

TEMPLE, DAVID B., Ph.D. *Upon the King: Myth and Meaning in the Principalship*. (2006)

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The night before the historical battle of Agincourt, in Shakespeare's retelling of the events, King Henry dons a cloak and walks among his troops, conversing with them frankly, if in secret, about the responsibilities of the leader and the led. Enough, but not all, of Henry's questions are answered, sufficient that he can rally his badly outnumbered and out-trained troops to one of the greatest military victories of all time. This dissertation will, in a sense, serve as a kind of early-morning walk of my own among the competing ideas and values that have created my crisis of conscience and led me along the path to this, perhaps my decisive battle to remain in the principalship.

The decision to structure my dissertation into "acts" rather than "chapters" was not arrived at easily or with a bend toward melodrama. As the years have worn on I have come to view my own existence, both personally and professionally, as a kind of off-Broadway play and it seems appropriate that I divide its progression accordingly. In order to understand how I arrived at this philosophical frontier in my personal and professional lives, it is important for the reader to know key people and paradigms that have shaped my thinking. Act One will therefore consist of autobiographical reminiscing that will trace my route to the principalship and the Faustian bargain that has been required to keep me there. I will specifically identify the hypocrisy, doubt, and angst that I intend to grapple with in this dissertation.

Educational thinkers over the years have launched their own expeditions into the darkness that this dissertation proposes to illuminate. In Act Two I will review some of

the current literature in the area of educational reform – focusing on the forces that shape American education with an eye toward the social and spiritual implications of current policy both now and in the future. This is crucial if I am to achieve this dissertation’s stated purpose of clarifying for myself and the reader the competing paradigms that tear at my soul, and formulating an educational leadership philosophy that will withstand such assaults.

In Act Three we will be off to the theater for a one-act play that gives voices to competing views of educational leadership. Just as King Henry sought clarification of his own vision for leadership by engaging different characters in conversation around a camp fire, the play will assemble disparate approaches to leadership styles and contribute to the quest in this dissertation to discover the sound of my own voice.

To be true to my purpose of returning to the school house as an enlightened educational leader, I must bring back from my journey an archetype for the principalship that I can make peace with. In Act Four I will look at the “prophetic imagination,” inspired by the writings of Walter Brueggemann, Abraham J. Heschel and David Purpel, as applied to school leadership and examine some possible paths for myself and others.

UPON THE KING: MYTH AND MEANING  
IN THE PRINCIPALSHIP

by

David B. Temple

A Dissertation Submitted to  
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Approved by

Dr Svi Shapiro  
Committee Chair

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To my father, Tommy, who continues to model courage and dignity; to my mother, Patricia, who is “so conjunctive to my life and soul, that, as the star moves not but in his sphere, I could not but by her”; to my bride, Robin, and children, Matthew and Jennifer, who have given me more love and happiness than one man deserves; to family and friends, present and departed, who embellish the tapestry of my life and work; and to Papa, Lucius Riley. If there be anything within me that is good and noble, much of it came from him.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the  
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## PROLOGUE

*Upon the king  
let us our lives, our souls, our debts, our careful wives,  
our children, and our sins  
lay on the king. We must bear all.  
O hard condition, twin-born with greatness,  
subject to the breath of every fool . . .  
what infinite heart's ease must kings neglect that private men enjoy!  
And what have kings that privates have not too, save ceremony?  
And what art thou, thou idle ceremony?  
. . . what drink'st thou oft, instead of homage sweet, but poisoned flattery?  
O be sick, great greatness, and bid thy ceremony give thee cure!  
Canst thou, when thou command'st the beggar's knee,  
command the health of it?  
No thou proud dream, that play'st so subtly with a king's repose;  
I am a king that find thee, and I know  
'Tis not the balm, the scepter and the ball,  
the sword, the mace, the crown imperial,  
the intertissued robe of gold and pearl,  
the farced title running 'fore the king,  
the throne he sits on, nor the tide of pomp  
that beats upon the high shore of this world,  
no, not all these, thrice-gorgeous ceremony,  
not all these, laid in bed majestic, can sleep so soundly  
as the wretched slave, who with body fill'd and vacant mind  
gets him to rest, cramm'd with distressful bread; never sees horrid night,  
the child of hell, but, like a lackey from the rise to set  
sweats in the eye of Phoebus and all night sleeps in Elysium;  
next day after dawn, doth rise and help Hyperion to his horse,  
and follows so the ever-running year with profitable labor, to his grave:  
and, but for ceremony, such a wretch,  
winding up days with toil and nights with sleep,  
had the fore-hand and vantage of a king . . .  
- Henry V, Act IV, Scene 2*

For the introspective leader, the internal struggles that tormented King Henry and other leaders in history and literature remain the same. Questions of purpose, obligation, responsibility, as well as personal and civic duty and cost, remain as palpable as the smoke from a thousand campfires at Agincourt. What drives people to the “thrones” in business, politics, and even education? And what “play’st so subtly with a king’s repose”? I am not a king, but I am a principal “who find thee, and I know.” What late hour finds the leader, if not on the precipice of a great battle, but at his desk, alone, wondering if his charges who sleep peacefully at home, unburdened by the weight of ultimate responsibility, have not the “fore-hand and vantage?” Despite all the thousands of pages that have been written on collaboration, empowering teachers and staff, team dynamics, and the rest, at the end of the day the weight of the school rests completely on the principal’s shoulders. If something goes wrong, scores dip, or the political winds turn, it will be the principal who will be punished – not the faculty, staff, or even the central office.

However, to turn a phrase from a Robert Frost poem, “may no fate willfully misunderstand me and half grant what I wish and snatch me away not to return. [The principalship’s] the right place for me. I don’t know where it is likely to go better.”

I have come to discover that no one can tell you *how* to be a principal, you are a principal and the truth is that you had very little choice in the matter. Leadership on the whole, and the principalship in particular, I am firmly convinced, are callings – much like missionary work or the siren call of the sea that rips us from home and hearth for reasons we cannot even articulate. Principals have an affliction, a fever that drives us in a belief

that the lives of the children in our schools, and the lives of the educators and staff in our charge, will be better for us having been there. Those who simply come to the principalship to escape from the classroom, for money, for some mythical sense of power or notoriety, or who view the craft as some sort of intellectual exercise, are quickly weeded out. What keeps true principals going, through the paperwork, politics, petty faculty and office squabbles, budget cuts, 15-hour days and almost complete loss of family and personal life, is the high that comes with walking through *your* school, visiting classrooms, talking with students in the halls, helping a teacher in need, and knowing that you are, in some way, influencing so many lives.

