’s class next door. And you know what he told me? He said when he opened the door to find out the source of the commotion, low and behold, there was no adult in the room, and now I know why, because that adult in the room, is sitting across from me right here in my office. So let’s assume you didn’t call Derrick Lerner a motherfucker, which, between you and me, let’s face it, maybe he is one, and just maybe he made you so mad, that you called him that and didn’t know you called him that, which happens to me all of the time.” He says the last part really sweetly which makes him look, with his pocky face, like we’re getting to know each other in a bar. I get up to leave and he tells me Ray’s got it, he’s a professional babysitter, take a seat, he says, really gently, like I’m his child. Derrick’s mom’s is on her way to the school and she’d like to meet with the three of us. He smiles with assurance.

Fifteen minutes later, at 11:09, Derrick’s mom shows up out of breath. She’s a short, squat woman, who wears a lot of makeup and expensive clothes. Identifying the bottom of a downward spiral is far easier than tracing back how it started. Is it the moment she tells me she’s an English professor at Toulhouse College, or is it when Wonderlove seats us in a tight row facing him, or is it harder to discern than that? Was it fated the second Derrick walked into my class on day one and I said nice to meet you, and he looked at me with cold eyes. Did I call him a motherfucker? I didn’t. But in my head, I might’ve. And that might count. Things we can’t possibly know, predict, or calculate count.

Everything is oppressive. Even the light from his small, desk lamp, which I normally find soothing in contrast to the omnipresent fluorescents, feels menacing. I don’t want to look at Derrick or his mom or Wonderlove. I wish I had never left my class during the check-in. I wish I could be back in my classroom and I think of everything there that

comforts me like my Mickey Mouse used to: the clippings on the walls from the *New York Times*, the poem my dad wrote about me when I turned 30, the Bob Dylan poster, which represents who I might be if I were controversial, but loved for it, the Czech print representing communism (two red body-like sculptures with tin megaphones coming out of every joint, blasting outward), my desk and the three chairs I like to sit on: the swivel black one, the ancient looking, low slung, brown one, and the high-seated Pier One stool, not to mention my stuff: backpack, moleskin, water bottle, computer, sports section.

I try to think about sports but it feels forced. Derrick telling Wonderlove that I called him a motherfucker even though I only thought it makes me think I don't even have access to the privacy of my own thinking. I try to but it feels forced. To the question who's going to play off-guard this season for the Bulls, I hear in my head, *who the fuck cares*.

"Now," Wonderlove says, playing his fat fingers over his desk like a piano. "Let's see if we can work this out."

"Mr. Wonderlove, I have to say, in all my years as a parent, I've never had to drive down to any school any of my children have attended to deal with a complaint regarding their conduct." She keeps going but, through the blaring in my ears, I can't take in much. She talks about her kids as if they were little diplomats, for Christ sake.

I start to say, who's making you come to the school, or something officious like *with all due respect*, but Wonderlove raises the stubby fingers he had been tapping the desk with, and lowers them slowly, like the Emperor in the first Start Wars when he killed people by mere gesture. While he's gesturing he's also pursing his lips in a silent inverted shush, sucking the air in. I slump in my chair a little and out of my peripheral, I see Derrick, who's sitting in-between his mom and me, smirking. I could take him, I think, right now. And then I think about my wife Bindi's reaction, *you did what*, and the fact that maybe I take him, maybe he takes me, and that this is all a diversionary fantasy meant to rescue me from this public undressing of losing to this little shit first in class, and now here. A little voice inside my head says *the only thing you lost is me*, which feels both true and impossible to decipher.

“I can’t recall a single time Derrick has encountered difficulty in school, let alone wound up in the discipline system?” She says discipline system like it was an obscenity. “Can you Derrick?” Derrick momentarily wipes the shit-eating grin off his face and nods the affirmative. And then, realizing he’s being watched, shakes his head no. Then he glances down at his arms and picks at a piece of lint.

“OK” says Wonderlove, “I’d like to stay away from the past and just focus on the present. Maybe Derrick, you could provide an account of what you think happened, and then Avi, can respond to your account. Does that sound like a fair way to proceed?” Everyone nods not altogether enthusiastically. “I don’t know, man, the dude just swore at me and kicked me out of class.”

“Derrick,” his mom says sharply, “sit up.”

“I have the same problem with my kids at home. Mine even eat dinner leaning back. We used to call them low-riders.” When Wonderlove says low riders he uses this real, phony generic voice filled with levity and humor meant to indicate that that everything will be OK. *Will it?* “Derrick, I am going to need a little bit more elaboration from you than ‘he kicked me out of class.’ I’ve known Avi a long time and he’s got a long leash when it comes to student behavior.” What do the stricter teachers have, I think, choke collars?

“Well, not when it comes to me.”

“So you think I treated you unjustly Derrick?” I say.

Derrick snorts out a little laugh, and covers up his view of my face by playing with his hair.

“Derrick, Mr. Lessing asked you a question,” Mr. Wonderlove says.

“Derrick,” his mother bristles.

“What? I wasn’t the only one talking in that room. There were like 4 other people goofing off but he decided it was all my fault I guess.”

“So you do admit that you were talking when you shouldn’t of been talking.”

“That’s how the class is. We don’t do anything. Everyone’s talking all the time. He wants us to talk.”

“Does he want you to talk when you’re talking, or are you talking out of turn?”

“I don’t know. Both I guess.”

“Might this be a curricular problem *and* a classroom management problem?” Derrick’s mom says as if I weren’t in the room. After all she has expertise in these matters. “Derrick wants nothing more than to be engaged. If the material is engaging than Derrick will be. And if it’s not...”

“I am sure that Avi’s material is engaging to him...”

“Mr. Wonderlove, we’re not talking about Mr. Lessing, we’re talking about the class. A class curriculum should develop a student’s skill, not advance a teacher’s whims. There are a number of parents who think the class is not developmentally appropriate.”

“Mrs. Lerner, let’s, for now, stick with this individual piece before we move on to the other pieces.” How reassuring. When we’re done the individual pieces on Wonderlove’s agenda, perhaps we can move towards a formal discipline hearing, maybe my suspension – how lovely.

“Now, Derrick, would you agree it’s your responsibility to engage in the material?”

“If there was material,” Derrick mumbles.

I have yet to speak and now that it’s my turn, which Wonderlove has indicated with a bob of his head, I feel a gnawing tightness in my chest and that electromagnetic pulsing in my ears. “Well, I guess I could answer this in several different ways. The idea that we don’t do anything is absurd. We have a course reader with reading assignments, we have essays to write, every day in class we engage in activities that further our goal: to be more aware and to be better writers of our life stories. It’s an English class. But I could see how Derrick might think that we’re not doing anything if some of the work gets too personal and he doesn’t want to go there.”

“Personal? What could you possibly want to know about Derrick’s personal life? This is English right, not group therapy.” The mom howls a little and folds one of her hands under her nose. Derrick’s laugh is more of a snort.

“No it’s not therapy, Mrs. Lerner. I make the distinction between a class that’s therapeutic, and doing therapy.”

“I fail to see the distinction.” Another exaggerated facial expression meant to indicate that I am a crazy person.

“Students telling stories from their life isn’t therapy.”

“Well you can’t force...”

“There’s no forcing...” and I can feel my throat tightening.

“I don’t want to share my life with complete strang...” Derrick begins.

“Alright, look,” Wonderlove says, “let’s all take a deep breath. Count to 10, like Benjamin Franklin said.”

“You’re thinking of Jefferson.” Wonderlove ignores me.

“Derrick, you don’t get the point of the class?”

“Mr. Lessing, watch how you talk to my son.”

“Right, because there is no point.”

I could just strangle him right here. Strangle him and kick her in the shin. Or get a lobotomy. Doesn’t matter. Someone needs to suffer. True, there’d likely be an arrest, lawsuits, grievances etc ... But those are matters for the future.

“Mr. Wonderlove, my next move is to have a little chat with Martin Haberstein in the English department. I will be asking him some tough questions: are there, for instance, rubrics for their essays? An assignment sheet with learning targets, REI protocols, SEL spheres? Are there any expectations in place for these children that may offer structure for this class of his? I have yet to see even a syllabus.” She throws up her arms, palms upward in supplication to the heavens, as if the absence of a syllabus in her empty hands clinches the utter lunacy of her son’s predicament.

“Well, sometimes there are and sometimes there aren’t.”

“What?”

“Rubrics, I was going to address each of your points separately.”

“At the school I work at, every English professor, no, every staff member, must have a rubric for every assignment or task. Targets for each day. I would think this would be common practice at a school like Birchwood High School.”

Wonderlove smiles just then in a way that makes my veins feel cold and exposed. “You’re right Ms. Lerner. Your query into Mr. Lessing’s teaching practices will be best answered by talking with his division head. What I am trying to do in the next 4 or so minutes, since I have six other students waiting, with, and this is confidential, far more egregious infractions, is to understand how the encounter between Mr. Lessing and Derrick brought us all to this situation we’re in now, so that we can repair and rectify it. Does that sound reasonable? Does that sound reasonable?” We all nod, again unenthusiastically.

“Mr. Lessing? I’d like to get your take so I can take all the facts into account before making a decision regarding Derrick.”

“Derrick was disrespectful several times as I was trying to get class started and at some point, enough was enough.”

“Can you be specific?”

Derrick snorts a little again and then lifts his fingers to his hair to cover up his view of me.

“Yeah, does calling me a ‘pussy’ give you a sense?”

“I never said...”

“Derrick would never say...”

“Worse than any insult you can hurl at me, Derrick, is the effect you have on your classmates. Stephen and Horace follow your lead. It contaminates the class.”

“They’re their own people. Are you going to blame me for their behavior too?”

“What I’m talking about is what you do to the classroom atmosphere...”

“... Atmosphere?”

“How you make it impossible to teach.”

“With all due respect, Mr. Lessing, isn’t that your job?” He smirks. I feel less violent and more curious. Could one go clinically insane if this conversation extended, say, six more hours.

II:18 Derrick is sent back to class, Mr. Wonderlove talks to Derrick’s mom, and I wait obediently on an attachable chair-bench pushed up against a blank wall. Here and there are other offices with students waiting outside on other chair benches. *It’s all reminiscent of something out of Kafka* my dad would say; things have been *Kafkaesque* for as long as I can remember.

Next to me, I see a kid I know, but haven’t seen in 3 years. His name is Edison. He’s a good-looking kid. Even distressed, he looks like the sympathetic protagonist in a movie. He’s the kind of guy you have trouble taking your eyes off of. It’s the economy of his movement, the intensity of his gaze. Edison was placed in my freshmen learning support class mid-year, when he told his previous teacher that testing his patience wasn’t a good idea because people could end up being patients themselves. Which I thought was kind of clever.

“He’d have no scruples about laying you out,” the teacher told me.

“Hitting me? No-o, you’re kidding, right?”

“Oh, yes, he’s pathological.”

He was mostly fine in my class. Not that he did any real work in class, which was a glorified study hall anyhow, but I liked him, we got along well. He had a self-satisfied way about him, like he didn’t need you for anything, because he was up to things you couldn’t understand. As if he were already in a high status position outside of school and this school stuff was a mere formality, not really pertinent to his world.

“So, Wire, what do they have you in here for?” I said as if we were both in the same situation.

“Huh?” He looks at me kind of blankly that I experience as aggression. He doesn’t recognize me. He runs a comb through his hair, and casts his eyes to the floor. I can hear Mike’s mom’s plaintive voice through the door.

“So are you watching it?” I ask after awhile.

“What? Why don’t you leave me alone, mister.”

“The Wire. You *really* don’t remember me.”

“Yeah, I’ve watched all of it. Why? Oh damn, Mr. Lessing I didn’t recognize you at first without your beard.”

“Yeah, I need new clippers. I was thinking maybe you hated me for some reason.”

“Mr. Lessing,” he says sing-songy and he kind of looks side to side.

“Four to one, which character do you like better – Omar, Bubbles, Mike, or Avon.”

“I like Marlowe.”

“Yeah, you guys kind of have the same look.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Lessing? What are you saying?”

“I mean you both have that kind of style, of understated power.”

“Yeah, right. You calling me a gangster? Is that what you thinkin’?”

He locks some eye contact on me and then busts into a smile and a laugh. “I’m just playing with you, Mr. Lessing. I had you. You look sca-red.”

“Sheeeeeeeeeeeeeee-it,” I say, imitating Clay Davis, a character I love from *the Wire*.

“Mr. Lessing be crazy up in this piece,” Edison says, cracking up. And then a look from Wonderlove’s assistant quiets us both down.

“Yeah. It’s been an intense morning. I hope you don’t take my *Wire* thing the wrong way. I don’t think you’re a gangster.”

“Shit, Mr. Lessing, I don’t care about that.”

“You’ve got bigger problems.”

“You could say that.”

“Anything you need help on?”

“I’m straight.”

“What I mean is that I think you’re sophisticated. You get things on a deep level. You don’t think of the *The Wire* as school material, but it takes real intelligence, a nuanced, sophisticated, mind to understand all of the characters and their contradictions. Not to mention the way it covers the spectrum of drugs, gangs, violence, police, and politics in American cities.”

He combs his hair. “I’m smart. I could do school work if I wanted to.”

“I agree with that first statement. I’m not so sure about the second one.”

“You don’t think I could? Why not?”

“I’m not sure. And that’s not a comment on you so much as it is about school in general. I mean look where you are.”

“You’re sitting right next to me.”

“That’s a good point. That’s a *great* point.”

“Maybe if people weren’t messing with me all of the time.”

“That’s what I’m saying. That’s not going to stop. I’m sure that you’d acknowledge part of that is you messing with people and part of that is them messing with you. There are hundreds of parts to everything, at least for me.”

“Yeah, it get on my nerves.”

“The school, your teachers, what?”

“All of it, being called down here, being accused of something I didn’t do.”

“The discipline system.”

“What’s the discipline system?”

“This office.”

“I don’t like this office.”

“You know Dan Verona, right? He works with students at risk.”

“Risk of what?”

“Well, of getting hurt.” It’s one of those phrases I use without really knowing what it means. “Maybe at risk of being in danger.”

“I’m not at risk.”

“It’s just a term.”

“I’m not at risk. Risk what? In danger of who?”

“I’m talking about kids who struggle academically - hold on, let me finish - for whatever reason, because they can’t do the work, or they’re always absent, whatever. In your situation, having grown up on the west side, and with what you’ve told me about your brother, and what happened, school is probably one of the last things on your mind. You’re at risk of dropping out. Am I right?”

“You’re not wrong.”

“So that is what the term means. Anyway, Dan thinks that it’s on the kids to comply with what the adults in the building want and that if you pick up your effort you’ll succeed. If you tune out the background noise. I don’t think it’s always that easy.”

“I could if I listened.”

“Yeah, but you don’t.”

“Damn Mr. Lessing, why you gotta be pressin’ me so hard.”

“No, I’m not even saying that you should.”

“What are you saying?”

“That you’re an embodiment of the *Wire*.”

“Huh?”

“I’m saying that it’s not just you that fails in school. The school fails you. It’s both.”

Derrick’s mom walks right past me and averts her gaze, heads out the door, back to her cushy college job. Wonderlove puts his stubby hands on his hips and says, “Now what?”

“Are you talking to me?” Edison raises his eyebrows.

“Yeah I’m talking to you mister. Can you believe this kid? Like I said, now what? Second time this week.” You got hand it to Wonderlove. He can be really disorienting with the way he starts these cross-examinations.

“Now what? Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Wonderlove crosses his arms and spreads his legs further apart. He looks like a football coach on the sidelines. In charge. The effect on Edison, because he’s standing over him, is kind of comical, if it weren’t happening for real. Both of them seem pretty unafraid, which is worrisome.

Edison shakes his head, stands up, and carelessly slings his backpack over one arm. He almost hits my head as he does this.

“Edison, Edison,” Wonderlove says, “you almost hit Mr. Lessing with your bag.”

