

Relentless Possibility

It's 5:20 p.m. Your tie is down to your knees. Your lungs and teeth and eyelids are filled with magic no-dust chalk dust. You have downed your seventh bowl of Stop and Shop apple banana crisp oatmeal and the eighth just blew up in the microwave. You are more than tired of the sound of your own strange voice, uttering fascinating things like, "Get that tie out of your mouth," or even better, "Get your tie out of his mouth." And you just spent the last twenty minutes whirling around in a full-fledged WWF wrestling match, routing a dozen boys in puffy-jackets and bookbags out of the building. They hide under your desk, lay on the rug like feeble, puffy demonstrators, refusing to leave school. It's 5:20 p.m. You know that if you live to be a hundred and fifty and someone puts a vintage 1998 puffy ski jacket in your hand, you'll grab it and throw it out of the nursing home door. Go home, children. Go home.

Of all the bizarre scenes to flash through your day, you know this is the most bizarre. Even after so many hours of school, so many just won't go home. When they go out the door they head for the broken down basketball hoop, gossip on the front steps, and even do some reading. (They do – I've seen it.) "Bye Mr. Feo," says one of the last ones out the door. Feo is Spanish for "ugly." Angela must have taught them adjectives today. This subtle joke flies up every year about this time. The kid looks at me. "I just made that up, you know." He laughs.

I can't tell you what draws these kids here day after day. Ten year old kids, four feet tall, coming off the Orange line by themselves at 7:00 a.m. before the sun is even up, waiting for Fr. Al Hicks to unlock the door. Smiling. Eager. Their bookbags are more horizontal than they are vertical. Valdir's in the sixth grade. He's a mild troublemaker, he has a hard time getting his homework done, and he's behind his peers in the suburbs. But hold a field trip and he'll be there. He's never missed one. Al says, "If we had a worm race, with worms, he'd show up." And he would. That's hope right there. In two years, come ask me about Valdir. He'll be fine.

I picked up Stephen in my car yesterday morning. He was waiting for the number 15 bus. He climbed into my car and said, "Thank you, good morning. That story last night was *weird*." And he's off, teaching me a Salinger short story, right off the street. There are rapes and drugs and police cars up and down his road. Two years ago, his house was broken into and everything was taken. Two years ago, he couldn't write two sentences in a row and couldn't sit still without smacking someone. This morning, he's in my car teaching me Salinger.

So for me, these schools mean at least this: It's a relentless possibility. If you take a kid and give him what he needs, he can grow into anything he wants to be. These schools don't even sound real – especially that they are staffed in part by volunteers some of whom are right of college and have limited teaching experience or no teacher training whatsoever. Before you get nervous, though, let me tell that the data is in and these places are working – somehow. Test scores for our students go up. They enroll in great high schools and they do very well. They are amazing young people.

There are those facts; but what I remember most is the vision of driving up the street up every morning. When I picked Stephen up yesterday, he was surrounded by six or seven other kids in puffy jackets, waiting for their buses, too. They're up early too. At the end of my ride I pass by a public high school, a half-mile-long concrete box with 2,000 kids showing up for class. I don't know what makes them get up that early either.

I do know what they're looking for, though. They're looking for their hopes to be met by challenge. That's what our schools, somehow, do every day. You can see it for yourself. You see that any kid can do whatever you ask him to do, as long as you give him the chance. They'll diagram sentences and use the quadratic equation. They'll pray with you at church, and shake your hand, and do homework, and read books, and do community service, and lay down on the rug so you won't send them home. They will grow to love and to serve. Thanks for teaching today, and come visit our school someday. The door's always open.