With the highs, however, come the lows. Like a general, the principal is responsible for leading his people into what has become a very gruesome educational battlefield. The analogy is not as exaggerated as one might comfortably believe. Every day there are casualties in our classrooms. Despite our best efforts, adults and children are being emotionally and intellectually maimed, and if a principal does not at some point sit at his or her desk late at night, while the army sleeps, and wonder if the cause in which those people are being led is a just one, then that person is not a true leader, much less a principal. The true work of the principalship, after all, is making meaning. If you cannot make it for yourself, then you surely cannot help those who follow you to find it. Most often the introspective principal, rather than leading the opposing force, finds himself in the middle of opposing forces.

The night before the historical battle of Agincourt, in Shakespeare's retelling of the events, King Henry dons a cloak and walks among his troops, conversing with them

frankly, if in secret, about the responsibilities of the leader and the led. Enough, but not all, of Henry's questions are answered, sufficient that he can rally his badly outnumbered and out-trained troops to one of the greatest military victories of all time. This dissertation will, in a sense, serve as a kind of early-morning walk of my own among the competing ideas and values that have created my crisis of conscience and led me along the path to this, perhaps my decisive battle to remain in the principalship. I do not wish my use of King Henry as a running analogy to be misconstrued as an elitist, arrogant view of the principalship. I do not consider myself royal in any way, nor do I view those I lead as subjects much less "wretched slaves." In fact it is such a view of the principalship that has led many to their doom. As I will show, it is precisely my rejection of a top-down, authoritarian approach to administration in favor of team-driven, servant leadership that has contributed greatly to my present condition of exile. If the reader will kindly substitute "leader" for "king" then I trust that my intent will be clearer.

The purpose of this dissertation is quite selfish in a way. In the pages that follow I will journey deep into the jungle of educational leadership and my own "heart of darkness" to face squarely the demons of professional hypocrisy, self-doubt, and intellectual angst that have pursued me for so long. If I survive, I hope to plot a course back to the school house door with a clearer vision of the present fears and horrible imaginings attending education leadership and my place in it. I am not alone in the woods. I hear rustlings of other educational leaders on similar journeys, and this dissertation aspires to be a kind of signal flare that will assist them in finding their own paths.

My trusted steed for this quest will be my love for writing, which has always been my favorite mount for viewing the professional, moral, and spiritual landscape. “Writing as a method of inquiry, then,” contends Laurel Richardson, “provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves, and others, and how standard objectifying practices of social science unnecessarily limit us and social science” (Richardson, 2000, page 924). To me, writing is a way of *knowing*, and the qualitative research approach that I chose for this dissertation is consistent with my instinctive faith in a qualitative approach to education that is enhanced, rather than dictated, by quantitative insight. As Elliot Eisner points out, “educational critics and critics of the arts share a common aim: to help others see and understand.

To achieve this aim, one must be able to use language to reveal what, paradoxically, words can never say. This means that voice must be heard in the text, alliteration allowed, and cadences encouraged. Relevant allusions should be employed, and metaphor that adumbrates by suggestion used (Eisner, 1991, page 3).

Since my goal for this dissertation is to *make sense* of educational leadership for myself and, hopefully for others, I have chosen a vehicle that is comfortable to me – qualitative inquiry or “the intelligent apprehension of the qualitative world” (Eisner, 1991, page 21).

Qualitative inquiry runs counter to the time honored practice of emotional detachment in dissertations and general scholarly writing. Though qualitative research has gained more acceptance, if not respectability, in recent years, one must still have good reason, and perhaps a death wish, to employ it in academic circles. My contention is

that the fanatical and politically charged search for a holy grail of objective truth in general, and in educational philosophy in particular, is the primary barrier to the kind of education that I advocate. American education has been so focused in recent years on objective instructional and evaluative models that the essential, subjective character of teaching and learning has been systematically excluded from the classroom and the critical conversation. “To read about people or places or events that are emotionally powerful and to receive an eviscerated account is to read something of a lie,” writes Elliot Eisner. “Why take the heart out of the situations we are trying to help readers understand?” (Eisner, 1991, page 37). Thus, I have chosen to confront in this dissertation some very emotionally powerful people, places, and events in an attempt to promote the reader’s and my own understanding of my struggles as an educational leader. Even more importantly, however, I aim to provide grist for the mill – fodder for new thinking in educational leadership. I share Alan Peshkin’s belief that

personal biographies and unique modes of thinking make it possible for individuals to experience the world in unique ways. These unique ways of experiencing make possible new forms of knowledge that keep culture viable. These new forms then become candidates for shaping the experience of others, who in turn can use them to create even newer forms, which in turn. . .and so forth” (Eisner, 1991, page 48).

The decision to structure my dissertation into “acts” rather than “chapters” was not arrived at easily or with a bend toward melodrama. As the years have worn on I have come to view my own existence, both personally and professionally, as a kind of off-Broadway play and it seems appropriate that I divide its progression accordingly. In order to understand how I arrived at this philosophical frontier in my personal and professional

lives, it is important for the reader to know key people and paradigms that have shaped my thinking. Act One will therefore consist of autobiographical reminiscing that will trace my route to the principalship and the Faustian bargain that has been required to keep me there. I will specifically identify the hypocrisy, doubt, and angst that I intend to grapple with in this dissertation. Some unusual characters emerge from this history – a grandfather who was not able to go to school past the eighth grade, but who remains the most intellectually gifted soul I have ever encountered; a college professor whom I loved and feared, a virtuoso of Shakespearean texts and much more, who led me into the heart of darkness and literary light, and others who have challenged and inspired me along the life altering, spiritual journey of the modern principalship.

One of the traps, born of isolation, which educational leaders fall into, is the notion that no one else faces similar professional and intellectual doubts. Educational thinkers over the years, however, have launched their own expeditions into the darkness that this dissertation proposes to illuminate. In Act Two I will review some of the current literature in the area of educational reform – focusing on the forces that shape American education with an eye toward the social and spiritual implications of current policy both now and in the future. This is crucial if I am to achieve this dissertation’s stated purpose of clarifying for myself and the reader the competing paradigms that tear at my soul, and formulating an educational leadership philosophy that will withstand such assaults. This discussion will include the sometimes competing voices of David Purpel, Parker Palmer, Alfie Kohn, Svi Shapiro, Ed Hirsch Jr., Seymour Sarason, and others.