“What are you talking about?” Edison says, and then Wonderlove puts his hand on Edison’s shoulder. “Don’t touch me.”

“Calm down.”

“Get your hands off of me man.” Edison throws both of his hands in the air and in doing so the backpack again falls on my foot.

“Pick it up.”

“You pick it up.”

“I don’t mind picking it up,” I say and when I reach over, Wonderlove says, “Don’t touch that bag, Mr. Lessing.”

But it was too late I had the bag over my shoulder and Wonderlove, Edison, and me stood in a triangle.

“Get in my office right now.”

“No.”

“Can you believe this kid?” Wonderlove looks to me for support. The best I can do is blink. “You have a couple of options Mr. Durand, you can walk into my office right now, and apologize to...”

“...That’s really ok ...“

“TO MR. LESSING, or I can get on this little hand held device here and talk to officer Davis. Would you like that?”

“I don’t really care. You’re going to do what you do, and I’m going to do what I do.”

Wonderlove pulls his radio from a side clip. “Yellow Bird, I’ve got a 221 in home base.” He fiddles with the talkie and smiles. “Greek Lion, 221 in the HB.” Then a look of sadness passes over Wonderlove’s face, as if Edison had left him no choice, that was his hand, what could he do, he had a full house, he had to play it. Edison looks at him blankly, wheels around and heads out into the hall. Wonderlove bites his lip, nods once, smiles faintly, and takes chase. Not knowing what to do, I trail slightly behind, with the backpack slung over my shoulder. “Edison, this isn’t the path you want to be on,” Wonderlove blandly calls to him. If it was such a bad path, then what were we doing chasing after him, I think. Where did following Derrick Lerner get me?

11:33 Edison wasn’t exactly making a run for it. He also wasn’t going quietly. Consternated teachers come out of their classrooms like puppets in a musical number. Down the hallway we go in a ritualized dance; Edison, followed by Wonderlove, who furiously and ecstatically barks into his radio, and then me. Behind me quite a way, but gaining fast, are three-barrel chested security guards heading in our direction. Edison cuts a quick left by the science rooms, and takes the staircase toward the 1st floor student center, a huge congregating area. There, I see officer Davis and Shade Murray, the guy who taught me how to wash my hands, and four or five other security guards in a loose perimeter blocking all the exits.

Nothing is more titillating in a school than the possibility of a confrontation. Everyone’s starving for something real. Deans, social workers, students, custodians, teachers, all formed a wide phalanx around a smaller cadre of administrators, deans of discipline, and security guards that converged in concentric circles around the perpetrator, who thirty

minutes before was peacefully combing his hair. More were gathering and gesticulating, pointing and whispering, explaining to the newcomers what had happened and what could happen. In the fulcrum of it all was Edison, whose arms now jutted out the sides, like weapons now cocked. I didn't much want to stay anymore, but I had his backpack. It was a lame reason, but it would do.

It wouldn't help to defend him, not now, anyway. There were a bunch of voices echoing off the walls, mostly the adults ushering kids away as if it were their responsibility to cordon off the area where a crash was about to happen. Problem was that the early lunch was letting out and there were too many kids gathered around to disperse.

11:40 A few of the barrel chested security guards were putting their hands on Edison and Edison was telling them what would happen to them if they kept them there. I fantasized entering the ring and giving a sermon on the misuse of power in school. Then I thought about handing him his backpack and walking away. Or, I thought, I could scream with all the force in my being, 'Leave Wire alone,' over and over until they cart me away in an ambulance. Neither option seemed particularly compelling. Neither did going back up to my room though, for what, the class that I had abandoned was over? By now, they were probably all talking about what a fuck up I was, which is what Bellboy thought when he first met me. He was right and so were all of the evaluations.

As I look at Edison defending himself from a mass of uniforms and walkie-talkies in what now seems just short of a mob atmosphere of students rooting for him to annihilate his high school career, I think about how much I hate schools, the hubris of them: I also know all this hating is a way of distracting myself from actually doing something. And didn't that indicate a deep flaw in my character, a moral cowardice, the very hypocrite so worthy of mockery: someone who wants to fight alongside someone who is wrong, but doesn't want to suffer the consequences of that fighting, and then blithely blames his inaction on circumstance.

I desperately need to use the bathroom; I suddenly feel famished.

My worst self comes out in the heat of conflict. I become like a stupid animal. Must pee. Must heat. And then the rush of feeling that must be the inspiration for horror moves. I feel a gnawing hate for this school, all schools, Wonderlove, myself. It's all pointless now. I sit here on the dusty floor, so far removed from the action that no one would know I was part of what started it. And I watch helplessly as things get worse. It makes my eyes burn. A situation nobody wanted in the first place was getting out of hand, without the possibility, it seemed, of an amicable resolution that would seem a no-brainer seven minutes ago. If Wonderlove had not told Edison what to do... If Edison had shook his head in contempt but picked up the bag...

If He had brought us out of Egypt, and not carried out judgments against them—Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had carried out judgments against them, and not against their idols—Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

If He had destroyed their idols, and had not smitten their first-born—Dayenu, it would have sufficed!

But it didn't suffice. None of it made sense. Wonderlove, Edison, and I are now all engaged in an ancient ritual of repression, rebellion, and reprisal. Edison is belligerent; Wonderlove is confrontational; and I am gone.

Edison is saying *fuck this* and *fuck that* and *fuck you*. What if Wonderlove had followed Edison and then talked with him when he inevitably stopped? Or what if he had just let him go? What if I had caught up with him, and said, Hey Wire remember that scene where Prezbaloski tries to break up a fight and fails, let's take this a different direction? That would be against protocol though. He talked back, he took off, and now he was refusing to be searched. Why were they searching him? Because people who talked back did drugs? What was the point of protocols you had to follow if they only caused more chaos? We use words like protocol, compliance, rules, and conduct as code for *I will dominate you*. It's the way of the world, my father says to me when I complain to him. "The bigger the place, the

more bureaucratic it becomes. Look at Buchenwald; one big bureaucracy.” There were now a dozen or more security guards dealing with traffic, blocking passages, and generally barking out orders to one another.

The end was anti-climactic, like a game decided by missed free throws. Edison was being led to the squad car. I couldn't see if they handcuffed him. Did they find drugs? Did he push someone? Or could you now arrest someone in a school for not doing what you wanted them to do? When I tried to get out more information from Shade, he says, not now, Avi, let's talk later.

I think about Raiva, my three year old. How, when we reach a crucial point of disagreement - where I abdicate my role as parent, and join her as fellow three year old - I take a certain shameless pleasure in being mechanically out of control, shutting her out, inciting her purposefully, so that I can justifiably take my anger out on her. When she's especially obstinate about something she wants that she can't have, our encounter escalates into a series of promises and threats, until I carry her to her room like a suitcase. She screams and I scowl at her and bowl her towards her room. In the 15 or so times this has happened, she screams full-throated at me, and dives into her bed. Sometimes she flails her arms at me and I whack her on the butt, nothing too severe, but humiliating nonetheless. Later, when we've talked it through, she asks me, "Do you love me?" Not many things make me feel more rotten than that.

"Of course I love you. I just want you to say "please" and "thank you" and not whine."

"You love me when I say thank you?"

"Yes. No."

"Yes and No, pap, which is it, silly."

"No, I love you all of the time."

"OK then don't get so mad Pap because if you get mad I'll be sad. Don't get mad at me."

Were Wonderlove and officer Davis any worse than me? Here were a bunch of grown people doing the same thing: humiliating a scared, tough, black kid, who was reputed to be in a gang, or was it his brother, the one who was shot dead outside of his house four years ago, when Edison was eleven? The difference being nobody was going to apologize to Edison, tell him it was ok, and that we loved him, no matter what. I stood there with his backpack a little longer, and then, when they escorted him out to the squad car with a bunch of kids standing around with their faces jammed to the windows and doors, I sat down on the floor and put one hand on my head, while the other hand fiddled with the lining of Edison's bag.

Fourth period is over, fifth period has begun, and I've been caught in yet another passing period. Why wasn't Edison scared? Why did he deliberately make his situation worse? Was it a conscious decision? In high school, the most trouble I got in was when I encouraged our fans to be disrespectful to the visiting basketball team. For that I got a warning from Dean Lawrence and that made me shake in my boots. What scares me most is what *hasn't* happened -- the tumor in my neck that ended up being benign. It feels somehow embarrassingly Jewish and upper middle class that the big issues that dominate my life are neurotic, not real. Or minor. Losing the private school gig when my position was cut. Raiva's stroller flipping over and breaking one of her little teeth.

This kid's brother was gunned down four years ago, when he was eleven. How do you recover from that? And how could I question why he'd want to rebel, give up, kick back? Of course Edison made things worse. Was he supposed to act rationally in a world where nothing made sense around him? Hell, I wanted to make things worse just because an insecure kid called me a name. And now I had. I was complicit in that and now in this. "The best teachers," my old mentor told me once, "make it easier for their kids. They clear stoppages in the river so that the kids can float on by unencumbered." I complained about passing periods while Edison was in handcuffs.

My mom says it never works to try and compare your problems to someone else, because your problems are your problems, but when the student you have just failed to stand up for has gotten arrested, it seems to me to make perfect sense to compare. The reform movement in education of rigorous expectations should dictate that when a volatile black kid who lost his brother to gang violence three years ago decides to storm out of the discipline office after getting goaded, you let him walk on. That would take real rigor and self-discipline.

All the different voices in my head, parts, thoughts, feelings, and sensations declare war on each other. It's a big family fight in my head. The father in me booms, *Get off the floor.* And the petulant child responds: What for? *Because you're bringing attention to yourself by sitting in the middle of the student center.* I'm not allowed to sit here? *Teachers don't sit on the floor.* What if I don't identify with being a teacher? *Too bad, that paycheck means you are one.* I should've done something to help Edison. *That ship has sailed.* You're saying it's too late. *I'm saying that time has passed. You'll have to advocate for him in a different way.* Like how? *I don't know but you're not going to figure it out here, get up, people are staring at you.* Something immovable and despairing in me, says, no, I should never rise, speak, or do anything ever again.

The self-congratulatory pleasure I took in connecting with Edison, laughing with him (aren't I cool and well-meaning without making a big fuss of it?) is spoiled when rapport proves much easier than actually advocating, or standing up for someone. Didn't he at least deserve that?

Dan would've. Maybe Dan would call later, advocate behind the scenes. It's not too late, I reason. Is that true? Too late to avoid his arrest, and once he's in the system it's out of my hands, Dan will say. The very things I find essential in my life – reading a good story, writing, going to see plays, exercising, encountering fascinating people, feel totally irrelevant and out of place after witnessing this. But that is just one more self-incriminating self-lie, that somehow my life will never be the same after watching something horrific, that I will

fundamentally change how I live, when really, if anything, it affirms my decision to escape, evade, and hide from power, authority, and the mashing combines. I betrayed Edison. *Everyday is a betrayal. When you tell everyone you're the son of a Holocaust survivor, you have co-opted your dad's story to make yourself more exotic, to make your history more rich, to seduce women, and to get kids of color to like you.*

I get up too quickly and have to bend over a little bit until the head rush passes.

I could head up to the studio theater to lie down.

I could emotionally eat. Bindi introduced that term to me, and beyond my first few bites of anything, everything I eat seems emotional. My packed lunch is up in the room, but if I go there now, chances are Zach will be waiting patiently and indignantly for me so that he can tell me the way in which I ignore him in class. I need to do a better job with the students I don't naturally like; that should be obvious, but as a teacher, it's often not.

I end up heading towards the staff cafeteria, though if someone were to stop me and ask me why I wouldn't even know that I was going anywhere. For great swaths of the day, despite all of my meditating, and talk of being in the moment, the actions I take, the places I go have little correlation to any conscious decision-making. For instance, as I make my way up the stairs, instead of thinking about how to help Edison, I scratch my scalp, and think about how life is a big joke. I can be a lazy thinker.

I think about how amateurish and pathetic everything can sound once you examine it, and worse, have to keep remembering it. I cringe thinking about my pep talk to Edison. A great help that was.

In the staff cafeteria line, I wonder, how is it that everyone seems to know how to talk to one another and achieve social normality. The Consumer Ed teacher, who is also the football coach, is talking to an equally muscular guy I don't recognize. They're talking about this guy Randy, who I also don't know, but evidently they do, because they laugh loudly and almost bend over with former-athlete stiffness every time they say his name. When they get to the front of the line, they each say, "How you doing Babs?" and Babs, whose real name is

Gertrude says, “Oh good Russ,” and then Russ says, “Give me the ham with a side of mac and cheese,” and quickly pivots back to the conversation, speaking loudly. I feel alien.

“So what’ll it be?” Babs’ assistant says to me. I don’t know what to order.

“What do you like today?”

I clear my throat. “All of it.” She has a real round face, the kind, in a different era, you’d expect to be wrapped in a bonnet.

I should get the salad. I order a Reuben and fries. It’s because the salad bar is so terribly designed that every time you use it you think *this is terribly designed*. It’s supposed to protect people from germs. But in reality the Plexiglas prevents me from reaching any of the middle trays where the tastiest compartments are: the olives, tomatoes, salami, croutons, and dried cranberries. I fear spraining my neck reaching for the chickpeas.

“Mr. Lessing? What are you doing in here?” Jamie, the gold standard teacher who I saw after my meeting with Martin is needling my ribs. “We never see you down here buddy. Are you going to eat with us?”

“I thought you were going up to my room.”

“I eat down here and I come up the last 20 minutes.”

“I was going to go to the studio theater. I’m actually really depressed.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Do you know Edison Durand?”

“I know the name but the not the face.”

“He just got arrested.”

“Oh no.”

“Yeah.”

“No shit.”

“I have his backpack.”

“I was wondering what you were doing with that backpack.”

“Yeah.”

“Come eat with us.”

“I’m having a bad day,” and when I say this I lean my head on his shoulder and he pats me on the head. But as I’m doing this Russ and his friend look over at us. Are their muscles permanently flexed? I take a step back. Jamie and I exchange a look. His says, why, and mine says, why not, which makes me feel like I’m in Junior High. I spit up the water I’m drinking and spray it all over him.

“Avi!”

“Sorry.”

“That one was on purpose.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t think I could’ve held back.”

“That one you could’ve.”

“Maybe but it’s not for sure.”

People are looking at us and I say, “Jamie isn’t feeling well,” and duck out to the seating area, leaving him to explain what really happened as well as pay for my lunch. I think, suddenly, it makes me happier to interact socially when there is some kind of scene to be made. But I don’t know if Jamie feels this way because he later tells me that he doesn’t like when I spit water out on him.

I can think of few more delightfully invasive and socially treacherous occurrences than spitting up water on someone. What a complete and utter joy to be drinking water, or really anything (though surely water elicits a less vehement reaction than say coffee or something sticky like Gatorade or Apple Juice), when something makes you laugh - it could be anything really, for the inveterate water-spitter-outer any pretext will do - before spraying it all over them. Jamie maintains, correctly, that I can choose whether or not I spit out water. He also says that he doesn’t enjoy the moment I spit out water on him, which I thought he did. Bindi tells me, don’t do it, people don’t like it, it’s gross. Why I thought he or anyone would is a mystery really; other than I would probably enjoy it if he spit up water on me. I really would.

In the main faculty dining room, there are tables here and there, all rectangles, maybe ten in all, and for the most part, people sit according to their division. Teachers in Humanities sit together, Fine Arts go by the window, deans sit in the back corner, there's science in the center, and so on. There are outliers of course: a rogue Humanities teacher who sits alone and reads the New York Review of Books, a special ed teacher who decides to sit with the art teachers. The young teachers are the exception. They all sit together because some of them are dating or want to. There is also a collection of grizzled veterans who sit together. I wonder if they grimace because their bodies hurt or they don't like being here anymore. I wonder if they talk about their impending retirements and pension reform.

I sit across from Jamie and next to Sheila Tuckson, the librarian. On my left is a guy I don't know. Sheila has greying hair and wears her glasses on her nose, all the trappings of the librarian persona, except she swears and talks about sex a lot. She says to me, "Avi, I *never* see you," and I can tell from the way she's saying it, she's more alarmed than happy.

