

Feeling Home: Our Minds, a Palace

You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace.”
— Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes*

The school is a series of elbow-jointed bungalows. From the outside, they are uncompromising reminders of the history and of the hope of the neighborhood. Inside, the rooms are narrow rectangles, squat and dark like a closed subway station. The school will root and bud and then flower over the school year, but now, weeks before its birth, it is full of unknowable potential.

When I inform my friends that I will spend the next year teaching in Compton, they look at me with both admiration and trepidation. In 2010, Compton is the eighth most dangerous city in the United States. The city of rap songs and a near mythos around violence will become a lynchpin of sorts, tying my present to my past.

I grew up in Paramount, which is just four miles away. In a car with traffic lights timed just right, it takes just under 10 minutes to touch the entry lines of both cities. Beyond proximity, the cities are very similar--a perplexing blend of brutality and progress. When I was in high school, our substitute biology teacher said flatly, “Nobody wants to come out here to sub. It’s too dangerous.” Ms. Y became a familiar face that year, an intrepid stand in for when our regular teachers were knocked out by colds or professional development or emergencies, or just plain dread.

Soon after I graduated from Paramount High School, the *Los Angeles Times* reported: “A 16-year-old Paramount High School student was wounded Thursday afternoon in what authorities said was a gang-related drive-by shooting. Herminio Munoz is the third Paramount High student to be shot in the last five months.” Popular student and cheerleader Sheila Lorta was the second—caught by a stray bullet as she returned to the campus after grabbing a snack. Alfred Clark, a track superstar and honors student, headed to UCLA on a scholarship, was the first to fall that year.

On the third day of school, Aaliyah, one of my first graders came in with tearstained cheeks: “They shot my dog, Bucky, in the face. He dead.” I think back to the guns and the hostility that seeped through stares and guns and the teachers too afraid to traverse my city to my school. I think back to the grizzled biology sub who had the courage to tell us the truth—not many found the calling to work in a high crime, low hope place compelling enough to actually do it. They had a point. The city was rough around every one of its edges and not in the glossy and safe way of a Hollywood movie; instead, it was the real deal with no assured happy ending.

Indeed, Paramount’s violence was indiscriminate and omnipresent. On a pensive Sunday afternoon when quiet sits within all things and the low hum of pondering fills the mind, I begin

to think my journey to Compton is not as random as it appears. I had been working in a corporate law firm in downtown Los Angeles—miles and years and thoughts away from my home. At lunch one day, fatigued with the process of not making a difference, I searched for roads back into education. I had started as a teacher, left to become an attorney and wanted back to a field that had strongly called out to me.

It was a lone job posting about teaching students to own their education, their destiny that caught my eye that day. There was no address on the school. No indication of its location. It worked like fate—all mysteries and delayed meaning. And when I arrived for my first interview, passing through and by familiar streets and still buzzing helicopters, I knew some larger purpose was unfolding.

Perhaps every action we take is a recalling of a past one, taken by someone who inspired us. Maybe the true power of inspiration is not unlocked until we reflect on it. Here I was, so many years later, an attorney, an Ivy League graduate, a teacher. By most measures, I had gotten out of the ghetto, but it was not done in isolation or by accident.

What had my teachers done to get me here? How could I replicate their work? On paper, I was certainly fated to be a statistic. I had a teen mother and father. We were poor. Nobody in my immediate family had even stepped foot on a college campus. Then, like a jolt, a single, powerful thought swept through me: They showed me ways out of the city. I realized suddenly that poverty is a large magnifying class, one that does not look out, but exaggerates the closest things into inevitabilities. These inevitabilities are translated into a rare and powerful brand of hopelessness.

“Ways out?” you will ask.

“None,” poverty shouts—in bleakness and hopelessness and grittiness—none, none, none.

In Compton, we set about silencing it. The writer, Henry Miller noted that, “One’s destination is never a place, but a new way of seeing things.” Every Saturday, a colleague and I take a different group of students to a festival or museum or aquarium or event. We will show our kids that the hemlines of the city are not the hemlines of the world. If we are successful, our children will find the roads that lead out of Compton and, ideally, the roads back in-- to make a difference in the lives of other children. The result will be a magical set of domino moves. They will realize that the cycles of poverty are not chains in a fence, but stones in a wall that we take down daily.

One of our adventures is a trek to the Festival of Books housed at UCLA. In the morning light, the campus is an ethereal labyrinth of brick and ivy. Four hundred and nineteen acres of rolling emerald hills that ebb and flow just below the sunrise. Michael says suddenly, “I want to live somewhere this pretty.”

I think back to my own childhood; it was the teachers who took me outside of Paramount that made all of the difference. Amidst factory choked air and puffs of mechanical dragon smoke that formed a soot layer over the freeways, I began to glimpse a series of possibilities that would move me. That did move me. That will move me. Whether my colleague and I have accomplished our goal of showing our students ways out and back in, we cannot know. It has been five years. Not enough time.

Since then, I have become a principal. This year, we will start a program that will, in the end, send all students abroad by the end of eighth grade. In March, a 12 -student contingent will

attend a Global Leadership Summit in Costa Rica. The middle school has subsidized half of the cost and a flexible payment plan has opened windows and doors and opportunities.

I begin to realize that education is not static, but rather fluid; its edicts are not just related to schooling, but also to living. What we are doing is not just teaching, but equalizing opportunities and resources and, we hope, dreams.

Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan calls education the civil rights issue of our time. Disparities. Inequalities. Short sticks. There is not room for any of them. For these reasons, the job of teaching is daunting and beautiful. We are sharers and creators and makers of meaning—convincers, persuaders and salespeople to our students, letting them know that there is something out there beyond our predicament and beyond the present, that will tap into and pull out all that we are and can become. Earlier this summer, I met a teacher who reminded me that, “Teaching is only hard if you’re good at it.” The words spin and suspend, like a stop motion frame, compressing into my being, into the air, into a truth forever locked in. It’s only hard if you’re good at it.

And I return to thoughts of my home and those teachers who arrived early and stayed late and just plain stayed. I think of the worlds they opened up for me and the experiences that they gave and, yes, the possibilities. And, I think of the sacrifices that they made to make me believe in myself, in some spectacular and then unknowable world where kids like me could and would succeed.

My former first grade students will enter middle school this year. And, more than anything, I hope that they will continue to see that their potential is not limited by a zip code or income level, but rather limited only by the boundaries of their own imaginations. And, one day, not so far into the future, I hope that they find their way home just as I did, and pay it forward.