In Act Three we will be off to the theater for a one-act play that gives voices to competing views of educational leadership. Just as King Henry sought clarification of his own vision for leadership by engaging different characters in conversation around a camp fire, the play will assemble disparate approaches to leadership styles and contribute to the quest in this dissertation to discover the sound of my own voice. As the chorus urges in the opening lines of Henry V, I pray that the audience will “pierce out our imperfections with your thoughts; into a thousand parts divide one man, and make imaginary puissance.”

To be true to my purpose of returning to the school house as an enlightened educational leader, I must bring back from my journey an archetype for the principalship that I can make peace with. In Act Four I will look at the “prophetic imagination,” inspired by the writings of Walter Brueggemann, Abraham J. Heschel and David Purpel, as applied to school leadership and examine some possible paths for myself and others.

And through it all there will be “the royal captain of this ruin’d band, walking from watch to watch, from tent to tent, with cheerful semblance and sweet majesty; that every wretch, pining and pale before, beholding him, plucks comfort from his looks: a largess universal like the sun, a little touch of Harry in the night.”



## ACT ONE

Though the two are somewhat inexorably meshed, when I look back at my life and career for the primordial stuff of my leadership philosophy and present dilemma, I tend to concentrate on people rather than circumstances. It is therefore understandable that I would choose, or be chosen by, a career in the service and constant company of people. This section of my dissertation explores the impact of those souls who have most profoundly influenced the intellectual and vocational paths I have taken and the resulting predicament that is this dissertation's nexus. As my editor and friend recently pointed out to me, there is a thin line between honest examinations of those closest to you and sentimentality. Indeed, one of the criticisms of the kind of qualitative research that this dissertation relies on is that it is prone to a presumption of "the primacy of the individual mind" (Gergen, Mary M. and Gergen, Kenneth J. 2000, page 1041). I contend that such skepticism is better directed at "forms of representation that favor hierarchy and monologue" and "tend toward reifying the 'knowing one'"(Gergen, Mary M. and Gergen, Kenneth J. 2000, page 1041).

It is not difficult for me to pinpoint the genesis of the interest in literature and philosophy that has propelled me through 12 years of classroom teaching and seven years of administration. My grandfather, "Papa", began reading to me from the time I could barely walk, and though I was too young to understand the content, I was captivated by his voice, his merry, pale blue eyes, and the security of his arms. It did not matter that he had to leave school, like many in his Depression-era generation, before reaching high

school, or that he had spent his years carrying mail and running a small local store with his brother to keep food on the table. To me, then and now, he remains the towering intellectual figure in my life. More importantly, perhaps, he has informed and inspired my teaching and leadership style. From him I inherited a passion for words, and to this day I still pursue them as he did in a threadbare college dictionary held together by duct tape. A voracious reader, Papa looked up any word that he did not know, and explored the origins of many words that he did know. He was equally driven in his need to share his thoughts about a wide range of subjects - not in an arrogant, pseudo-intellectual manner, but as someone who loved to empty his bag of collected treasures and share them with a fellow explorer.

The first book that he read to me was Robinson Crusoe, the story of a young Englishman left alone on a desert island to battle the elements and his own spiritual doubts. He surely could not have known that it was the perfect choice for his grandson, who would later battle feelings of loneliness and spiritual confusion. I never asked him later why he chose that particular novel. It could have been because the one bookshelf that housed his collection contained very little in the way of fiction. Most of his books were nonfiction titles from American history – primarily the Civil War or “The War Between the States” as Papa called it (“There is nothing ‘civil’ about a war,” he would say with a grunt and puff of smoke). As I grew I would come to share his intense interest in the Civil War, baseball, and, yes, even professional wrestling, which transformed the gentle giant into a furiously rocking, cigar chewing, mountain of motion who literally

wore out the arms of his chair with sliding arms and hands that churned like the wheels of a locomotive.

He taught me the simple pleasure of throw and catch – the steady cadence of leather and life. He showed me the exhilaration of “sneaking” across town in his 1962 Ford Galaxy under the cover of night to enjoy the sinful pleasure of a Tasty Freeze milkshake. “This is our secret,” he would whisper, though I would find out years later that grandma knew all the time. Mostly, though, we talked, hour after hour, and the years between us melted away. He taught me the art and joy of listening as well as the give and take of true conversation. He loved to sit on the porch in his rocker and read the Bible – layers of flannel shirts and an ancient toboggan protecting him from the morning chill. He was proud of the fact that he had read the entire Bible “cover to cover”, and I never doubted him, especially after a group of door-to-door recruiters from a very different religious orientation made the mistake of engaging Papa on his scriptural home turf. In his top dresser drawer he kept a set of envelopes, each bearing the name of a grandchild. Each month he faithfully deposited several one-dollar bills into each envelope. Then, when the annual event rolled around for each child, he would proudly present the treasure and watch with unspeakable joy as the receiver went through the ritual of counting the one-dollar bills in front of him and announcing the total. Papa always smiled and nodded, pleased that the numbers matched. Perhaps the best indicator of the degree of faith that I had in my grandfather was when he persuaded me to take all of the birthday money from him that I had saved (I could never bring myself to spend it), and go up to the Savings and Loan in Hillsborough and open a savings account. I could not even see the top of the

counter, and only the immeasurable love and faith of a child for his grandfather could explain how I was satisfied with giving the lady all my money and only getting a little book in return that didn't even have pictures.

There were many other eccentricities that made up part of the sum of Lucius Riley. Mostly, though, I remember the faith that he had in me, the grandson he affectionately called "Doc." Because he believed in me, I have found the strength to believe in myself at times when I had no reason to. Whatever in me that is good and noble, much of it came from him.

Papa died about seven years ago. I keep his dictionary and his Bible on my desk, and sometimes I open one of them and bury my nose deep in the pages to catch the fading smell of his cigar. I have our copy of Robinson Crusoe, too, our secret portal to that tiny stretch of sand and surf. Sometimes, if I am quiet, amid wind and wave, I can still hear his voice and feel the security of his massive arms around me. Crusoe and Friday are still there. I think they miss him too.

As I inventory Papa's contributions to my career as an educational leader a couple of gifts stand out. Through Papa I gained an appreciation of life-long, independent scholarship – a love of learning for learning's sake. Though he never attended high school, much less college or graduate school, he taught me that true learning doesn't come exclusively from societal institutions, and that curiosity, a desire to explore, and sheer determination can overcome great educational obstacles such as poverty, lack of intellectual stimulation at home, and scarcity of educational resources. Perhaps, as I will explore later, it is such insight that prevents me from buying completely into the

assertions of Jonathan Kozol and others who seem to tie significant educational reform primarily to money.