The chorus director's student teacher sits next to me on the end. He's got a 5 o'clock shadow like me and he wears a cardigan sweater. He's mostly focused on eating his soup. I should eat more mindfully like this guy, like Bindi advises. I fight her on all of the stuff she's right about: slowing down, being nicer, tamping down my personality. If I ate more carefully, maybe Jamie wouldn't say I was such a disgusting eater, and we'd be better friends.

When I exchange names with the student teacher and have nothing else to say I ask him what his best and worst moments of the day have been. He says, "Well the worst moment of the day was for sure Chondrea."

Jamie says, "I hate to tell you this Steve, but Chondrea is a person not a moment." Steve laughs a little bit too loudly and says, "Well whatever she is, she's the worst." I don't think I can stay for this conversation where another black kid gets hosed. She's probably the Chondrea in my American Studies next period. I get up from the table and Jamie says, "You didn't even ask him for the best moment," and I say, "I already know, it was the moment Steve kicked her out of class," which feels rude, condescending, and petty to say, but what

the hell, might as well be all three of those things, since let's face it, I'm not going to quit my one-hundred thousand dollar a year teaching job just because a kid gets arrested and a girl I like having in class has a shitty relationship with her student teacher. And to think hours earlier, I had imagined myself going to Afghanistan to Rescue the Children. How pathetic. That's when I remember all of the lunch appointments I made: Zach, Lizzie, Dan, and Bellboy they're all theoretically in my room. I'll have the rest of your life to self-incriminate, I tell myself, and quickly discard my tray, head out to the hallway, and bound upwards taking the stairs by two the way I did when I was a kid.

12:01 All the tables are unfolded. The group of girls from the hallway joins Lizzie at the center table. Zach sits at a separate table and peers at the stuff on my desk. He keeps having to push the center bar of his glasses up because they are too big for him. One of the nose pads is missing and a wad of masking tape keeps one stem from falling off. Bellboy, my best friend at school, even if he says I can't go to concerts anymore, is pulling his lunch from a big, green, sequined bag with a print of collaged faces on it. He says to me, "I brought you some pirogues," and I thank him and say, "Ahhhh..." and he says, "Bad day?" I hug him. My stomach hurts.

"Mr. Lessing?" Zach says. "Are we going to be able to talk? I told another teacher I would be there later in the period based on what time you said you'd see me." I turn my back to Zach and Bellboy looks at me gravely. He knows I'm prone to overreactions. I say to Bellboy in a whisper so only him and I can hear, "I'll pay you 20 dollars if you take this one." Bellboy turns to Zach, "What do you need?"

"Sorry?" Zach says.

"Is that 'sorry, I couldn't hear you' or 'sorry, why are you talking to me?'"

"I don't know," Zach says to Bellboy and shakes his head indignantly.

I go over to my desk and pull out an apple and a bag of cashews from my bag, sit down at my computer and check my email. I check my email up to 25 times a day. I'll also check

various sports websites up to five times a day. It's a mental tick, like trying to drink water out of a glass I've already emptied. I keep trying to take some deep breaths but I can't seem to get them past my sternum. I lean Edison's bag against my desk. Maybe I should try to call his parents.

"I'm going to help you with your problem today Zach," Bellboy counsels.

"No-h, that's ok I'll go." I look up. Zach is trying to make eye contact with me.

"Sit down," Bellboy says.

"Uh do I even know you?"

"You know Bellboy," I say.

I got this," Bellboy says. And then Zach sits down, smiling with self-important exasperation. "Zach, realize first that your being upset does not help your cause." Bellboy narrows his eyes and punctuates his words when he wants to be serious. He also has a juttled jaw and even though he wears jeans, they're all designer labels; ever since he started sponsoring the English Exchange, he wears cardigans and big-knotted ties.

"OK"

"Could you do this with any other teacher?" Bellboy says. "Would any other teacher even entertain the notion of you coming in here and airing your grievances? No, that's first off. Second, Mr. Lessing is the most receptive teacher at the school if you approach him in a manner he can hear you."

Zach starts laughing. "Hey, can you hear me over there Mr. Lessing?" I don't answer him. Really I could fall asleep. I feel pretty depressed. I gingerly step over to his table. Stomachache. "Thanks Bellboy. I got this now. Alright, lay it on me Zach."

"OK I'll try to say this in a way that doesn't sound condescending."

"I'm going to stop you right there," Bellboy says. "That in itself was condescending."

"No it wasn't!" Zach said throwing up his arms. I could see his bare belly.

"Yes it was," Bellboy said "and you know it."

"OK I'll try again. Mr. Lessing, why don't you listen to me in class? Was that better?"

“Yes.”

“I listen to you Zach. I have been listening to you since I had you as a student your Junior Year. I have 28 other students in that class to listen to.” It’s one of those teacher clichés that happen to be true. “And today wasn’t your turn.”

“It’s never my turn.”

“See now you’re just being a victim,” Bellboy says to Zach and I think wouldn’t it be wonderful at every moment to have Bellboy over my shoulder for difficult interactions like these. I could’ve used him with Derrick’s mom, with Wonderlove, with the officer Davis.

“OK I feel that you don’t allow me to talk.”

Bellboy looks at Zach a little glaringly and Zach says, “What?!” and throws his arms in the air, revealing his bare belly again.

“Zach,” I say, “I’m going to say something that may be hard to hear and it’s hard for me to say too. Sometimes when you talk, I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe me?” He laughs.

“No, I don’t believe you. And it’s not so much that I don’t believe you’re telling the truth, although to be honest that might be part of it. It’s bigger than that. You always seem so angry and so pissed off and so hurt that I don’t know where it’s coming from. Maybe that’s the best way to say it. Your reactions don’t seem to match what’s happening. And when you share stories it sometimes feels as if you’re competing for the Best Sufferer award.”

“OK Mr. Lessing,” and he says it in such a way that I can’t tell if he’s acquiescing or pretending to acquiesce or planning revenge.

“Is that OK I’m angrier than when I first walked in, or OK I’m going to think about that.”

“It’s OK, I’m going to think about that.”

“Alright Zach, we’ll start with you tomorrow, OK?”

“OK Mr. Lessing.” With that we turn away and pretend he doesn’t exist. He walks out the door, head down. What is it that triggers me so much about Zach that I have to

look away from him when he exits. There are legitimate boundary issues. And to be fair to myself, I've seen teachers act worse. But I'm not supposed to be other teachers. I'm supposed to be Mr. Lessing, different. But how different am I?

I'm acting against everything that I say that I'm for. Free-expression, acceptance, vulnerability. What does that mean? Does it mean that I think I am him? That I feel helpless to help him? That being poor and white doesn't hold any cache?

I've accomplished something in telling him the truth, though. I didn't charge forward like I did with Stephen, or back away like I did with Edison. One for three wouldn't be bad except it is when you think that Stephen is even more sure of himself now than he was before, and Edison's situation just got more precarious.

Bellboy says, "What was that?" And I shake my head in disbelief. I throw him a 20-dollar bill. "Stop it, will you?" he says and throws it back.

"You know what, Bellboy. That was one of my best interactions all day. At least I told him the truth."

"Yeah."

"Do you think he took it ok?"

"I think he did."

"So you don't think he'll come back to the school and murder me?"

"No, I don't think he's going to come back to the school to murder you."

"You think the Packers are going to win this week?"

"No, you're not going to do this." Bellboy says. "And don't give me that look like you don't know what I'm talking about. You're great at deferring the conversation away from you. You'll do anything for it not to be about you."

"Isn't that the function of the teacher though? You get interested in everyone else and nobody is interested in you."

"But I'm not a student. And you do this with everyone."

"You think?"

“No, I don’t think, I know,” and when he says it he sounds kind of Jewish and by Jewish I mean he sounds like an imitation of a Seinfeld character. At the moment he says it, I am drinking water, and I spit it out all over the table and him. And then all of the girls are laughing and shrieking and Bellboy mops his face resignedly and I realize this is my way of getting people to listen. I get attention by spitting water on people. I don’t want to tell anyone about my day. I don’t want anyone to listen to my ideas. I want to play and provoke and be wild.

Of course this spitting is fake. I mean I didn’t need to and it didn’t come naturally. I’m reverting to the way I was in Junior High, kind of needy, kind of annoying, when I had big red gums for real. I’m turning into Zach a little and wanting everyone to accept me anyway. Wasn’t that what Zach was doing to me? I race out into the hallway to tell him, “Come back, come back, I accept you! I accept me!” But he’s gone; there are just a couple of wide-eyed freshmen that think I’m going to bust them for being in the hallway before the bell rings.

We collectively snarf down the last bit of potato chips, apple pieces, gummy bears, French fries with ketchup, cookies, jelly beans, and starbursts. The girls straighten their skirts, toss their hair back, lug their backpacks over their shoulders dramatically. The guys lazily toss their brown bags like basketballs at the garbage can, and slide out into the hall. All their voices meld together like the sound from thousands of transistor radios. On the table, they leave crumbs, wrappers, umbrellas, sweatshirts, torn bits of paper, water bottles, pens, and a textbook that, someone will come running back for in a panic, momentarily. “Did I leave my A.P. Government book here.” My nod and point, or shrug, will save or ruin their day.

I call home. I have to call twice and finally Bindi answers.

“Hi Avu,” Bindi says.

“Hello Dromeo.”

Raiva is in the background saying, “I want milk, I want milk,” and then just, “I want-
ed iiiiiit, I waaaanttted iiiiii-ttttt.”

“Let me talk to her.”

“She’s fine, Av.”

“Yeah, I know. I just want to say hi.”

“Here Raiva, papa wants to talk to you.”

“Oh Naimush, I love you.”

“Papa, no Papa, listen, you have to listen to me.”

“I’m listening to you, Raiva. I can hear you perfectly.”

“Papa I will come to your work and you can come to mine.”

“And what’s your work Raiva?”

“Papa, you have to go to school and work. You have to write, you have to tell the
story about how you have to see the butterfly and you can tell that to the students, OK?”

“What a great idea. Who are the butterflies? Are we the butterflies?”

“Noooo, Papa, the butterflies we saw, remember.”

“I don’t remember. Which butterflies? When?” But she must have pressed ‘end’.

I think about what I would look like if I were a butterfly. If we all got to transform.
About how short their life is and how short mine is too. The picture Uncle Fred took of me
when I was six. I turned and Fred clicked. The picture captured joy, which is different than
innocence. It’s not naiveté on my face, it’s readiness. I want that back.

My hand is shaking a little. I stick my arm out to see if I’m really shaking or if I just
think I’m shaking. It’s decidedly both. When I was in college, I loved to call up everyone I
knew when I felt a little shaky. And this is what I want to do now but a group of kids are
full-throttle waving to me from their knees in the hallway, as if engaged an elaborate ruse or a
piece of performance art. They burst out laughing when I wave back. When they start to
come in, I exaggeratedly point to the phone and make my waving hand a stop sign.

When did we see those butterflies?

The bell rings and everything shifts. Over and over again, in schools everywhere, bells ring and people move. Moods change. Fortunes tumble. Again and again they ring. They ring on Saturdays, Christmas, over the summer, and will ring long past the time I leave, or retire.

12:26 After lunch, everyone wants to throw in the towel. Elementary schools have reading or nap time; high schools just have another class: American Studies is combined English and History. I teach it with Snyder, the guy next door, who loves sports and hates Aaron Burr. I can't possibly face another 30 kids, and in this case it isn't 30 kids, it's close to 50. By the time I open the wall, arrange their desks, and get my plans up on the board, I'm pretty spent. This is why most of the curriculum I develop revolves around shared leadership. It's good pedagogy; it ensures my survival. Speaking of survival, what are the chances Martin fires me after school, or lowers my ranking from *distinguished* to *competent*, or tells me my class has no merit, or used a Philip Roth novel as a parable for the way I self-sabotage.

Worrying as much as I do is a relatively new phenomenon, say, the last 6 months. Performing the neurotic indicates self-involved vulnerability. But real neurosis it turns out has no purpose at all. I have another little pang of anxiety that Bindi will leave and not close the garage, and after thinking that, it's like I've open the hatch to my spaceship head and there's a flood. What if I've offended someone; what if someone breaks into my house; what if Raiva gets leukemia? This is how people become alarmists, I think, by thinking thoughts like these and, worse, identifying with them, as if they had real substance. Still, it's hard to stop a brain from spinning, with a brain that's spinning. Has my willful toddler, in a moment of willful rage or carelessness wrapped the blind chord around her neck and inadvertently strangled herself?

“Girls fold up that table please. Danny, put the chairs in circle. Ninah, pass back these papers. Karen, erase the board, and while Karen is doing that, Caroline, I want you to dictate this prompt on the board. These ones, I’m holding them.”

I pull them from their hallway chatter, from whatever happened 5th period, into the world of American Studies: writing prompts, Document Based Questions, half sheet reminders, partner dialogues, essay prompts, motifs, thesis statements; mini-lessons on transitions, tense agreement, syntax, and diction; the difference between tone and mood; and since we’re reading *Catcher in the Rye*, to the question of teenage depression. When I say open up your notebooks or your books or look at the board, they know what I am *really* saying is stop talking about what you want to talk about and concentrate on this, the things that I want or have to talk about.

I split them into groups, 50 kids in all, ten stations, and five kids per station. There are handouts at each station. Back at my computer, there’s an email from my mom. It reads, “When you get a chance, could you give me a call.” I call my mom and there’s no answer. Voicemail. I think about not leaving a message, which, I know will annoy her, but my argument is that I’ve already essentially left a message since she knows it’s me (caller id). Her argument is that a message involves words. Karen Friend comes up to the desk and stands there petulantly while I leave my message. I brush her away with my hand, and she goes off to complain to her two friends.

The bell rings: my co-teacher, Snyder comes up to me, and says, “Everything alright buddy?”

“Yeah, just some stuff at home that I gotta check in on.”

“Oh, go check in on it now.”

“No, that’s ok Snyder, it’ll still be there later.”

“What?”

“The problems.”

“Yeah,” and then he crosses the double room to his desk to check on his fantasy team for basketball. We switch off teaching and since he’s completed his work on the American involvement in World War II, he has a couple of weeks off.

In my moleskin journal, I’ve written:

Question: Is Holden in control of his own fate?

The handout itself features a list of steps I want the class to complete:

Note: Questions 1-4 should be written out to hand in. At least three sentences per response. Questions 5-6 you may fill out in your notebook. Question seven is a talk-aloud and for eight annotate.

1. Pick a direct passage from *Catcher in the Rye* where Holden seems to be more upset than he *should be* or than you *would be* by what happens to him. Write down the page number and at least a portion of the quote.
2. Write down your reaction to this passage. What stands out to you about his reaction? How would you react? What were you thinking when you read the passage? What would you tell Holden if you were there with him?
3. Switch notebooks with someone in your group. Respond both to your group member’s words and the original passage he or she chose.
4. Switch back notebooks (you now have your own). Read your partner’s response and draw a line under it and answer the following: why did JD Salinger write this passage? What is he getting at about Holden, human beings, and life in general, with this passage?
5. Think of your most depressed day. How does that change the way you view Holden’s erratic behavior? Talk about it with your partner.

6. What helps you and your partner relate to Holden, or conversely, holds you back?
7. Share with the group your best insight from steps 1-6.
8. H.W. read pgs. 143-155. Annotate references to money and family.

Evaluation: You will be evaluated on the thoroughness and thoughtfulness of your responses and the contributions you make in class. Notebooks will be checked bi-weekly.

I glance outside. Getting dark already. Is that possible? It is only 12:30. Maybe it is the tint on the window or it could be raining. Some rooms in the school are so insular a war could start, and you would never know. Karen Friend is giving me the death stare so I walk away (for fear I will make it worse by laughing). Sometimes I pick their groups, but today they picked. When they pick, you see the cliques, a lot based on gender and skin color. That isn't all, though, because the corner group, for instance, has blacks kids, bi-racial kids, and a white girl. De Angelo must be the group leader because he is talking and De Angelo rarely speaks. He is sitting with Yasmin and Louise and Missy, while two other kids work as their own mini-sub group.