Papa also remains my intellectual blueprint for what is too casually called a “master teacher.” In Papa’s “classroom” there were no degrees hanging on the wall, no audio-visual stimulation, or even books – save the threadbare copy of Robinson Crusoe. Papa built a relationship of pure trust, caring, and mutual sharing of ideas without the base alloy of standards and high stakes testing. There was no imposed hierarchy, only an intellectual and spiritual companionship that evolved over the years. He took the time to get to know me to the degree that he had an intuitive sense of what I could handle and what I could not. He had high hopes – even expectations – for me and his other children and grandchildren, but he never pushed me or rationed his love according to benchmarks achieved. Even though I never lived up to his idealized picture of me, I always felt that I could if I just kept trying. As a teacher he challenged me enough to keep me moving without causing me to give up whether he was teaching me how to field a ground ball or the intricacies of a Southern general’s field command. Even though the grandfather-grandson relationship differs from the teacher-student relationship in a classroom, I maintain that these characteristics of Papa’s approach to teaching are applicable

Another gift that he gave me is less connected to education on the surface, but it is central to my educational leadership philosophy. From Papa I learned the nature and importance of fairness and honesty. It not okay to deceive people or to pretend to be something that you are not. Papa taught me that you do not use people to further your own cause or that of the “organization.” Accountability to Papa meant being forthright

and dependable in your dealings with others, even if others did not always do the same thing. It is this legacy that contributes greatly to my internal conflict as an educational leader. I have serious misgivings about the educational system of which I am apart. Yet, as a principal, I am charged with the responsibility of making sure that the system runs smoothly in my own school by focusing attention on higher test scores at the expense of critical thinking, experiential pursuit of knowledge, and deep, applicable learning. Such a dilemma draws me uncomfortably close to the very clear line that Papa drew for me. I am certainly not against testing. In fact, I consider it to be an important tool in assessing student progress and weaknesses. It is when testing becomes the object and goal of education, and teaching to the test supplants a rich, thinking and application-based curriculum, that I become disillusioned.

Papa was certainly not without his faults, and they have influenced me as well. Though in my public role as a principal I have to put forth a pleasing social persona, in my private life I have inherited Papa's inclination to dwell deeply on perceived affronts and incongruities. Professional hypocrisy merges with the personal hypocrisy I feel when I remove my mask at the end of the day and slip into a sometimes curmudgeon disposition. Other principals have confirmed what I have found to be a sad truth. After spending the day cheerfully and optimistically addressing the needs of others, principals often come home exhausted and with little patience for their own individual needs or those of their families. Being a leader can mean that the majority of your energy and consciousness is consumed by others.

I am mindful of how fortunate I was to have my grandfather as a companion for nearly 36 years. When his death forced me to finally leave the security of the Crusoean island that we had inhabited, I encountered a kind of intellectual cyclops.

Dr. Blake was one of my first English professors in the small liberal arts college that I attended. It was not until much later that I realized how fitting it was that his last name was Blake, forever wedding him in my mind with William Blake – the English poet, thinker, and artist, who is often remembered for his ominous religious carvings and the black and white prints that he made from them. To the frightened, immature freshman who encountered him for the first time, he had a kind of etched wood and black ink visage. Indeed, his hair was jet black, slicked back, and parted to the side. He had a dark thin mustache, and his skin had the hue of unfinished, raw wood. Then there were those eyes – “burning bright,” like the tiger in Blake’s famous poem! They were blue, as I recall, and they danced between literary exhilaration and barely contained madness. When Dr. Blake took you into the *Heart of Darkness* to encounter Kurtz (“Kurtz – he dead,” he would quote, stretching the last two words to their linguistic limits) in the bowels of the Congo River, you feared and hoped that you would never return.

It is for his course in Shakespeare, however, that I am most indebted to the good doctor. As in all of his classes, Dr. Blake did not use notes or books. He came in, sat on the edge of a desk in the middle of the room, and did what country folks call “rendering.” Whole passages rolled off his tongue like a spring rain, and facts were his foot soldiers – ever at his command. So complete was his knowledge of the Shakespearean canon that I began to wonder if he had actually been its author. Woe be unto the student who did not

do his assigned reading, and thus found himself unable to respond to one of the professor's probing questions. On one memorable occasion just about everyone in the class, including me, was filled with such woe. He began his questioning with the first student, in the first row nearest the door. One by one the students fell, like targets in a state fair shooting gallery, and were dismissed from class with a blaze of blue eyes and burning breath. Three and a half rows of enemy soldiers fell to earth before he became so exasperated that he stopped – with the student sitting directly in front of me. He continued on with his lecture while the rest of us sat praying that we had not soiled our pants.

Why do I count Dr. Blake as a primary sculptor in my life? I did not fear Dr. Blake – I respected his knowledge and penetrating intellect. I was afraid, not of the man himself, but of disappointing him. He taught me how powerful a teacher can be when he has completely mastered his subject matter, when he has sucked the marrow out of it as Walt Whitman suggested. To be fair to my teacher, I must confess that, as I got to know him, I found him to be a very kind person who genuinely cared about his students. Though I could never describe him as a warm person – there was always a kind of physical and intellectual gulf that could not be forded – I did learn from him that a leader cares enough to command the facts and expect everyone's best efforts. He was the successor to my grandfather as my intellectual beacon. To Dr. Blake, and now to me, learning should be so deep that it soaks the soul. He had little patience with regurgitated facts and thinly supported opinions of the type that so dominate current educational



practice. Like Kurtz, Dr. Blake would accept nothing less than a journey into the heart of the matter, and now as an educational leader, neither will I.

An equally steady force in my life has been my parents, and, as with my grandfather and my old college professor, they have served to shape me as a teacher and leader.

It is difficult to put into words the exact nature of my relationship with my mother. She has always been a sister, intellectual playmate, best friend, and “who I want to be when I grow up” rolled into one. My mother, seed of Papa, grew up in a very controlled environment where expectations were many and compliments were few. Papa softened in his later years, about the time I came along, but my mother mostly remembers a man who was frequently exhausted from working two jobs and who lacked the time and patience to foster the kind of relationship that he had with me. As the only girl in the family, my mother was expected, like her mother, to model the traditional female stereotype – devoted, domestic, and docile, while her two brothers in general, and one in particular, tested the limits. Thankfully, my mother inherited Papa’s powerful, if unharnessed, intellect, and his musical ability. He had played the trombone in his youth and was even part of a small, local band. In fact, he tried out for the military band and made the cut, but his mother happened to answer the phone when the military called and she never told him out of her fear of losing him on the battlefield. My mother’s interest was in the piano and organ, but after high school, despite her straight “A” average, she received no encouragement from counselors and teachers to go on to college. Though I am sure that scholarship money could have been found, she also recognized that money

for college would have been difficult for her parents to produce. Therefore, she left high school and, like many others, went into the workforce at a department store and later became a secretary.