"What's going on Mr. Le-ssiiiiing!" Missy says. She makes fun of my last name, at least once per class, making it sound like the dumbest thing you ever heard. Everyone laughs in that croakish manner which, if you're not a teenager or don't work with kids, would make your skin crawl. "You seem quiet today," Missy says. I'm not good at hiding anything; people know with me right away when something is off. Kids are the most perceptive people, I swear, especially when you think they're not looking.

"Edison got arrest..."

"I heard about that." It snowballs from there into a full-on interview about Edison, what I did to intervene, which isn't much. The group seems unsurprised by my lack of involvement.

I say, "I got a weird email from my mom, my dad may be sick." I'm not sure why I'm worried about my dad, or why I would tell this to a portion of my American Studies class. *To cover up something else maybe.*

"Aw . ." Yasmin says.

Even De Angelo looks up slowly. "What's up Mr. Lessing?"

"Yeah, you can tell us," Yasmin said. I might've said more if Yasmin wasn't there.

Then again, what was there to say, except a long story about how Jews like me are paranoid that everything that's good is about to end, that every move we make is the wrong one, that even the best, most genuine moments, thoughts, places, and people are tinged with a coat of temporality, irony, and despair. I say, "Family stuff. Bet you've all been there. Alright get to work." I move from table to table floating in and out of attention. I'm realizing I'm a pretty private person; in the end, so is everybody, though. Aloneness is part of the human condition. So is, as far as I can tell, feeling often like a thing, instead of a person.

12:44 "Mr. Lessing, can you come back here?"

"Sure, De Angelo, what's up?"

"This looks pretty in-depth to me."

"Isn't that a good thing? Don't you want our learning to have depth?"

"Yeah, but you've got to simplify, too."

"Alright, we'll start the next exercise with you. It'll help you to clarify today's work and prepare you to write the next paper."

"Aw no ... Mr. Lessing. Please don't."

"Brianna and Tatyana. Prepare De Angelo, he's going to start our discussion."

"Get over here, De Angelo," Tatyana says.

"Everyone one more minute to finish up and then we're moving on to the talk aloud portion of today's show. Karen, can you come up here for a second?"

She makes the *ch* sound as in *Challah*.

“Look, I just want to apologize for not talking to you beforehand. I’m not a good multi-tasker and that’s why I couldn’t talk.”

“How come you talked to Snyder when he came up to you.”

“Because by that time I was off the phone.”

“OK, well it seems like every time I’m around you have something better to do than talk to me.”

“That may be how you perceive the situation but that’s surely not my intention.” I sound wooden. I sound condescending. I don’t mean but I certainly don’t mind too much when she goes silent. It’s when she looks over to her two friends, both of whom are giggling, and smiles back at me, that I feel my skin heat up.

“All right, everyone, no more talking. We’re going to get started.” I dislike the crowd control part of the job. “If you can hear me clap twice. If you can hear me clap three times. Thank you.”

“Is that it?”

“Is what it, Karen?”

“Are you done talking to me?”

“Yes, I am done with you.”

“Well if you’re going to say it that way. So rude.”

I lift up the overhead revealing what I’ve written on the white board:

Holden makes too big a deal out of nothing.

“OK look up. If you strongly agree with this statement go to that corner of the room, if you agree, go to that corner of the room, if you disagree go to that corner, and if you strongly disagree, go over there. Wait! Don’t do the thing where you go to the closest one,

or scoot your chair to the corner, or aimlessly sit in the center, I see you De Angelo, or go where your friends go *Danny*, or forget which corner means what *Sederious*, or criticize the statement for being too vague, or ask me if you can go the bathroom, or come to me and try and distract me, or joke around, or play grab ass, or ... you get it? Go!"

There's a burst of energy every which way. I yell *twenty seconds* and then count down from 10, which increases their scrambling. The game jumpstarts the intellectual conversation. Or so I hope. "Alright let's hear from a representative from each corner, one that I'll choose. I see you, Maria, hiding in the corner over there.

"I'm not hiding."

"Sheeeee-it," Danielle says.

"OK Keenan, why do you strongly disagree?"

"I thought De Angelo was going first!" Tatyana objects.

"Shut up," De Angelo says, and balls up his fist.

"Don't worry, I haven't forgotten," I say and smile big at him. He glares at me but can't help smiling a little himself. I think he thinks I'm the goofiest white guy he's ever met.

Keenan flips his hair back. He has a little body, accentuated by his skinny jeans, and a surprisingly low voice, which cracks from nerves. "Well I think Holden has legitimate reasons for being upset." I wave him on. "I mean he's been kicked out of all these schools and his brother died and I think he's really depressed."

"Good. Good start. Let's hear from the opposite extreme."

"Yeah, go ahead Celine." Celine plays soccer and is one of the rare kids who pulls off cool and smart at the same time without getting shit from either group she occupies.

"Well he might be really depressed but that doesn't mean he has any good reason to be. He got kicked out of those schools because he wasn't doing any of the work. That's his own fault."

"And his brother?"

“Yeah, I mean that really sucks, no IT DOES, it’s just that, not to be harsh but that happened like 4 years ago.”

Lawrence says, “Well you can’t really talk about the amount of time because he may have repressed those memories.”

I interject, “OK so he’s depressed and repressed. But does this make us feel more empathy for Holden’s situation? Or less?”

“Less! More!”

“I’m hearing a lot of polar opposition from these two corners. That makes sense. You’re like today’s Democrat and Republican parties – totally polarized.” Snyder lifts his hand up in appreciation – he’s really into politics, and fashions himself as a centrist. “Let’s hear some from the people in the middle.”

Neema raises her hand. “I mean, I agree that he’s making too big of a deal of these things. Well not his brother because I mean if my brother died I don’t know what I’d do. But he does complain about a lot of shit - I mean stuff. Sorry. You want me to go on? Ughh... Mr. Lessing... do I have to? OK he complains about a lot of stuff that I don’t think is a big deal. Like I agree with Celine that he should work harder in school.”

“Go ahead Sterling.”

“Yeah, I agree with Neema.”

“Good for you,” Snyder says from his desk. “How so?”

“Well he likes that girl what’s her name? Yeah, right Phoebe, but he doesn’t tell her. He goes out with all of these other girls that he doesn’t like and then bags the prostitute.”

“And then he doesn’t even want to sleep with her,” Jason says.

“Ahh good, Skateboarder, nice of you to make your entrance. Why doesn’t he sleep with her?”

“He gets scared?”

“You tell me.”

“I think he’s scared.” They might as well be having a conversation about me. These are the best conversations though, the ones that get personal.

“For Holden, there’s the stuff that’s happening and his reaction to it. Is that what makes you have less sympathy for him? The way he reacts?”

“Yeah,” Jason says, “It just seems like he whines a lot about his situation.”

“Example?”

“Well I mean I don’t have an example right in mind.”

“OK why don’t you look for an example while I hear from one of the other camps.”

It feels like a relief to be just teaching, not inside my head so much. Or maybe more that the stuff inside my head has a place to go. The classroom can contain all of our heads I think blissfully.

“Can I say something? Mr. Lessing?” It’s Cara, one of Karen’s giggling friends.

“No. Yes, of course.”

“It’s more of a question. I don’t understand why Holden doesn’t just go talk to his parents?”

“You’re laughing at that Ryan. What’s so funny?”

“Holden can’t talk to his parents. That’s why he’s in this situation in the first place. Nobody fittin to talk to his parents after he’s just failed out of school.” Ryan raises his eyebrow. I’m about to call on someone else. He adds, “And this isn’t the first time this happened. Nuh-uh. He can’t win either way.” A few others nod at Ryan’s line of defense.

“But I mean he could call them and tell them he’s in trouble.”

“Uh-yeah, Mom, I just called a prostitute and then chickened out and got beat up by her pimp ...?’ That don’t play.”

“Well I’d call my parents if I was in that situation.”

“You’re lucky you have parents to call. My mom would whip my ass!” Ryan blurts out and that gets him some applause.

Jason blurts out, "You have no idea! My mom's loco. She's like one of those immigrant parents who's old school."

"As much as I find corporal punishment a fascinating topic, I'd like to get back to ..."

"I remember what I was going to say. Holden says.."

"...What page?"

"Huh?"

"Page?"

"Oh. Right. Page 33. So this is the scene with his history teacher and he's totally ripping on him. And this is the guy who's trying to save him."

"Hmm that's interesting. Anyone want to respond to this idea? Is he trying to save him? Is he even trying to help him?"

"He's asked him to come over to his house? Doesn't that count as someone trying to help?" Celine says.

"Does he help him?"

"No, but he tried. Holden should've listened."

"OK interesting. Well let's move on to something else. But before we do, Celine, I was thinking you should give up soccer."

"What?"

"I think you've been getting injured and it's been taking up too much of your time."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you giving up your soccer. Also, when you're answering questions in class, you've got to be more succinct. Do you know what that means? Of course you don't."

"What's going on right now? You're freaking me out, Mr. Lessing"

"Also, I think and I have a lot of experience in this realm, I think you should think about changing your hair and about that boyfriend of yours..."

".. Mr. Lessing!"

“Do you get what I’m doing?”

“What you’re talking about?”

“He’s messing with you,” Josie says.

“For a reason.”

“He’s saying you think that Holden’s history teacher is trying to help but he’s not really trying to help. He just wants to believe he’s helping to feel better about himself but really he’s just condescending and annoying.”

“Brilliant Josie.” I give her a high five, which she reluctantly returns. She doesn’t want to appear to be in cahoots with me. There’s nothing more incriminating and embarrassing than showing unbridled enthusiasm and pure exuberance in connection with a teacher. “Did you find me annoying just now, Celine?”

“Extremely.”

“And condescending, too, I assume?” She nods. “That’s what this history teacher is doing. Come on people!” I turn to the whole class. “Raise your hand if you’ve ever had a teacher or parent or an adult in power giving you advice that you neither asked for nor particularly needed. Is it good advice to offer clichés as counseling when someone is in crisis? Is he really talking to Holden? And who connects to Holden at all? Really sees him?”

Stradlater wants him to write papers, Ackley wants to borrow his shit, the woman on the train wants to hear good things about her son, the women who dance with him want to make fun of him, the prostitute wants his money, the girl he takes to the show wants him to be normal who really wants to see him, really see him or listen to him. And would his parents? Do we have any evidence that his parents would care one iota about whether or not Holden is happy? They just don’t want to have to deal with him. Right and you can’t completely blame his parents, I mean they lost their son, Allie, their child, who Holden, who never lies about anything, calls a saint, and now they’ve kind’ve packed it in. But that’s what people do when they are overcome and overwhelmed. They pack it in and have no time or patience to really listen. I’m sure I’ve done that before; I’m sure it’s happened in the last

week with a number of you. How much am I like that teacher who won't shut up? How much are you like Holden who refuses to listen?"

At the break, I try calling my parents and they're not there either.

I wander out into the hallway, and remind myself to start next class with music. I need a better setup like Bellboy – mini speakers, iPod hook up, the works.

Martin, the department head, walks by with a book, as usual, on his way to the bathroom. That's the type of wisdom my dad dispenses. *Jongen, I have one piece of advice. Bring a book wherever you go.* I follow Martin in. "What are you reading?"

"Heart of Darkness."

"Joseph Conrad."

"Yup."

"For class?"

"Yeah." Martin's bemused look makes him look boyish.

"I read it a long time ago."

"It's a masterpiece."

"Oh yeah. Why?"

He laughs a little but not really; it's more of an inward chortle. "That's a longer conversation."

"The bathroom is the perfect place to talk about literature."

"I'm not going to talk to you here, Avi."

"I've had some of my best conversations in places like this."

"In school restrooms?"

"Well not necessarily this one. But bathrooms in general. In high school, we wrote a play about a guy who locks himself in the bathroom during finals."

"Oh yeah? You don't see the incongruity of being social in places that are private?"

“Hmhph, I’ve never thought about it that way. Maybe that’s why it’s so potentially freeing because of its incongruity. With my friend Eli, we’d be at a party or whatever, and end up in the bathroom.”

“OK” Martin said, “Well, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Last questions: has it been a weird day for you? Sometimes I think the school takes on one mood. Today’s been strange, I suppose they’re *all* strange, but this one’s unsettling, agreed? I mean, what’s your mood?”

“Maybe we could talk about this after I use the bathroom. Or even better after school.”

“OK Martin”

“OK?”

“Yeah, how do you do it all?”

“How do I do what all?”

“How do you raise kids and teach? I wish I was more like Marlowe, instead of Holden. Or at least I wish I was afraid in the way Marlowe is afraid, not in the way Holden is.”

“Holden Caulfield and Marlowe. Those certainly are two different models for how to face your fears.”

“Yeah, but both of those guys lives are at stake, you know?”

“Marlowe’s life is in peril, yes, but Holden’s life isn’t at stake.”

“Why, just because Marlowe’s in Africa? Holden’s suicidal. If his sister doesn’t come with him that day to the museum, he might commit suicide.”

“Where are you getting this?”

“It’s just the feeling I have reading it.”

“Your reading is not supported by the text. At no time does he mention suicide.”

“It’s not mentioned, but it’s there, in the way that it’s there for all of us. I’m just saying his life is at stake.”

“That’s a generalization and a pretty broad one. You’re saying we’re all suicidal? What does that phrase *life at stake* even mean? It has no meaning.”

“It has a lot of meaning. My old theater teacher used it all of the time. What it means is that everything that is happening to Holden feels heightened. It may not be important to anyone else, but it’s important to him. His life is at stake.”

“Avi, you’re confusing two completely different character traits. Holden is not a suicidal figure. He may be a lonely, confused, even desperate, young man but his life isn’t hanging in the balance. What’s at stake is his notion of authenticity. This is very different from *Heart of Darkness*, where Marlowe has good reason to be afraid of death.”

“Why?” Marlowe from the *Wire* looks like Edison. Martin looks a little like my father. “Who doesn’t have a good reason to be afraid of death?”

“You’re misunderstanding the point, Avi. Steve shakes his head. Marlowe is in imminent danger?”

“How so?”

“How so? The native cannibals for one. The blood-sucking colonialist for a second. The treacherous river for a third. Should I go on?”

“Hmmm ... but what about the quiet desperation of our lives. The Cheever stories from the 50’s. Later, Carver. Or even Jonathan Franzen’s stories – I mean they’re about suburban people with suburban problems but they’re clawing for something to hold on to...”

“What about Roth?”

“Yeah, Roth is good. Roth is entertaining. I should read more Philip Roth.”

“Can I go to the bathroom now Avi?”

“Sure. I’ll read *Heart of Darkness* again.”

“Alright, Avi.”

“Alright Martin. Hey Martin, I want you to know that I may make a lot of jokes about not caring about what kind of English teacher I am and I might even on the surface seem like I don’t care. But I do. I care about all of it. I care that I teach books passionately.

I do want to become a better English teacher. I mean that might not be evident, but it's true. Teaching is more confusing than people let on. Did I ever tell you the story about my dad's colleague in the Philosophy department?"

"No. Don't you have to teach a class?" The one-minute bell has rung.

"This'll only take a second. My dad's colleague at Lake Forest College died last year in a boating accident."

"Sorry to hear that. Listen, Avi..."

"...Anyway, all of his students, became advisees of my father, and subsequently dropped out of philosophy. This is how my dad told it. And I asked him, did you get offended. 'Offended?' my dad said. 'Yeah, that they dropped out of philosophy after they had you.' 'No', he said, 'those were Joseph's students. You see Jongen when students take courses from me they're not really majoring in philosophy. They're majoring in Abba Lessing.' 'What do you mean?' I said to my dad. He said, 'I mean, listen, they take the courses, they do their studies, but in some sense, what they're getting the most out of their time here is me.' I think that's what attracts me to teaching, Martin, the immediacy of it. You can't divorce life from school. "

"You're attracted to yourself."