From an Ophelian world dominated by Papa, my mother moved into another world dominated by my father. Luckily, for her and later for me, my father is a good man who worked hard to provide for his family, first as a newspaper printer and later as supervisor in a plant and a heating/air conditioning specialist. Though his own father left his family for another woman when my father was very young, Dad has always put the family's needs first. My father has never been a man of letters, but he is a man of his word and has remained singular in his selfless devotion to his family even after a series of strokes that have disabled him physically though not symbolically. Even though he did not have a paternal blueprint to follow, my father, along with my mother, have always been my moral, spiritual, and ethical anchors. Their selflessness has directly translated into the stewardship model that I believe in so strongly as an educational leader.

My brother is ten years younger than I, and one of the great voids in my life is our lack of a close relationship. We have completely different interests and, though we each know that the other is always there if needed, we have never had the kind of bond that is often developed between brothers who are closer in age. We are however, in our own ways, drifters. He has been a kind of vocational vagabond while my wanderings have been more intellectual and philosophical. I sense, though, that his spirit is no more at peace than mine is, and that our rest will only come when similar questions are answered.

While in her thirties my mother's intellectual hunger became so unbearable that she finally completed her undergraduate and graduate studies. After 15 years as a middle school band director she embarked on what would be a tremendously distinguished career as an elementary school principal. Though she never pushed me into educational leadership, I am under no illusion that she did not play a major role in my decision to become an administrator. I followed my mother through the same private liberal arts college and then the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and in many ways I continue to follow her with the knowledge that her achievements will forever remain just beyond my grasp.

My mother and I are like clones, identical except for insignificant differences in gender and age. As a result, during our separate journeys through the principalship, we have faced common obstacles and come to shared conclusions. Our team-centered, stewardship approach to leadership and our deep commitment to learning and enlightenment that lasts beyond annual high stakes testing runs counter to current educational practice to a degree that has left us both exiled in our own land. The irony that such a crisis of conscience should be so mirrored in separate settings by administrators of different generations and gender is not lost on either of us. My mother retired from the principalship a couple of years ago and in a sense escaped at the end of her career the kind of crisis of conscience that I feel in the middle of mine.

My own personal crisis of conscience, the winter of my growing discontent, began even before I left the classroom after nearly twelve years as a high school English teacher.

The love of literature (especially Shakespeare) and writing, inspired by my grandfather, supported by my mother, and grafted to my soul by the good Dr. Blake, eventually overcame my childhood desire to be Batman's successor, an astronaut, pilot, and, finally, a journalist. I am grateful, however, that I did not abandon my journalism hopes before I worked as a sportswriter and announcer for various small newspapers and radio stations both in my hometown and through my first years in college. The experience honed communication and writing skills that played a major role in my decision to become a high school English teacher.

I was fortunate to enjoy several years of teaching in the 1980's before the gathering storm of high stakes testing and the "feel-good curriculum" finally overcame American education in the 1990's. Certainly, education was no Eden before the accountability obsession. There were long days, doubts, frustrations, failures, and successes, but I did get a taste of relatively unfettered and unencumbered teaching. While still operating within state and local curriculum standards, I was able to honor inspiration, intuition, and the individual needs of my students. I had free range of intellectual and professional motion, and my classroom and those of other colleagues with whom I had the honor of teaching became a haven for critical thinking and connections across subject areas. My personal, professional, and artistic judgment mattered.

The storm did come, and in my heart I felt an inescapable desire to become an administrator. As a department chairperson for several years I had more access to the inner workings of school leadership than a typical teacher has. A couple of the principals with whom I worked encouraged me to consider educational leadership and, along with

several colleagues in my school, I finally embarked on the masters program in educational leadership at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

As happened in my undergraduate career, in my masters program I came into contact with several professors who pushed me to fundamentally challenge some of my assumptions about education. I was forced to clearly articulate my own personal philosophy of education and it is there that the trouble began. One of my professors is fond of saying that “the unexamined life is not worth living, but the examined life can be a pain in the \_\_\_\_.” My pain increased as I was introduced to possibilities beyond the narrow, product-based conception of education that drives current practice. “Philosophy is nagging,” Eisner rightly acknowledges, “it cajoles students into asking questions about basic assumptions, it generates doubts and uncertainties, and, it is said, it keeps people from getting their work done” (Eisner, 1991, page 4).

Michelangelo was once asked how he was able to create his *David* out of a block of stone that no other artist had been able to do anything with. He responded that *David* already resided in the stone; all he did was free him. Over two years I chipped away at my own philosophical clump of stone to reveal a view of education that was much different from what was standing in the town square. Still, stoked with youthful idealism, I believed that I could be a catalyst for change.

Like King Henry I assumed my first leadership position at a relatively young age. While many serve as an assistant principal for several years before being appointed to their first principalship, I was only an assistant principal for a year and a half before I became principal of a rural high school. Through my masters program in educational

administration and first years as a principal, I remained convinced that there was a way to circumvent the “teaching for the test” mentality and facilitate the kind of intellectual curiosity and deep learning that I valued so highly. Where and when I lost my faith I do not know, but at some point I knew that in order to satisfy the educational hierarchy and keep my job, I had to go along with a politically driven and market economy-based educational agenda that ran counter to my view of learning as a moral, spiritual, and intellectual journey compelled by critical thinking and infinite application.

The Faustian bargain was made.

So, like King Henry, I rallied my troops and urged them on to higher test scores with faculty meeting speeches, curriculum alignments, and incentives. If it had failed in California or Texas, then it would be belatedly tried in North Carolina and not be given the time to fail or succeed. Though late at night, alone on my “throne”, I would gaze across my desk and out into the night to avoid looking at myself, the next day I was back on my horse leading the charge.

Perhaps my discontent would be easier to understand if I had met with defeat on the educational battlefield. Then these would be the sad ruminations of a defeated general, languishing in a prison of missed opportunities and wondering where it all went wrong. Measured against the prevailing standards, however, mine has been a fairly successful march. I have led schools public and private, pre-kindergarten through the twelfth grade to higher morale, better student discipline, lower drop-out rates, and, God have mercy on my soul, higher test scores. I have had the privilege to work with kids urban and rural, academically gifted and mentally disabled, and I have been witness to

the heroic efforts of committed and inspired teachers who have stuck to their posts despite withering and continual enemy attacks. If I stay in the principalship until retirement I am confident that I will receive my perfunctory watch, framed certificate of appreciation, and pat on the back for a job well done.