"No. Yes I guess I am. Teaching is a turn on. It's true. When you do it, it should feel like you're falling in love. I'm attracted to all of it: the teaching, my students, to myself. I'm attracted to you Martin. I'm not afraid to admit it. I like seeing your face."

"Let's talk after school. My office around 3:30? We can't say everything we need to say right here and now. I don't want the pot to overflow. Just to offer a different analogy."

The bell rings. I rush out of the bathroom and hurry back into the chaos of the classroom. Everywhere here and there are groups of students. And I suddenly feel a kind of envy of the young that makes me feel despicable. Something about being young and not having made any mistakes. And that's how Holden is ultimately different. He's still young, half of JD Salinger's age when he wrote the book, and so even though he's been kicked out of

school and ends up in mental institution, he still has his life in front of him. Marlowe, now there's a brave soul. Either way, as fictional characters, they have their whole lives in front of them, forever.

1:22 What are you going to do about Edison? I think I'll call his parents. And what if that phone number doesn't work? Why wouldn't it? Because they've moved around a lot? I'll probably go talk to Dan. That's it? What would you suggest? Talk to your class about it? What's the context? The context is that it happened, what other context do you need? This is an academic class. You're the one who says a good class shouldn't delineate the difference between skills and emotions, academic and personal, or that just lip service? No but I have to relate it at least back to Catcher in the Rye. Why? Because otherwise it won't make sense, there won't be any connection from one moment to the next. Isn't that the way life often is? Don't be a hippie dippie.

I pass out the following handout at the beginning of the last class:

I.D.

This is an opportunity for you to speak about your own experiences using the questions below as a framework. You are telling your own story; you are not representing an entire social group. I recognize that what you have chosen to talk about is only one aspect of your identity as a person. Please think about your ethnic background or race as one part of you. Choose one other identity to discuss before you begin to talk to your partner.

YOU DO NOT NEED TO WRITE DOWN YOUR ANSWERS. Please just talk about your experiences. YOU are not required to share any of the details from the stories told or heard.

1. How would you describe your ethnic or racial background? What other identity will you discuss?
2. What do you love about being _____ and _____?
race/ethnicity other id
3. What is or has been difficult for you being _____ and _____?
race/ethnicity other id
4. What do you never want to hear said or see done to you because you are _____ and _____?
race/ethnicity other id

Support your partner with active listening:

- ❖ Face your partner.
- ❖ One (1) person answers all four questions before it is the other person's turn to speak.
- ❖ Keep attention on the speaker.
- ❖ If appropriate, help the speaker move through the questions
- ❖ Encourage the speaker with your voice and body language

"Count off by 25's"

"25's?" Maria spits back at me.

"Yes, 25's."

"Why 25's?"

"Because then everyone will have a partner, stupid." Sederious winks at Ryan.

"Shut up."

"It's because, Maria, I don't want you to pick your partner. I want you to work with someone you don't usually work with."

"Oh."

"When you know who your partner is go off to a place in the room where you can talk. This is not a conversation between 4 people; it's a conversation between you and your partner. Use the whole space; I don't want you within 4 feet of another group."

1:28 Maria is partnered with Keenan. "Ooooh ... this is a great group.

"Mr. Lessing, calm down. Why-yy?"

"Ni-ice one Mariasteen!" I say.

"Mariasteen?" she looks up and waggles her head. "Yeah now you're a little bit Jewish."

"He just said I'm Jewish."

"Yep, now get to work."

"Why? Mr. Lessing, I don't want to do this!"

"I love your *whys*. Jews are taught to question everything."

“I’m not Jewish.”

“Oh no?”

“No.”

“How about just for the class period?”

“Fine.”

We’re still at an impasse regarding the work.

“You want to know why Steen. I’ll tell you why! And then I get close to both of them and bug my eyes out.

“Stop! You’re so weird.”

“Seriously? OK you’re high-energy, Mariasteen, and free and open. And Keenan, you’re an introvert who has a lot to say about everything. I think if you take risks this could be an incredible conversation. Not that I have any expectations.”

“Thanks, Mr. Lessing.”

“Yeah, thanks Mr. Lessing,” and Keenan sweeps some of his hair out of his face. Maria looks bright and alive and Keenan looks little and adorable, which makes my heart swell.

The next group is Karen Friend and Danielle Washington. Danielle is saying, “What are we doing, Mr. Lessing? Why are you doing this to us?” Karen just glares at me. “You’re doing this because I told you to and I’m your teacher. How does that sit with you?”

“Not very well, Mr. Lessing,” and she raises an eyebrow at me.

“Alright, well, what if I told you that the very questions that are central to our curriculum exist in you. Hold on, before you talk, we’ve read *Huck Finn*, Frederick Douglass’s narrative, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Gatsby*, and now *Catcher in the Rye*, and each of those books, in one way or another, is trying to connect the personal problems of individuals to the societal problems of their day, and without fail, all of them have to do with race, class, and gender, all those big identifiers. The fact that you’re black and a poet, Danielle, matters, just as it matters that Karen is Jewish and ... well, whatever other way you choose to identify

yourself as. Does it make sense now why we're doing it?" For a dramatic sendoff, I hand her back the prompt that she has discarded onto the floor.

"Yeah, a little bit," Danielle allows.

"I'll take that. I'll take a little bit. Just a little bit. Just a little bit, uh-huh, just a little bit, R-E-S-P-E-C-T, find out how much it means to me."

"Mr. L-E-S-S-I-N-G!" And then Danielle and I do this joke where I look at her like she is the supervising adult and she gives me a look like I'm embarrassing myself and then I walk away with overly drooped shoulders and she calls me crazy. When I turn back to her from the next group, she's smiling and maybe it's just my imagination, but she genuinely looks engaged. You can't just teach when you're the teacher. You have to joke, manipulate, analyze, comfort, philosophize, interrupt, self-deprecate, it really calls upon all you got, each day, and that's what I love about it, that there's never enough time, or enough of you, and you'll never get it right.

I wander by a couple of pairs that seem well enough engaged to leave them alone. Maggie McDowell and Sarah Chambliss are both sitting cross-legged in the far corner of the room next to a broken down lamp. Maggie's laugh, which I call her 19th century Austrian laugh for its operatic pitch, is in full effect. I sit on my stool within listening range.

Sarah, who is black, tall, and waifish, gesticulates a lot, but avoids eye contact. "My mom came from Alabama. Yeah and my dad, my dad's story is even weirder. It's so fucked up."

Maggie peers at her, a serious look on her face.

"Oh man, so my mom has always been the type to kind of follow her dreams, right? Her dad was a military sergeant and he was really a disciplinarian. And my dad kind of stole my mom away."

"And are both of your parents bl-?" Maggie adds quickly "African American."

"That's the fucked up thing. They're both mixed. My mom's mom is from Haiti. So she's like Black but not black. I don't know, it's confusing."

“No, no, it totally makes sense,” Maggie says. “And what about your dad?”

“Oh don’t even get me started about my dad,” Karen says, and Maggie does her Austrian laugh. “So my dad’s dad is like BLACK black, like grew up in the city and shit.”

“Chicago?”

“No, San Francisco. I mean like he grew up in not-the-ghetto but in like the Tender-Tender-something, Tenderbone! which is this part of San Francisco that’s known for ... my dad’s dad was in a gang, let’s put it that way. My grandfather...”

“...the one in the gang?”

“Yeah . . so he was married three times. And my dad has all these sisters he didn’t know about. And the first one turned out to be my dad’s case worker or whatever when he got out of jail.”

“And where’s she?”

“She died.”

“Oh. I’m so sorry.”

“No she died like before I was born.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, so that’s my family or a slice of it. Kind of fucked up, don’t you think?”

“No not at all. It seems really rich. Like it’s really cool how you have so much diversity in your family and everyone comes from these interesting places and have lived these real lives. My family is so boring. I’m an only child.” I wish I could record these conversations and show Wonderlove, show Martin, show the world, you see great things do happen, just not all of the time, but they happen.

“I bet you got a lot of attention.”

“Too much.”

“Yeah ...”

I clang my Buddhist Tingshas. “Alright everyone by now should be close to switching if you haven’t already. If you’re both talking and have shared the time already – don’t worry,

you haven't done anything wrong – just keep working at the same pace. If you finish early, ask questions, remember this is meant to be a conversation.”

“What were we talking about?” Sarah says?

“I *totally* don't remember,” Maggie says.

Both of them laugh. Maggie, as if an uproar had just happened in her study, in Austria. And Karen with a more down home full body cackle, shoulders convulsing.

“Aren't those the best kind of conversations, where neither person is tracking what's being talked about?”

“Yeah, totally, I totally love that!”

“Sometimes I wish we could have this class at like 2 o'clock in the morning.”

“It should *totally* be at 2 o'clock in the morning.”

“Yeah, so what were we talking about again?” And they both burst out laughing again, melding together like classical music and jazz, as if nothing could be stranger and funnier than this moment in their lives.

“Wait we never got to you.”

“I wish there was something significant to say. You know it's interesting...”

When Maggie got quieter I couldn't hear her as well and I didn't want them to know I was listening in on the conversation. I heard something about her dad not speaking to his dad, and Portland, a family dispute. Maggie cried a little and Karen hugged her in the way that only girls can do, where they hold it at the top for a long time. Some of the partners were long done, other had ignored my request not to break into conversations of 4, but a few scattered dyads were talking, really talking. I couldn't help but pat myself on my back a little bit, as if I were looking out over a vast organization that I had created. I scan the room surreptitiously. Karen is staring at me, and Danielle, too, is checking me out too, head askance. As if they're saying, we're not eating what you're serving, not here, not now, not ever, but it's me who's saying it, not them. You can never relax, not completely.

I look out at the rain. It starts to really pour again, and I think about sending everyone to the window to look outside, but then maybe Snyder wouldn't like that idea. He probably would but I chicken out anyway. I look out to the football and baseball fields and wish that I still played sports. Not that I ever did, not well anyway. My mind is flying above those fields now, back to the past, the future too, there was my dad to worry about. Worrying about your dad is like worrying about yourself because you know that you are subject to the same illnesses, so that when things happen to your family they are also happening to you somewhere later down the road.

The heater clangs, the clouds swoop by overhead, and the light outside changes the colors in the room, so that you notice them. Here is green. Here is blue. Karen hugs Maggie. The other Karen scowls at me, and, in each I feel a kind of bizarre hope twisting up there in the wind, that the transiency of all life makes everything we do incomplete, forgetful, and trivial. But that doesn't mean what we do doesn't matter. We could live as *though what we did made a difference*. Because, in the end, it won't, but it does to right now. Knowing that somehow makes it all easier, like I didn't need to push so hard against the glacial institutionness. I could spend my energy where it matters. On Edison. Maybe even on Zach.

1:45 "Alright let's come back to the center." '

"Alright let's gather back to the center," Yasmin repeats back nasally. The talking continues for a minute or so after that and then Yasmin tells everyone to *shut the hell up in here* and everyone gets real quiet. "Keep going Yasmin."

"Keep going?"

"Yeah, keep going, but as me, since you have my nasal voice down. Sheeeeeeit."

"Not funny, Mr. Lessing."

"Sorry."

“You should be. I don’t know what to say. You’re the teacher, for real, Mr. Lessing, I’m not doing this.”

“Anyone else want to play Mr. Lessing? Or teacher? Come on, what comes next?”

“I’ll do it.” It’s Sterling Mitchell. His mom lives in New Jersey, but he lives in Birchwood with his Nigerian dad.

“All right guy-s,” Sterling says. He’s got me down, especially my breathiness. “Now I hope you liked that activity. The purpose of it is for us to get each other’s stories.” He does my mouth breathing and my hand gestures too. “Yasmin, go first, please tell us how you feel after sharing your story.” And now the class is really dying.

“That’s ok, I’m straight,” Yasmin says and starts tying up her hair.

“Don’t be shy everyone. I want everyone to lean into discomfort. Put both feet on the ground. Back straight. Breathe in joy and breathe out stress. Connect to the beings around you. Feel yourself in-between the ground and the sky.” He pauses one last time and then says extra nasally, “You’re loved.”

The class loves the closer, especially Sederious who falls off his chair. “And scene,” I say trying to turn the ship around. So, seriously, what did you get out of it. Sederious?”

“What?”

Tammy says, “He wants to know what you get out of it?”

“It was straight. It was cool. What? You want me to elaborate?”

“Let’s do this. Let’s go around the whole room and as our check out say one thing that we learned about our partner. And...check in with your partner to make sure that they’re ok with you sharing that.”

That scatters the group again, and then I have to take out the gong and ring it three times before everyone is back in their seats. Three minute of wasted time – next time I’d script it better. “Alright let’s start. Go ahead, Sederious.”

“What?”

“Oh no, not this mood,” I say.

“What?”

“He wants you to go! Shit,” Yasmin says.

“Oh, OK calm down. So what I learned about myself?”

“NO! Your partner!”

“Calm the fuck down.” KaDarly glares at Yasmin.

“Listen to your teacher,” Yasmin says, not giving an inch.

Sederious takes his comb out and runs it over his head back to front a few times and then puts his head down.

“We’ll come back to you, Sederious.”

“Don’t come back to me.”

“I want to hear what you were going to say.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“I’m sure you would’ve said something.”

“Nope. I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Because of Edison?”

“No, I don’t care about Edison.”

“You don’t?” I thought you were friends.”

“We are.”

“So?”

“Edison can take care of his own damn self.”

“Let’s start with you, Neema.” I elected Neema to be my student hero of the year, an award for a student that you admire deeply. She came to America when she was in 4th grade but her dad, who see misses like crazy is back in Jordan. The day the Navy Seals killed Bin Laden, a kid came up to her in the hall and went, “Sorry that your friend died.”

Neema says, “OK so my partner was Josie. And what I learned about Josie is that she’s adopted and doesn’t really know where her parents are from. Do we clap?”

“You can’t clap for someone being adopted, stupid,” this kid Terrence tells her.

“Yes you can.” Neema claps. “See I just did it.”

“You go girl.” Mimi, another friend, clasps her shoulder.

“OK I’m going to go since I was Neema’s partner. I learned about Neema that she’s from Jordan and even though she’s Arab, she’s not Muslim, which everyone thinks she is and it really pisses her off.” Neema is wiping her eyes a little now and some kids are doing the dreaded “aw” thing . Sederious has momentarily stopped combing his head and is looking askance at her.

“What’s wrong?” he pipes up.

“Sederious, she probably doesn’t want to talk about it.”

“Neema can answer Sederious,” I say.

“Seriously, I’m wondering like I’m not trying to put pressure on you or anything but why...”

“I’ve gotten so much shit at this school for being Arab and it’s like, ‘I’m sorry but I did not make the towers fall and it’s like I have to go around...and can someone else go...”

“Sure,” I say, “but I just want to say a couple of things. One: Sederious, I’m glad you showed concern for Neema. That’s something that’s actually pretty hard to do. And two: Neema thank you.”

“For what? For crying?”

“For being here and staying here.”

“Where would I go?”

“Last semester if this had gone down, you’d taken off, gone to the bathroom, whatever.”

“I still want to do that.”

“Well I’m glad you’re not.”

“Not yet.”

“Nobody is embarrassed for you are and you shouldn’t be either.” Now it’s dead quiet and even Snyder has looked up from his desk and nods his affirmative. That’s when I know it’s a good moment.

“The last thing I will say, which is nothing new, I mean Colin Powell had the courage to say this, that, even if, Neema, you were Muslim, and I know you’re not, it wouldn’t matter, you wouldn’t deserve to be insulted or looked at strangely. I mean that would be like someone coming up to me and saying ‘I can’t believe you let Bernie Maddoff take all of those peoples’ money. But then again that’s what you Jews like to do, is steal other peoples money.’ Do you see what I’m saying? That may seem extreme, but I can tell you, it’s nothing compared to what others endure because of their race or ethnicity. You all see that everyday I’m sure. So, if you see Neema being messed with, then...”

“...We fuck em up,” De Angelo says.

“Well, I don’t know that we fu - mess them up physically, but...”

“Mentally?”

“Yeah, that’s closer to what I’m talking about.”

“Can I go? I’ve had my hand up for like a half hour.” Lawrence is a little bit like Zach. A white kid who doesn’t have money who needs attention. “OK thank you! So my partner was Andrew. And both of Andrew’s parents are black.”

“Why you gotta say it like that?” De Angelo says.

“What?”

“Say black dude. You’re like Bl-a-ckkkk. Shit we know he’s black just by looking at him.”

“Keep going, Nico.”

“Yes, so as I was saying, his parents...”

“Bro-gie, we got that.”

“OK, so Andrew’s parents got divorced when he was younger. His dad’s a doctor and his mom’s a lawyer and ...”

“... He’s got a nanny who makes him eggs and toast every day. We know.” Cherina says.

“How do all of you already know everything?”

“Because Mr. Lessing is always snackin’ on Andrew’s food.”

“Anyway, as I was saying,” Nico says, as if the proceeding action exhausted him, “one thing that Andrew doesn’t want said or done to him because he’s black is for people to say that he’s not educated. He takes a lot of pride in being a student.”

“Why did that stand out to you?”

“It stood out to me because I don’t take a lot of pride in that area.”

“Hmmp... Andrew?”

“Yeah, so uh my partner is Nico and he’s white,”

“Guys,” Snyder barks, “What’s so funny? You need to hold it together for like 3 minutes or we’re not going to get through even 10 percent of the class. Come on!” I like when Snyder joins the action of the class; makes it much easier to teach, to hold the integrity of whatever I’m trying to accomplish.

“So, Nico is not sure where his parents are from. He thinks Scottish and German.”

“Those aren’t places. Those are ethnicities.” I say.

“Same thing.”

“No it’s not.”

“In this case it is.”

“Albanian also,” Nico adds, and smiles a little too widely.

“Yeah, Albanian, that too. And the one thing he doesn’t want people to call him is a racist.”

“Who else wants to go?” I say. But Snyder looks at me gravely and starts flashing hand signals. I can’t make them out.

“You told me to tell you when there were 2 minutes left.”

2:08 Outside it's blustery. Winter is coming; only a few weeks more. When the weather is bad here, I think about the day Eli and I stupidly went to a lecture in Hyde Park. It was negative 15 degrees Fahrenheit. The block we had to walk felt impossible, as if simply walking carried inherent life and death risks. Eli yelled out, "Why did people settle in this god forsaken city?"

The American Studies kids will be gone in a few minutes and then after school the theater kids will stream in. It's the first day of our read through -- a play called *Found a Peanut*, by Donald Margulies. Karen will thankfully leave. A kid who I've never taught and know next to nothing about will store his skateboard in my room. He will say 'bye,' I will say 'bye', and I will think about my daughter's school and the way, in winter, taking her coat off and putting it back on are bookends to her day.

It's strange to be in the middle of one's life but always be thinking about beginning and endings. About how my dad's at the end and my daughter's at the beginning and how all things begin and end but how the middle is more indiscriminate it just is. I should be cleaning up or calling Edison's mom or saying some last reminder to the American Studies kids or throwing some water on my face but the truth is after everything that's happened I just want to sit on this black rolling chair and space out a little with all of the loose papers, bottles, etc . . on the ground and let it all just exist around me without having to do anything about it.

I take a deep breath and blow it out my mouth and know right then to start rehearsal with meditation. Start again with the breath. I have the moleskin in front of me and I visualize the faces of my cast. Scott Daniel has an old man's face. He ties and reties his ponytail every few minutes. Cassie Scaman rides her bike slowly as if she were in France. Ethan looks like he's grown up since last year, but, still seems a little prone to anger. What's his deal, I wonder. Think about them, look at their faces, and you won't be able to ever bemoan being with them again. I think about Edison, I can see his downcast eye, and I

make the decision to go to the police station after rehearsal. If nothing else, I can give the guy his bag.

3:00

The miracle of young people is you don't have to anticipate what's next. Look at Anna with her bright features and the way she dances in. Listen to Sam when he says, "Good afternoon Mr. Lessing," and tips his cap even though he's not wearing one. Watch the way they move, the way they turn and shake and go backwards, how imprecisely they come your way, the way they run their hands against the world. They keep alive the thing we keep trying to obliterate. Most everything changes now.

VII. ON INTIMACY IN THE CLASSROOM

“I am against all big organizations as such, national ones first and foremost; against all big successes and big results; and in favor of the eternal forces of truth which always work in the individual and immediately unsuccessful way, under-dogs always, till history comes, after they are long dead, and puts them on top.”

-- William James letter to Mrs. Henry Whitman, June 7, 1899

“An ordered world is not the world order.”

-- Martin Buber (1970, p. 82)

A. Intimacy

I told a colleague of mine, not prone to hyperbole, about a book I wanted to write that would take place over one school day from the perspective of a beleaguered but well-intentioned teacher.

“You mean you?”

“Yeah. More a version of me.”

We were eating lunch on her patio surrounded by dozens of jade plants. She boomed suddenly, “Call it the Search For Intimacy!” I looked around squeamishly. *The search for intimacy?* Could I say that with a straight face?

“How about the Social Emotional Life of School?” I offered.

“No, *intimacy*,” she insisted. She said it a little too loudly again. “Isn’t that what we’re all seeking? Closeness?” she said, tilting her head in and taking a bite of her cucumber roll. “If we settle for less than intimacy than our whole endeavor is compromised.” Glyniss (I’ll call her) could be archaic in her speech. It gave everything she said a certain authoritative panache. As if she were speaking from the high vantage point of legitimacy.

Intimacy did fit. It accurately described how teaching and learning are personal endeavors. From the moment I substitute taught at my old high school and fell into a great conversation with the students, I’ve seen teaching as a profession where I could bring more of myself into my work. And that would be a helpful thing (as opposed to my previous jobs I had post graduation where I felt that I had to leave most of myself at home). And yet, I

couldn't quite picture standing up on parent night and saying, "Hello, I look forward to a long year of intimate encounters with your children." As my students love to say, "That sounds creepy, Mr. Lessing!"

My experience with students has always felt noteworthy and important beyond something I could easily quantify or tally. I needed to find a way to talk about in a way that others could easily understand. I had been noticing for some time that the way an experience felt was as important as what was learned, and that, in fact, the two could not be separated. But the conversation around achievement threatens to mute feeling.

And, yet, when I think back to my own, best, educational experiences, in schools, the best ones left me with a feeling that I would call intimacy. In Mr. Shallenbarger's I learned to play theater games and left feeling more connected to my classmates (and that connection was possible); in Ms. Loris's history class, we learned about modern history, and I left with an image that still resonates with me: her holding back tears as she talked about the war in Iraq; Mr. Downey, my middle school English teacher, wasn't trying to teach me anything when he sat down with me after class, and said, "Avi, are you ok?" I remember them because I could be in the world again afterwards without being afraid or pessimistic. Those were the experiences I not only vividly remember, but that made me try hard in school. If I had a teacher who cared about me, I tried, and if I tried, I learned the material the teacher wanted me to know, and often, more. For me, the quality of the relationship between the teacher and the student and the students with one another, in great part, determines the success of what happens in a classroom. It's what determines if intimacy is even possible.

B. Being There

When teacher candidates interview, they say how much they love kids. I did too. The real challenge is loving them while you're teaching them each day, each class, moment to moment, to be curious and compassionate towards them even when they are indifferent, pushing your buttons, or, in rare cases, making your life hell. How to love students, in the

context of school, may mean something different for each teacher. For me, it doesn't mean *I-love-you-so-do-whatever-you-want*, but rather indicates a certain kind of attention and relation to teaching them. It requires me to be in what Martin Buber (1970) calls an I-you relation with students. In this relation we are in reciprocity with our students, in perpetual participation with them. The opposite is what he called the I-it relation, where we are apart from others.

Buber rightly says we cannot remain in the intimacy of I-you world at all times. The fire of its intensity would burn us up. The *it* world allows us to function, make transactions, generalize, and act in the mundane world. The morning commute is the I-it world. The penetrating gaze of a small child is I-you. Too much of the *it* world though drains life of meaning. Buber says, "Whoever lives only with that (it) is not human." (p.85).

It's difficult to engender the I-you relation in a school of 3000 students, when you teach five classes all with 25 or more students. There are days I wake up looking forward to my classes, to the action of school, to being with the students (I-you). There are other days I wish I could set myself apart, sort through papers and books, listen to classical music, block out everything (I-it).

On rare days I wake up and think, *I can't*. None of this, I know, is unusual. Who wakes up particularly wanting to do anything? But in teaching, it seems to me, the question of whether we want to be there or not, and to what degree we are truly engaged matters in a way that is unique. Students, I believe, learn through the quality of our attention and the consistency of our care. They instinctively know how into it or out of it you are. They take our lead and respond. At present, the teaching profession tilts more and more to the world of I-it. We need more I-you so that it can be humanized.

There is a moral imperative for teaching not to merely prepare students for the future, but to create meaningful experiences that matter in the present. The two are not mutually exclusive, but again it's a question of presence. We have to *be there* with students and to get them to *be there* with us too. That means, as a teacher, my goal is to be less

distracted, less preoccupied, more attentive, and more compassionate than I might be in the rest of my life. Finding ways to achieve this goal are as important as planning content in the classroom. It constitutes not just a pedagogy or a philosophy but a daily practice as well, a way of being in the world with yourself and others. Education for me is a fundamentally moral profession. It calls upon us to be better than we are in our normal life. This doesn't just mean more knowledgeable; it also means more available, more a real *I* to their *you*.

This is considerably difficult to achieve. We would all want to be better than we are, but certain limitations, habits, and personality traits dictate that we are not. And sometimes it is the wanting to be better that makes us worse: when, for example, we beat ourselves up for not being a good teacher, or we attach too much importance to the results we achieve with students. The intrusions of the head (pressing worries or preoccupations, daydreams, food fantasies; deadlines, self-consciousness; feelings of under-preparedness) of the school (noise, the authoritarian nature of school), and our role (the imbalance of power brought on by age, grades, gender, etc...) can heavily impinge upon even the most focused teacher. No matter how much I want to be more attentive, engaged, and attuned, so that my students can be more attentive, engaged, and attuned, it doesn't always happen.

More recently, though, I have become curious about everything that distracts, or throws us off. As a teacher, I learn the most when things go wrong, as painful as those experiences can be. If I am reflective and open to the ways I'm not a good teacher, then I have the real possibility of becoming a better one. If not, then I have no chance of improving. It's the same for students. Looking at weaknesses, or deficiencies in a curious, rather than judgmental way, opens many pathways.

Education's overarching goal is to make its participants better than they were when they began the process. As Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) say in the *Moral Life of Schools*, "The question of what students are taught and how well they are taught it is always at heart a moral question" (p.146). They call for teachers to carry with them an expressive awareness about their practice. A classroom is like a stage where we can create an idealized

world, with real people. We are always in rehearsal. And our goal as teachers and students is to be more attentive, attuned, alive, and responsive than we normally are, with the hope that this will impact subsequent experiences in the world. It's a laboratory for everyone to expand their perception, to illuminate worlds that have been dark, to expand the horizons of what we know and our power to know it. As teachers, our ability to grow those capacities in students, even in the face of substantial obstacles, is the greatest factors in a child's ability to grow intellectually and emotionally.

C. Teachers Can Get Students to Be There

The teachers who impacted me the most were the ones who knew me best. They knew I used humor to deflect attention, they knew underneath all my clowning, I could be serious, and they knew as insensitive as I could be to others, I was actually walking around deathly afraid of what people thought of me. Most of all, they pushed me to be in the room, to stay engaged, no matter how hard it might be.

That didn't always mean they were nice to me. Or that they eschewed the work of the classroom for personal connection. It often meant the opposite. They called me out, named my defenses, urged me on, and pushed me further than I thought I could go. They had good intentions for me in a time when the seas were rough. They were truly as Max van Manen says (1991), *in loco parentis*.

The classroom is meant to be the one democratic institution available to everyone, a portal where children walk in one way and come out another. They come in and can't write. They walk out and can. The current politicians would have it this way: they walk in as children and they walk out job ready. Education, though, isn't solely about being prepared to gain employment. It's also about coping with one's own uncertainty about how to live in the world; knowing one's gifts and limitations in the context of their lives; managing one's private and public self; suffering loss, experiencing hopelessness, and still living on, not in spite of the harshness of life, but taking measure from it.

D. My Class

I teach a senior, English elective called *Experiments in Reading Literature and the World*, which tries throughout the semester to create a culture of intimacy through storytelling and experiences that intensify each student's awareness of self and others.

We write personal essays. They are stories from childhood that convert into monologue performances. We meditate, do trust falls, and make the connection between students an explicit focus of the class. Students extend their awareness about who they are and who others are; they cultivate awareness around the obstacles in their life. We celebrate and consider what it means for them to be leaving high school.

There are a number of techniques, leadership paradigms, exercises, and disciplines I use to reach these goals. The major shift: instead of making the first day a getting to know each other before we start the "real work" of the semester, I make the whole semester *getting to know each other*. Compassion, intimacy, and imagination are no different than writing thesis statements, solving equations, or analyzing texts. They take time. They require explicit instruction and constant practice. I don't teach about character, culture, and care because I want the whole class to be fun, or to avoid real content (the way this kind of teaching often gets framed), but because I think that interpersonal connections are fundamental to the way we learn. We learn through a conversation, or in an encouraging relationship, or through contesting each other's ideas, or in collaboration with someone else. Even reading is an interpersonal act, between you and a text.

I use a lot of techniques and models from outside traditional education to foster students learning amongst and with each other.

We begin most every class with either an exercise from theater or with meditation. We often fold up the five big circle tables so that we can stand up, face each other, and move easily around the space. We engage in activities, and read essays that evoke our personal experiences with family, peers, and relationships, subjects often taboo in school. The stuff we write is read aloud to each other. The class is especially tailored to seniors, who are often

hungry for relevant conversation around their hopes and fears of life after compulsory education.

As a kid shooting baskets in my backyard, desperate to escape my loneliness, the possibility of examining my private world would have been unthinkable. If someone asked me to tell a story about myself, I would say, “Story? About me? I don’t have any.” As a child, inwardness felt dangerous. Any kind of real conversation about myself was scary, nerve provoking, and dangerous. Back then, I thought if I didn’t think about the things that scared me, then I could protect myself from being so scared. That system probably protected me in the short term, but made me quite limited in terms of what I could think about, or talk about. And since intimacy with others seemed equally terrifying, I fell into the role of the class comedian.

It’s no exaggeration to say that I used to organize around keeping people away from me (and truth be told, often still do). Richard Davidson (2012), a neuroscientist, captures the fundamental human drive in *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*: “Whether to approach or avoid is the fundamental psychological decision an organism makes in relation to its environment” (p. 39). It makes sense that everything that scared me as a kid I avoided. And even as an adult there are a huge range of things, people, and situations to avoid. But in most situations, I want to approach life more than avoid it. And I think we want our students to do the same, with the qualification that what we want most is for them to be safe. One norm I have in class is that uncomfortable is good, unsafe is bad, and if you don’t know the difference error on the side of safety.

E. Meditation and Mindfulness are Intimate Practices

I learned how to meditate at the Naropa Institute, while I took my classes towards a degree at the University of Colorado. Naropa is the college started by Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan Monk, who helped bring meditation to the United States in the 1960s. Class went like this: 40 minutes of meditation, a short lecture on some of the principles in

Buddhism, and then a short question and answer period. I came out of each session clear eyed. It's a cliché I know, but the leaves on the trees really did seem brighter. It really felt like they were waving gracefully at anyone willing to notice. I would stare up at them and feel equally shaky and alive. I learned more in that class about how to be in the world than any other class I took in college for credit.