Like Hamlet, however, I could be bounded in a nutshell and consider myself the king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams, born of a conflict between my survival instinct to defend and perpetuate current educational practices and my heart, which knows that current educational practices in this country are misguided at best and destructive at worst. I could relegate this to philosophical musings or educational theorizing if children's lives did not hang in the balance. Though bad educational practices do not literally kill children physically they do achieve something very like an intellectual death at an early age, and, in the end, I'm not sure which is worse.

I was badly shaken recently when one of my colleagues who entered the masters in school administration program with me, and was principal at the high school where I taught English, committed suicide in his home. He was a passionate, funny, gifted educator who came from New York and once worked there as a paramedic. With his dark, bushy hair and Groucho Marx style mustache, his imitations of people he had come into contact with as a paramedic would rival the best night club comedy acts. Mike began at the school as a history teacher, and he set a very high standard for teaching excellence. He breathed life into his subject matter with anecdotes and insights gleaned from passionate study and inquiry. Mike had the gift of being able to reach students across the spectrum of ages and abilities, and he enjoyed a loyal following of students and parents.

After I left the high school and entered the isolation chamber of the principalship, we were not able to see each other as much, though we did E-mail. Mike became an assistant principal at that same school and then quickly moved into the principalship. My last E-mail from him was just a few days before his suicide, and it was the usual, jovial message that I had come to expect from Mike - no mention of anxiety, no hint that he was about to take his own life.

There *was* anxiety, though. He juggled school demands and a deep sense of responsibility to his wife and two small children. Mike shared my concerns about the plight of education and, like me; he sometimes struggled with the political nature of the principalship on all levels. Ironically, one of the last pictures that I have of him was made on a day that the school was having a pep rally for the annual end-of-course testing. He is sitting in a dunking booth. I cannot say with certainty that the pressures of the principalship ultimately contributed to his decision that night, but I cannot help but feel that they did play a major role. I will always wrestle with the questions that haunt many people who lose close friends to suicide: Was there a sign that I missed? Would a visit have made the difference? A phone call? Another E-mail? The afternoon of the day of his suicide Mike stayed late in his office. When he left, his desk was completely straight, papers were in neat piles, and everything was signed. I'm not sure, but it is very possible that at the same exact time, miles away, I was sitting at my desk trying to make sense of it all – trying to find answers. Maybe he felt the weight that afternoon that all principals feel. Maybe competing forces tore at his soul. Maybe he struggled with his own Faustian bargain. The difference is that I came to work the next day. Mike did not.



I know, as Mike did, through my own personal experience, independent as well as academic reading and research, and, more importantly, through twenty years of working with students and teachers every day that we are on a perilous educational trajectory that threatens fundamental tenants of the very democratic society we expect our students to perpetuate and build upon. Among these are individual human worth, justice, intellectual freedom, and the capacity for moral and spiritual growth.

My own duplicity in this sham has become increasingly difficult to bear. Though I have not yet resorted to sitting in a dunking booth or being pied by students to celebrate gains on annual testing, I tacitly support the system when I address faculty and students on the importance of “getting those scores even higher.” Yet, while I remain a principal, I know the professional consequences of breaking rank and publicly joining those who expose the kind of educational child abuse that is going on in our schools.

Ah, there’s the rub. How do I reconcile my own continued membership in an educational system that runs completely counter to what I believe education can and should be? If such reconciliation proves to be impossible, what will be my course of action? The voices of my past – Papa, Dr. Blake, my mother and others – confound me. The thread that runs through each of the stories I have presented here in Act One is the imperative of moral, intellectual, and personal synchronization with my educational leadership – with my heart.

In Act Two I undertake the task of outlining some of the challenges facing learning in America as addressed in educational literature and how they are playing out or being ignored in the classroom and the principal’s office. Political and market forces have

an increasing amount of influence in American education though considerable opposition has been voiced in educational literature over the last decade. Included in Act Two will be a look at the role of “play” in the learning process, first explored by D.W. Winnicott in his seminal 1971 work, Playing and Reality, but attracting renewed consideration in light of fairly recent discoveries in neurology. The theater awaits us in Act Three as I attempt to dramatize some points of view presented in Act Two. The final battlefield – my Agincourt – will be fought in the fourth Act against the demons I conjured in the first three. If I do not gain the hand of the fair French maiden as Harry did, perhaps I will at least ride away with a greater prize – a vision of school leadership that will sustain me and others who follow.

## ACT TWO

One Saturday morning I voluntarily reported to the school district office to assist in a landscaping project. The new superintendent wanted to add some life and color to the very drab, Spartan entrance to the private residence that many years ago became the central office. A local landscaper had donated his services and many of the plants and shrubs. When we arrived on that balmy, South Carolina morning, orange paint very neatly outlined the border of the flower bed and dots indicated where the individual plants were to be located. Each bush and flower sat obediently in its pot beside the appointed spot. Most of the plantings went into the ground without struggle and settled into their predetermined place in the world. Others resisted, refusing to stand straight or sit to the center, where the bright orange dots marked an inflexible standard. Though there was some casual, sporadic conversation, for the most part each of the educators assembled worked alone and without questioning the grand, imposed system of orange lines and dots. In the end there was perfect symmetry, though some speculated that a few of the plants would probably not make it and would have to be plucked from their spot and discarded. This really presented no problem, however, since there was no shortage of plants to take their place, and the bright orange cosmic order was in no danger of collapsing. We left that morning completely satisfied. "A job well done," we thought to ourselves, "the public will approve."

It was not until later, driving home, that I realized how the morning's activities in our own little corner of Eden paralleled our work everyday as educators. I more clearly

understood what educational theorists like David Purpel, Parker Palmer, Michael Lerner, and others have been saying for years. In a sense, education has become a kind of intellectual and political landscaping, and, as a result, has been reduced to the imposition of objective, inflexible “order” on what is perhaps the most subjective and messy of human enterprises. Instead of orange dots, number two pencil circles mark the targets of education. We force young life into the holes we dig and designate, making sure that everything flows neatly and societal symmetry is preserved. Then we stand back briefly and admire our work, a kind of commencement, before moving on to decide how the next truckload of new life that has been delivered to us will be arranged and planted. “We search for context,” David Purpel writes in *The Moral and Spiritual Crisis in Education*, “and yet our educational energies are directed to filling in the blanks. Schools present education less as an endeavor to create a vision of meaning than as a paint-by-numbers exercise. . . . What the schools have done is more of a perversion of scholarship in their stress on textbooks, right answers, minimum standard performance, and external controls” (Purpel, 1989, page 60).