The scary thoughts about my life that I had habitually and willfully ignored because they threatened me now paradoxically freed me. Touching the fear didn't paralyze or kill me as it turned out. It made the world feel somehow more real, and I suddenly cared about myself more, experienced intimacy as a feeling of spaciousness in my body. Partly that was the act of meditation itself – breathing in and out, naming thoughts, feeling bodily sensations – all increased my capacity for feeling, widened my understanding of thought patterns. It was also the acknowledgement of suffering that unlatched an important door for me. It was readily acknowledged that life is suffering, that we do all die, and that everything is always changing. Nobody had ever said that to me so directly. Not only did it not depress me; it freed me and sharpened my attention. It also made me more compassionate to others and myself. The thing that was so obvious and so hard to talk about, I was now freely talking about. I understood more deeply how human beings protect ourselves from what scares us.

What I've known intuitively through experience has now been backed up by scientific studies. Meditation builds our capacity to deal with pain and suffering. In fact, trials have shown that it can help people with chronic pain, and relieves the anxiety and depression of people with social anxiety disorders (Davidson, 2012, p.201). The students can be reluctant initially. Often, so am I. The high school schedule seems designed so that nobody can catch a breath. Given the chance to stop, it's often easier to skip it, plow ahead towards the future, and get on with the goals of the day.

Attention to the breath can make us feel more expansive in our bodies, integrates our thoughts and emotions, increases our resiliency, and raises our ability to stay in positive states (Davidson, 2012, p. 205). In the classroom, we sit for five minutes, sometimes less.

Sometimes I guide them and other times I provide instructions beforehand. Afterwards, students are noticeably more alert, less agitated, and more curious. I am too. Meditation helps me to remember some basics: for example, I live in a world with light, sky, and, yes, trees. Also, a desk that is quite cluttered. I may have a cold from not sleeping enough.

And: what a great job I have where I get to teach young people about ideas, thinking, and feeling. Five minutes before, I had barely looked at them at all. The simple fact of their company seems astoundingly fortuitous. (1902) William James describes it this way:

The transition from tenseness, self-responsibility, and worry, to equanimity, receptivity, and peace, is the most wonderful of all those shifting of inner equilibrium, those changes of personal centre of energy, which I have analyzed so often; and the chief wonder of it is that it so often comes about, not by doing, but by simply relaxing and throwing the burden down.” (Varieties of Religious Experience, Lectures XI, XII, Xiii Saintliness).

The change in the students is noticeable. I want my class to be the thing that makes them more peaceful, more at ease, more in connection, not the thing that causes further stress, strain, and paralysis. Meditation, though, does positively impact the lives of young people, specifically around their ability to maintain focus (Jha, 2007). In fact, the plasticity of the brain is at its most malleable during the childhood years (Davidson, 2012 p.109-112). So teachers literally are shaping young people’s minds.

F. Schools Is Not the Classroom

I often experience school as a separate from my classroom. It seems a life world that increasingly trades more in Orwellian dislocation than communal spirit. The ever-present pressure to standardize all teaching and learning, through the advent of testing, learning targets, and value added evaluations, not to mention the overall cultural emphasis on measureable success, instant gratification, competition, hierarchies, and systems that control,

sort and rank, may make intimacy, compassion, James's religious experience and Buber's I-you seem not only difficult to achieve, but irrelevant, quaint, a side project.

Pierre Bourdieu (1985) explains this phenomenon in the "Forms of Capital." He writes about an educational system that reproduces our current social structure and order. School, he says, reproduces the status quo, while also disguising this function. It appears therefore to be the structure that frees people from their social status, while actually reinforcing it (p.241-258).

Even reforms that promote well-being like Social Emotional Learning must prove their worth in the world of educational outcomes. What they gain in widespread acceptance visa-via state requirements, federal grants, and the like they may lose in actual classroom practical impact. Well-intentioned movements like *social justice education* and *whole child education* quickly become meaningless educational jargon, a box for teacher to check off towards getting kids to achieve better. But achievement doesn't always happen when we push harder, go faster, or work more efficiently. Teaching is not computation. The cost of teaching only academic content, as Sir Ken Robinson (2006) makes clear in the most watched TED talk of all-time, is nothing short of our ability to be creative.

The opening of Natalie Goldberg's book *The Long Quiet Highway* echoes James's ideas that our most intimate, worthwhile experiences come from doing less, not more, from being off-track, not on it. She relates what she remembers most from high school is her English teacher calling her over to the window one day while it was raining. It took her away from the unending onslaught of someone else's agenda and into a direct experience with herself. She writes:

Thank God for that rain out the window and for Mr. Clemente who allowed us in ninth grade to listen to it for no reason, in the middle of the day. That one moment carried me a long way into my life. I didn't know it then. At the time, I think, it made me a little nervous – it was too naked, too uncontrolled, too honest. I thought it odd. In those days I was watching my step, making sure I knew the rules, keeping

things in control... here was Mr. Clemente who asked me to listen to the rain, to connect a sense organ with something natural, neutral, good. He asked me to become alive. I was scared, and I loved it.

During the semester my own students plead with me to meditate for an entire class period. We often do. And on that day, many of the students fall asleep, exhausted from not getting enough sleep for months. When they wake up, they look refreshed. Sometimes I think they've learned more in that class period, than in the ones I am actively trying to teach something.

G. Critics

I can already hear the guffaws. "Students don't want, didn't ask for, or need closeness or intimacy from their education. If parents wanted their children asleep they'd call them in sick. The emotional health and well-being of a child (not to mention the teacher) is outside the purview of what a school can and should do." Or, "Whatever happened to the good old fashioned teaching of writing and reading!" And, "The American economy is in crisis, which means American schools are in crisis! You should teach students skills that they need for college so they can graduate and get jobs to repay their debts that they accrued in college!" (That might be taking the cynical critic's voice too far).

The critic then might say, this time, more reasonably: "This approach might work in English and theater, but what about in other subjects like science and math, disciplines that may prize objectivity and skill acquisition over experience and holistic learning? What about students who do better with a distant, or tough teacher who focuses exclusively on academics? Maybe some students do their best learning in spaces that are mostly didactic, full of competition, devoid of personal meaning, and heavy on the acquisition of skills that bear little connection to their larger aspirations. Where the teacher is the acknowledged power broker and the students the acknowledged vessels. Shouldn't you talk about the

merits of this kind of education?”

My response would be no. This is *already* the *prima facie* state of American education today. Legislation like *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top* and the rising popularity of value added teacher evaluations mean I suspect that public schools across the country on the first staff development day have not been talking about what kind of people our students are, or how we can all enhance our capacity for curiosity, creativity, and compassion in ourselves and others. Their discussion will be how they can achieve more, score higher, and *do more with less*.

David Labaree (2004) lays down the historical context in his essay about how John Dewey’s idea of progressive child-centered schools has been lost to the social efficiency model touted by Thorndike. “In a contest between utility and romance, utility is usually going to win: it promises to give us something we need rather than merely something we might like” (p. 153). It’s only my guess, but it sure feels like in economic hard times, ideas that promote creativity, reflection, care, and intangible values like wonder, intimacy, and curiosity are thrown out the window in favor of more accountability, tougher standards, and a stricter curriculum. As Anna Deavere Smith (1993) points out, in times of trouble, we turn our ire not to our oppressors but to the group just a little less oppressed than us.

American teachers and schoolchildren hear again and again from the media that schools are in crisis (Lemann, 2010). There is now a common assumption repeated that schools should respond to the state of crisis, by getting tougher, by making the curriculum more rigorous. Listen to Arne Duncan in a recent speech: “Today, there’s a huge gap between what most high schools expect and what both colleges and employers are looking for. We must close that gap – and it starts with increasing rigor” (Duncan, 2012). Really? Why? It doesn’t start with compassion, or creativity, or reflection, or relationships. Why rigor? Because the banks failed does that mean schools automatically need mass reforming as well?

The hopes of the progressives – open classrooms, freedom schools, arts education intrinsically rewarding education has been squeezed by the demands of the marketplace, discipline, control, order, what employers want. In the face of this tidal wave of reform, when I argue for a dialogical relationship between teacher and student, I am liable to be asked how will that help us compete with China, or Finland¹³, which is the new fetish.

Creativity and compassion and intimacy may not raise test scores. But test scores most certainly cannot measure dynamic teaching. The progressive private schools bypass this conundrum. They offer education that fits their individual students' needs. It is education that is thoughtfully considered around what children need, as opposed to how the economy can grow. The politicians and other educational reformers who want to make schools and teachers more accountable and devoted to educational outcomes send their own children to private schools where they are nurtured in forward thinking, progressive environments that value creativity, care, and their children's lives life first and foremost, because (no surprise) they went to private school too. (Here's a short list: President Obama, Secretary Duncan, Michelle Rhee, three of the four congressmen who sponsored No Child Left Behind, and Davis Guggenheim, who made *Waiting for Superman*). Instead of calling for the same quality of education they received and their children receive, they perversely do the opposite. The children and teachers that attend and work in public schools are given a mandate of outcomes (provable results) data driven learning (results you can prove), and value-added evaluations. The private school kids go on retreats, and do service learning projects.¹⁴

The way we discuss learning as if it were a matter of priorities and targets bears little resemblance to what happens in a classroom, which almost always includes specific contexts,

¹³ Never mind that the obsession with Finland's educational system is laced with this irony: Finland borrowed many of its most valued ideas from the United States, such as equality of educational opportunity, individualized instruction, portfolio assessment, and cooperative learning. (Lemann, 2010, p.27-28). John Dewey's ideas may have lost in the U.S. but they have gained traction in Finland. We're trying to copy the very thing that originated here.

¹⁴ I have taught in both public and private schools.

real people with bodies that carry emotional and physical states and lives we can only begin to comprehend. This gap between what something is and what we say it is isn't unusual. The way I talk about my life is vastly different from what it feels like to be in it. Just as the person we think we are inevitably differs from the way others experience us. Finding an intimate language to talk about the life of lived-education as opposed to its abstract goals and aims, I believe, is sorely needed.

H. Maybe Intimacy Then Really Is the Right Word

Curriculum theorists have not hesitated to use the word intimacy to describe both their classroom experience and research. Jackson, Boostrom, and Hansen (1993) write, "Teaching calls for our being involved with others the way parents are with their children or physicians with their patients. As with participants in both of those relationships, the bond between teacher and pupil is, or can be, intimate" (p. 173). This same argument was made in the *New York Times* recently. In a column, Tim Jackson (2012) wrote

The care and concern of one human being for another is a peculiar 'commodity.' It can't be stockpiled. It becomes degraded through trade. Machines don't deliver it. Its quality rests entirely on the attention paid by one person to another. Even to speak of reducing the time involved is to misunderstand its value.

As my mentor, Bill Schubert, put it to a group of graduate students once: "Efficiency is about getting things done fast. But anything you want to do really fast you probably don't enjoy."

No quantifiable data points can measure the qualitative experience of being in a school. How, for instance, do we measure the way a student feels about himself or herself? Not all learning can be tested: for instance, one's self-awareness, resiliency, or grit. Also, how and when to trust our intuitions, how to make a follow-up phone call, how to deliver feedback, how to confront biases, how to build the capacity to take in new information, and how to solve one's problems without causing more problems. There are no tests for this nor

for the way we treat our parents, our girlfriends and boyfriends, and our teachers, but these data are crucial to life success too. These aren't airy-fairy add-ons, but basic life skills everyone should have a chance to learn intentionally. Learning can happen in the hallway between classes, or like Goldberg described, lay dormant for years, only to emerge years after the class has finished, and change our lives.

Quantitative measurement is useful to politicians because it yields data that are simple and can be sorted easily. As Einstein purportedly said, "Everything that counts can be counted and everything that can be counted doesn't necessarily count." Qualitative description often raises as many questions as it does solutions. But those questions may get us to think about the kinds of experiences that make the project of education as large and grand as the project of democracy.

I. We Experience Intimacy in the Body

Each time a student walks into a classroom, especially over time, he or she has develops certain expectations having spent an entire year in that teacher's room. Their heart rate perhaps rises or falls depending on the teacher, how the room feels, its size, proportions, the amount of space they have in-between each desk, the subject matter, and the activities that day. Since feeling permeates everything we do, and facilitates learning, how we feel in our bodies and in our minds is vitally important. When the Dali Llama (2012) accepted the Templeton Prize, he told the audience that compassion "will not materialize through prayer and meditation, but through education . . . [we have to] educate [young people] holistically. . . . A person's mental state changes, their blood pressure reduces, stress also reduces. We are not talking about the next life; we are not talking about heaven. We are simply talking about how to build a healthy body through a healthy mind."

While I had fine teachers in high school, and a few who were remarkable, I did remarkably little reflection on what kind of a learner I was, or how learning happened in the first place. I often loved my teachers or hated them. I remember, for instance, physically

shrinking each time I walked into my sophomore year Geometry class. My teacher, whom I'll call Mr. Puttanel, seemed as far and remote to me as if he were a bank teller behind a plated glass. His class was dedicated to testing who was intelligent and who wasn't. And, of course, the students understood the rules and cast aside students like me who weren't cutting it. Not only was I socially ostracized in that class, not only could I not concentrate there, I couldn't concentrate in the three classes before it. Because emotion is attached to each moment of our day, how we feel about a teacher, a classmate, or a conversation is directly commensurate with how much we learn, and ultimately what we achieve. During class, I buried my head in my book pretending to concentrate. In that particular class, my breathing became shallow. I prayed that I wouldn't be humiliated. What I learned had more to do with managing shame than learning the fundamentals of geometry.

Learning is embodied. In this way Merleau-Ponty (1962) is right and Descartes is wrong. Our existence is *not* proved *solely* by virtue of our thinking. Our existence is proved by virtue of the totality of our existence, which is lived both in the head and the body. Consequently, emotions are never separate from our thoughts or our bodies; they impact every experience we have. No longer do we think of emotion as a disrupter that gets in the way of learning. It facilitates it. As Richard Davidson (2012) says, "A feeling permeates virtually everything we do" (p.89). Making meaning is as much a tactile, living, breathing experience, as it is a cognitive one. Only a small aspect of a child's experience in school (a teacher too for that matter) is the intended lesson, the academic goals of that particular day. It is no doubt important. But to ignore the immediate, lived-experience that the students are having, is akin to keeping only one room in a whole house clean, while the rest of the house is in total disrepair. Yes, we should teach academic content that trains students in various disciplines, sharpens their minds, awakens them to nuance, and deepens their reading and writing ability. We should *also* be attuned to students emotional states and our own, tell and listen to our stories, and invest our attention and awareness in the experience of being together. Yes, we should prepare students for the future, all the while knowing we have

little idea what the future will entail. But we should also prepare them to live in their present, right *now*, something we have far more ability to know.

Neuroscientists used to think of the brain as a computer with simple inputs and outputs. That emotion and thinking were separate. This misunderstanding mirrors the false divide between skills and character teaching. They are not separate it turns out. We're always engaged both cognitively and emotionally. A teacher imparts and elicits knowledge that filters through the interactions we have with our students. We cannot simply jam an extra reading class into the schedule of a child who is below grade level just as we cannot conduct test prep for kids in an environment that doesn't account for their emotional life. It's as ludicrous as having a class dedicated entirely to only experiencing human emotions.

Merleau-Ponty (1962), in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, says intimacy is informed by our experience with the body. The corresponding intimacy or alienation one feels in a classroom manifests in our presence, but also amongst and around others. Presence is neither something inside of us or outside of us, but an existential encounter between people. Therefore, the quality of presence is an extremely complex phenomenon. If we understand it as central to teaching and learning as I argue, then we must consider that first and foremost we are living people in a live event that is ongoing, not simply people with jobs, or roles, or functions to serve.

Examining the mental and physical benefits that occur when one is relaxed and healthy is paramount. So is studying the inverse. Augusto Boal's work explores and addresses the consequences of an overly mechanized society. We have less agency. Our bodies become mechanized. We become more oppressed. Boal addressed this through theater games meant to de-mechanize the body.

School too often mechanizes. There are rules and bells and class periods. The operating principle in terms of logistics is uniformity and repetition. Teachers are encouraged to have class procedures and management that accentuates cohesion. On one level, this makes sense. At my school, for instance, we're managing 3000 students. But on

the personal level, it can be disastrously boring. Relationships too often become transactional, what Martin Buber called this the *I-it* relation.

For him, the *I-you* relation can happen when “we are drawn to and full of love for the intimate person. The world, lit by eternity, becomes fully present to him” (Buber p. 82). This is not only a radical shift in relation, but in perception as well. Phenomenologists describe this change as the shift from the Natural Attitude to bracketing (whereby we bracket or place outside of ourselves all of our usual presuppositions and concepts).

I had one such bracketing moment recently. My daughter, Raiva, wanted me to come upstairs to help her put her three pennies in her piggy bank. I demurred and said either she could go now by herself or she’d have to wait. Her arms slumped down exaggeratingly and turned away from me. Raiva has difficulty recovering from setbacks (so do I, the difference being she is three and I am 37). Instead of demanding that she move (when’s the last time someone prodded you to do something and you did it with any enthusiasm), I simply watched her, without attachment to any particular. I stopped doing the dishes and just observed her. I noticed when I did this my body relaxed. And I felt like I was seeing her face more clearly. She was weathering the blow. She turned around and looked at me. Her lower lip twisted a little. She lifted her striped dress over her belly button and then let it drop. I smiled at that and she smiled back. There would be no melt down. And we had entered the *I-you* relation. In the classroom, it works similarly. Often the moments where there are obstacles to our targets (could be a piggy bank trip, or a paper to write) are the sites where the most intense learning happens.

J. The Classroom Can Be Where Encounters Happen

I want the classes I teach to be like the best life experiences I have. They are different from everything that preceded and will eventually follow. They are separate from the rest of mundane life. It’s hard to say when subjective experiences of such short duration have begun and when they have ended. Initially, it is dislocating to disengage from my

private world into a heightened encounter with students. I am cast from my natural way of seeing and experiencing things. There is greater risk involved because it now will involve my whole personhood.

Trungpa Rinpoche (1984) put the fear of self-awareness this way:

You should examine yourself and ask how many times you have tried to connect with your heart, fully and truly. How often have you turned away, because you feared you might discover something terrible about yourself? How often have you been willing to look at your face in the mirror, without being embarrassed? How many times have you tried to shield yourself by reading the newspaper, watching television, or just spacing out? That is the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question: how much have you connected with yourself at all in your whole life? (p. 31).

The I-you relation is not necessarily a comfort; for me, it is the odd sensation seeing things and people as if for the first time. Everything feels temporal and a little loose, like the cells I'm breathing aren't mine alone, but a kind of harmony that my body and mind belong to the world, and they, in turn, belong to me. It's as if I've broken free from what Albert Einstein (as cited in Eves, 1977, p. 60) called the "Optical Delusion of Consciousness." Or as Martin Luther King (1965) put it:

All I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

I witness my students thinking more imaginatively and hopefully when we are in this state of integration and interconnectedness. Encounters tinged with an *I-You* quality slow me down, make me more reflective, get me to notice more, fill me with wonderment, make me more grateful and appreciative with and for others. I increase my capacity to stay happier longer.

While my own experiences with mindfulness are anecdotal, there are organizations like the Life and Mind Center studying how contemplative experiences can be measured in a lab. Several are dedicated to showing how these states help students achieve more in school i.e. CALM teachers, run out of Pennsylvania State, CASEL, the Center for Wellness and Achievement in Education, the Inner Resilience Program. There is even one called Inward Bound Education.

K. Meta-cognition

Let's shift our focus over to a typical experience with students to understand the importance of the I-you relationship in a school and why it's difficult to achieve this relation. It's paradoxical, but the real and psychological obstacles that we curse, deplore, and swerve from as if they were carcasses in the middle of the road, are actually, for me, at the heart of transformation and insight. What Daniel Siegel (2010) calls *mindsight* is the process through which we notice our physical and mental processes which gives us more agency to make choices around our emotional state.

Peter Elbow says the most important learning is about learning. The most important thinking is about thinking (1973; 1981). Our care, our attention, our attunement are all the baseline that allows students to invest more fully in not just the material we give them, but, even more importantly, the process of how they make something, whether it is a science experiment, or an English paper, a poem, or a homework assignment. If students lack connection to their teachers, to each other, and to what they are doing, the classroom remains isolated from the rest of their lives. Tasks are to be completed but do not connect meaningfully to their lived life.

L. How We Achieve this Integration in the Classroom or Ways and Means in which I Achieve the Intimacy of the I-You Relation in the Classroom

i. Meditation, non-verbal, and reflective activities

I say aloud to someone in my class almost immediately after greeting them, *turn off the lights*. Then, *OK, everyone let's close our eyes and take your attention inward*. Daniel Siegel, a psychiatrist who has studied meditation, talks about attention as a kind of hub. On the outer wheel are all the things we think about and in the center is the mind that can observe this hub. This is what makes human beings extraordinary, and allows the brain to change. We can literally fire and wire different neurons together based on what we think about.

I'll ask people to think about where they just came from, a class, their home, the hallway, and to bring some attention to any friends or family that are on their mind. And then I'll ask them to scan their attention to each part of their body before letting that attention go with an exhale. Then to their senses: the smells in the room, the sounds inside and outside of the room, and so on. I'll ask people to breathe with particular attention on the exhalations. I'll tell my students, notice when your thoughts go adrift, and bring your attention back to your breath, to your body. At the end of the five minutes, I will say, *ok take a last inhale and sigh out the exhale. Slowly open your eyes and remain quiet*. If it's well into the semester, and they are comfortable, I'll have them do a few sighs. And maybe rock forward and yawn. This also is a calming practice (Henderson, 2003).

I have been meditating with students since I started student teaching more than 12 years ago. I called it Rest and Relaxation. Now I call it what it is. Meditation. It used to be taboo. Now it's in vogue.

Perhaps the most precious resource at school is quiet reflection. A mostly silent space, whether through silent reading and writing, or meditation, or other contemplative practices gives students a chance to think, to slow down the gears of their mind that have been whipped into a hazardous pace by the very nature of the school (imagine walking

through Times Square 9 times a day on your way to several different bosses around Manhattan who each day have a new, important directive to tell you. Now do this everyday for four years and you'll have some idea of what it's like to be in high school). We all need places to integrate our experiences.

But these aren't the only kinds of silence we can achieve. There are numerous forms:

- The silence after we ask a question and no one has the answer.
- Dialogue writing back in forth on a single notebook about a reading or idea (Groups of students can silently have a dialogue on pieces of chart paper).
- Many of the best theater exercises by two of the most innovative practitioners of our time (Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal) are done in silence.
- Activities meant to provoke dialogue about race and class. Embodied, reflective and recursive.

2. Theater

Augusto Boal created a theater that addresses the ways oppressive contexts not only dehumanize our existential life situations but mechanize our bodies as well. The games he created demechanize the body. These games are often done in silence and involve touch. It is important that students, particularly older students, have opportunity to touch in a way that is neither violent nor sexualized. Our heart rates decrease from desirable touch (CNN.com). The close proximity of our bodies to each other creates trust.

For instance, one such game is called blind finger lead (Rohd, p. 34). In this exercise, the teacher sets up two lines of equal number participants facing each other. One line shuts its eyes and holds its pointer finger up on their right hand as if ringing a doorbell. The instructor taps people from the other line to go across to someone and make contact with their pointer finger to theirs and lead them somewhere in the room that is safe. They can only use their adjoined pointer finger to do this. Halfway through they switch – leader

becomes follower and follower becomes leader. Through this exercise, students are engaged actively within the confines of clear instructions but often explore those confines in different ways. For instance, one set of partners may move quickly through the space, going high and low over chairs, and touching various objects in the room. Another pair may stay in a comparatively small section of the room, moving very slowly, and carefully. There is a sudden explosion of joy and laughter and release of tension when I tell them to stop and open their eyes. I often use these silent activities as a segue to telling personal stories, or having dialogue around an issues or idea. Doing something physical with your body before working with your mind creates more opportunities.

3. Storytelling

Telling or listening to a personal story makes meaning-making more possible. If you can tell a story about yourself, you may making meaning from your life. And if you can do that, you often have more agency in your life. In the beginning of the year, when I inform students they will be telling stories from their lives they look at me blankly, and say, “I don’t have any stories to tell.” I’ll often do an exercise like the one I shared above first. After a short feedback session (what was that like? what did you feel?), I use their responses (adventurous, trust, vulnerable, scary, etc...) as prompts for their story. For instance, think about a time you felt scared to do something because it was unusual. Almost always, every student in the class, given some time, will have a story to tell. Telling stories in this way, first in partners, while everyone else is telling a story, creates a bond not only between each partner with one another but also for the class as a whole, because everyone is engaged at the same thing at the same time. These stories are opportunities for the students to reflect, think about, and make sense of their lives, while also accruing numerous skills, such as the ability to remember, describe, and make sense of people, places, and things. Most

importantly, students learn to listen and make meaning of someone else's life. Empathy. And empathy is something we can learn, not just something we either have or don't have.

The most impactful learning is done in connection, not in isolation. We are social beings who learn in relation. And yet much of our classroom pedagogy is done in isolation. The most important and increasingly rare connection is between the teacher and the student. It's the one that engenders the most learning. However, with class size increasing, it's ever more difficult.

Perhaps the most innovative and effective way of spurring learning is the one to one connection. There are many ways to be trained to facilitate this connection i.e. Matrix Leadership. The basic principle is to make dozens of one to one connections in the presence of a group that watches and listens, so that one becomes attuned to oneself and the other.

M. Conclusion

Walker Percy (1961) writes in the *Moviegoer*:

“What is the nature of the search? You ask. Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a cast away do? Why he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick. To become aware of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

The best teaching kinds of teaching take us to a different kinds of consciousness. They don't just help us learn practical knowledge to live well in the future. They provide spaces and tools to be imaginative and alive in the present. Those tools are often not the stuff of concrete training. In fact, recent research (Paul Tough, 2012) suggests that what teachers most offer students are in the realm of non-cognitive skills.

Even if we all agree that to educate well we need objectives and goals (which, lately seems to direct every meeting), we needn't always begin with the goal itself. Even Ralph Tyler (1949), who's landmark book, *Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction* inspired the objectives movement said you could just as easily start with classroom experiences, activities, or ending assessment as you do objectives (p. 128).

Recently, a Waldorf teacher told me about the method of planning she has been versed in. Before she goes to sleep she pictures each child for a moment and see what emotions, thoughts, and ideas come into her head. This inspires plans for the next day. As she was telling me this, I became excited by the notion of my daughter attending that school. To have a teacher who is aware of her presence and summons her thoughtfully in her mind each day is a powerful tool indeed.

David Grossman (2008) writes about the intensity of sensation in an essay entitled "Writing in the Dark." He acknowledges his son, Uri, who was killed while fighting in the Israeli army affects his writing.

I also write about what has no comfort. Then too, in a way that I cannot explain, the circumstances of my life do not close in on me and leave me paralyzed. Many times a day, as I sit at my writing desk, I touch sorrow and loss like someone touching electricity with bare hands, yet it does not kill me" (p. 67).

For Grossman, writing about and struggling with what makes us feel helpless and raw and in pain is an act of hope.

The moment we take pen in hand or put fingers to keyboard, we have already ceased to be a victim of the mercy of all that enslaved and restricted us before we began writing. We write. How fortunate we are: the world does not close in on us. The world does not grow smaller (p. 68).

The act of writing here produces intimacy. And that intimacy is created through an act of courage, by first considering that which is most difficult to talk about and giving it value.

Much of what happens in education that has meaning cannot be quantified. Instead it must be described meticulously from our own local and immediate perspective. In attending to the intuitive process of observation, I found what I valued most in the shared-life of teachers and students are our subjective experience of intimacy. It need not be quantified since it exists for its own sake in the encounter between people. These I-you encounters grow our capacity to live in the world and thrive.

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Zaillian, S. (Director), & Zaillian, S. (Writer). (1993). *Searching for Bobby Fischer* [Motion picture].

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VITA

Education

- Ph.D. **University of Illinois, at Chicago.** Chicago, IL. Curriculum Studies with an emphasis on narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and the speculative essay. 2013.
- M.Ed. **DePaul University.** Chicago, IL. Secondary Education Certificate, English. 2001.
- B.A. **University of Colorado.** Boulder, CO. English with an emphasis on literature. 2001.

Professional Experience | Teaching

- Oak Park and River Forest High School.** Oak Park, IL. August 2003-
Supervisor: *Daniel Cohen*
Teach a senior elective based on Social Emotional Learning (“SEL”) Goals.
Learning Strand Leader: Help facilitate Professional Development in SEL for approximately 60 faculty members and staff. *Directing:* Direct one school play a year. *Supervision:* Have supervised seven student teachers. *Other Leadership Positions* include Club Sponsorship (Documentary Theater Club) as well as the direct oversight of multiple professional development days. *Articles and Essays about my teaching:* Ayers, Rick, and William Ayers. *Teaching the Taboo: Courage and Imagination in the Classroom.* New York: Teachers College, 2011. Ayers, William, and Ryan Alexander-Tanner. *To Teach: The Journey, in Comics.* New York: Teachers College, 2010.
- Francis W. Parker School.** Associate Director of the Office of Public Purpose. Chicago, IL. August 2002 to
Helped implement a cutting-edge second semester program for high school students from Parker with high school student from Perspectives Charter School that used the city as its classroom. Arranged formal and informal classroom curriculum for approximately 20 students. 2003
- Waukegan High School.** Theater Teacher. Chicago, IL. August 2000 to
Doubled the size of the theater program; directed Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Lost Angeles.* Convened panel conversations collaborating with Facing History on race, power, and authority after each performance. 2002

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Professional Experience | Related Work

- Instructor.** Second City. Chicago, IL. September 2004
to June 2008
Taught youth and adults principles of improv theater including character and scene development, ensemble work, and truth in comedy.
- Assistant Director.** Famous Door Theater Company. Chicago, IL Summer 2001
Assisted Karen Kessler on all parts of the direction and production of the play.

Professional Presentations

- Lessing, A. (2012, December). Curriculum as an Art form. Panel presentation with Rachel Harper and Jason Ludakis at the Modern Contemporary Art Museum as part of their salon series, Chicago, IL.
- Lessing, A. and Andibulon, R. (2012, May). Creating Theater Through Interviews. Theater of the Oppressed Conference, Los Angeles, CA.
- Lessing, A. and Elliot, S. (2009, December). The body as American Politic. CASE conference. Implementing theater games developed by Augusto Boal in the classroom. Presentation with Shanti Elliot, CASE conference.
- Lessing A. (2004, September). NCTE Led a workshop with James Bell on Interview and Voice in the classroom. N.Y., N.Y.
- Lessing, A. (2005, October). Parts and Education. Internal Family System conference. Mundelein, IL

Professional Experience | Research Experience

- Doctoral dissertation: *Into-Me-You-See* September 2009
to Present
What is the lived experience of teachers and students in school? Why is public discourse so disconnected from that lived experience? I explore these questions through fictionalized characterization derived from lived experience in high school with special focus on care or intimacy that exists in relationships among teachers and students.
- Teacher Evaluation and Ranking* July 2012 --
Initiated by: Bill Ayers
This group will track and evaluate the wide range of approaches to assessing teacher effectiveness. We research and publicize attempts to reduce the complex and dynamic enterprise of teaching to a simple linear metric, and we will illuminate holistic and hopeful efforts. We work on strategies to promote authentic assessment and resist the demonization of teachers and the simplistic measures of success.

Publications

- Lessing, A. *On Intimacy*. Schools Journal. University of Chicago Press. (Ed. Andy Kaplan). Expected Date of Publication Spring of 2013.
- Lessing, A. *A Soft Approach to Hard Teaching*. Handbook of Social Justice in Education. (Ed. Ayers, William, Therese Quinn, and David Stovall). New York: Routledge, 2009