A review of educational literature in recent years indicates growing sentiment that something is going horribly wrong in the classroom. Though opinions vary as to the cause and cure, thinkers on both the Left and the Right have engaged in a spirited debate concerning the values and implications that we attach to learning in our schools. Some, like Jonathan Kozol, see race and class disparities in the educational system while others, such as E.D. Hirsch and Maureen Stout, point to a “dumbing down” of the curriculum to fit the mass market, test-driven agenda that Alfie Kohn so despises. Issues of gender

discrimination have also been widely examined by authors such as Myra and David Sadker, Peggy Orenstein, and Mary Pipher.

### **The Business of Education and “Crisis Control”**

It must be conceded, however, that there is much in educational literature that supports current federal, state, and local policies. Indeed, a particularly heated battle is being fought between those with a more holistic approach to learning and those who favor the current conservative “back to the basics,” standardized curriculum. As federal and state funding is increasingly tied to test performance, the prize for those who capture the flag is considerable. Increased attention to education in the media and in politics has exacerbated the need for schools to fend off the critics by “proving” their worth to “consumers.” The market economy has certainly seeped deeply into public education as evidenced by, if nothing else, the increased use of economic terms such as “human capital,” “service delivery,” “employability,” “stock holders (i.e. stake holders), etc. for educational purposes. “It’s time to admit that public education operates like a planned economy,” Albert Shanker, former president of the American Federation of Teachers was quoted as saying in a 1989 Wall Street Journal article, “a bureaucratic system in which everybody’s role is spelled out in advance and there are few incentives for innovation and productivity. It’s no surprise that our school system doesn’t improve: It more resembles the communist economy than our own market economy.”

A broader emphasis on “management” rather than “leadership” in education has been most noticeable in the much publicized “takeovers” of the public schools in New York and Chicago by their respective mayors. In each case the mayor pegged non-

educators to actually design and implement reforms. In 1995 Mayor Richard Daley in Chicago appointed his budget director, Paul Vallas, to head the takeover while in 2002 New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg tapped a lawyer with no previous experience in education, Joe Klein, to save the schools (National Public Radio, 12-1-05). To be fair, Mayor Daley did not ask for the responsibility of reforming the schools, it was forced upon him by a legislature that did not know what to do with such a disaster. In both takeovers the first step was to clean up poor financial practices and then shift from decentralized control of education to total mayoral control (National Public Radio, 12-1-05). Tutors and other specialists were hired to raise test scores, teachers were given “generous” four-year contracts, and social promotion was no longer allowed. Despite the increased flow of money and statistical gains in some areas, the takeovers have been less than totally successful. “In both cities, the overall results have been encouraging but mixed,” National Public Radio reported. “As experts point out, deep-seated problems in big city schools require more than quick fixes, but there's a new breed of mayors who believe that if they do nothing about their schools, they'll be blamed anyway. So they might as well give it a shot” (National Public Radio, 12-1-05). The crisis control model of school administration may soon be utilized by Los Angeles Mayor Villaraigosa, who, like his predecessors in New York and Chicago, also seeks total control of education.

Jurgen Habermas, as quoted in Svi Shapiro's *Between Capitalism and Democracy*, sees inherent dangers in the “politilization” of cultural traditions. “Cultural affairs that were taken for granted and previously outside of political manipulation now ‘fall into the administrative planning area’ and become part of the ‘public problematic’”

(Shapiro, 1990, page 149). John Goodlad concluded in *A Place Called School* that “it is reasonable for states to assess the way districts conduct their business. But to seek to monitor from remote state capitals the activities and performance of individual schools and teachers is unrealistic and ultimately damaging”(Goodlad, 1984, pages 274-275).

Michael Apple sees state intervention into education as self-legitimacy as well as a way to avoid a larger debate:

It (the state) will also act to remediate the negative outcomes that are generated out, if only to maintain its own legitimacy. By defining large groups of children as deviant (slow learners, remedial problems, discipline problems, etc.), and giving funding and legislative support for special teachers and for ‘diagnosis’ and ‘treatment,’ the state will fund extensive remedial projects. While these projects will seem neutral, helpful, and may seem aimed at increasing mobility, they will actually defuse the debate over the role of schooling in the reproduction of knowledge and people ‘required’ by the society. It will do this in part by defining the ultimate causes of such deviance as within the child or his or her culture and not due to, say, poverty, the conflicts and disparities generated by the historically evolving cultural and economic hierarchies of the society, etc. This will be hidden from us as well by our assumption that schools are primarily organized as distribution agencies, instead of, at least in part, important agencies in that accumulation process (Apple, 1995, page 51).

### **Everything in Its Place**

The blue print for Western education is consistent with the blue print for other major institutions. Modern thought has tended to retain the medieval concept of “everything has a place and everything in its place.” Humans by nature long for order in their lives. After taking care of basic survival needs the first settlers in a newly discovered land invariably begin to impose boundary lines. Squares, rectangles, and straight lines replace what humans arrogantly perceive to be the messy thought process of nature or even God. A walk in an English garden is a testament to man’s artistic

sensibilities and fanatical devotion to “order.” A walk through a typical public school yields the same: students and furniture, if indeed the two are differentiated, in neat rows, squares and rectangles. As long as students are obedient, quiet, and stay in their place, or hole, then education is judged to be taking place. “Perhaps because of the awesome traumas of the twentieth century – world wars, holocaust, famine, economic depression, nuclear bombs, pollution, and the real possibility of even more horrors, “ David Purpel posits, “we have extended our human impulse to control our destinies to obsessive dimensions . . . .” (Purpel, 1989, page 48). Purpel and others contend that control mania manifests itself in an obsession with objective measurement of education using standardized tests (codename: “accountability”). This is not surprising if one agrees with the notion that education is a microcosm of the greater society – in the case of the United States and other Western powers, an industrial society. Accountability represents

a kind of quality control mechanism borrowed crudely and inappropriately from certain industrial settings. We control the curriculum, teachers, and staff by insisting on predefined minimal performances on specified tests. In this way schools continue their love affair with industrial and business metaphors: in this case it means metaphors like efficiency, cost-effectiveness, quality control, productivity. Another industrial concept that impinges strongly in educational institutions is the emphasis on management, particularly in the concepts of productivity, quotas, planning, and engineering. It is routine for schools to expect teachers and curriculum workers to operate within a framework of a cycle of activities determined and revised by a process of predetermined objectives and continuous testing (Purpel, 1989, page 48).

For confirmation of Purpel’s assertion one has to go no farther than the proliferation of school leadership and training based on Demings’ “Total Quality Management” (TQM) model. When taken to its most horrific extremes, a business



administration approach to education reduces students to commodities, schools to factories, and learning to “a way of knowing that treats the world as an object to be dissected and manipulated, a way of knowing that gives us power over the world” (Palmer, 1993, page 2). “Teachers,” writes Michael Lerner in Spirit Matters, “under increasing pressure to produce students who will do well on ‘objective tests,’ have learned to redirect children’s attention away from ‘fantasies’ toward ‘reality,’ namely those skills and qualities that are likely to make them ‘successful’ in a competitive marketplace” (Lerner, 2000, page 18). “From a business perspective,” contends former IBM chairman and CEO Louis V. Gerstner Jr. in Reinventing Education, “the central problem for American public schools is that they have not been forced to continuously adapt themselves to changes in their students and the demands of society and the economy. Operating outside the market, they have been insulated from the necessity to change” (Gerstner, 1994, page 15).

However, operating “inside the market” can also engender a paradigm that views competition as a primary ingredient for quality education. For years students have competed with each other in the classrooms as well as on the athletic fields with the prize being validation through praise or marks in a grade book. In this golden age of accountability teachers now compete with each other as do schools and districts with the “School Report Card” serving as the newspaper box score. Teaching and learning have become solitary struggles for finite resources. Lost is the notion of education being what Parker Palmer calls “a profoundly communal act” (Palmer, 1993, page xv), and the consequence is “the renewal of harsh economic and social competition in which the

metaphor and mythology of organized sports and war have been used to glorify, extol, and legitimate an ideology of ‘opportunity,’ which comes down to mean a winner-loser culture” (Purpel, 1989, page 16).

### **Students as Capital**

A particularly disturbing premise of American education is the notion that students, young people, are a kind of investment capital – to be managed and evaluated according to their future societal functionalism. As early as 1990 Svi Shapiro sounded a warning to the then Reagan-era disconnect with “education’s relationship to issues of empowerment, justice, or human dignity” (Shapiro 1990, page 3). The infiltration of the capitalistic paradigm into the classroom, according to Shapiro, comes at a steep price:

In the brave new world of corporate-state-school cooperation, education becomes ever more widely defined as technical training, the means to ensure industrial harmony, and the mechanism for assuring individuals well-adjusted to the demands of the bureaucratic world. In this ‘human capital’ view of education, the ideals of a critically intelligent, liberally educated, and humane citizenry is likely to be a subordinate goal. Transcending the limits of conservative policy in education may spell more money and more resources for the hard-pressed domain of schooling. It is unlikely, however, to mean any fundamental reorientation in the nature of the school experience itself. Such an experience is likely to become ever more suffused with the positivist and hierarchical values of bureaucratic capitalism (Shapiro 1990, page 164).

The idea of education as a commodity has become so prevalent that even students view schooling in terms of diplomas and degrees to be accumulated for investment capital and traded for some coveted position in the capitalist culture. School is something that you endure to “pass go” and move on to the “important” things in life. Current curriculum pedals what Roland Barth calls “inert knowledge” – or “knowledge that

doesn't go anywhere" (Barth, 2001, page 39). "Our schools are replete with inert knowledge," Barth believes.

Despite the (now waning) educational rhetoric that boasts expressions like *discovery, inner motivation, exploration, active involvement, and best interests of the child*, school continues to be an adult-centered, not student-centered, enterprise. And the greater the preoccupation with standardized tests, the more adult-centered it becomes. It is no surprise that many youngsters' natural excitement and curiosity about the world are more thwarted than nurtured by the school experience" (Barth, 2001, page 39).

Education no longer serves as a tool for building a greater intellectual or cultural foundation for living. In fact, students in today's classrooms see little connection between learning as it is defined in schools and their own personal lives. "Students learn very quickly," says David Purpel, "that the rewards that the schools provide – grades, honors, recognitions, affection – are conditioned upon achievement and certain behaviors of respect, obedience, and docility" (Purpel, 1989, page 35). According to Shapiro, the school has indeed become a central battleground for the "hearts and minds" of today's youth.

It may indeed constitute the final bulwark for the socialization of the young into the work-oriented, instrumentally motivated values of traditional bourgeois society. Given the depth and intensity of the divisions that now pervade American culture it must be less surprising that the process of cultural transmission in schools (especially high schools) is resisted or treated with the ambivalence that it is. We speak here of the violence, vandalism, and apathy that have become, and continue to be, endemic to American education. School and popular culture face each other in a relationship of increasing confrontation and dissonance, each being the focus of values, beliefs, and behavior that are the very antithesis of the other. To be young in America is to be the focus of a process of socialization that is, at best, schizophrenic, and, at worst, irreconcilable" (Shapiro, 1990, page 53).

## Tracking and “Schools That Work”

Docility is important when herding students into various educational freight cars. In a market-based economy emphasis, or value, is placed on those stocks that will show long-term profit while other stocks become “devalued” and are discarded for the best price possible. In a market-based educational system, emphasis, or value, is placed on those students who will best perform long-term in the capitalistic world that Shapiro described. Other less capable students, as determined by objective, snapshot testing, are devalued using a system called “tracking.” Bill Bigelow sees tracking as a tool used to place students who are unresponsive to memory games, what he terms the “Memory Olympics.” “This is classic victim blaming,” he writes,

penalizing kids for their inability to turn human beings into abstractions, for their failure to recall disconnected factoids. . . Tracking is usually advocated with good intentions; but its only educational justification derives from schools’ persistence in teaching in ways that fail to reach so many children, thus necessitating some students’ removal to less demanding academic pursuits” (Levine et. al., 1995, page 155).

Tracking, which fell from favor in the 1970’s and early 1980’s, enjoyed a reincarnation in the late 1980’s in the form of technical course tracking in comprehensive high schools. It is what Svi Shapiro regards as “the clear consequence of the division of labor and the separation of culture and civilization” (Shapiro, 1990, page 67). “In short,” contends Shapiro,

the purpose of the vocational track or school is not so much technical training as it is the socialization of individuals towards their (inferior) positions in the social division of labor. The status differentiations between vocational and academic tracks are reflected in the low morale and apathetic attitudes so characteristic of

technical or trade schools (Shapiro, 1990, page 67).

The status differentiations are also reflected in low academic expectations and intellectual starvation. While vocational programs purport to give students “hands-on experience” that will help them to “compete for high paying jobs,” the truth is that schools seldom have the funding to provide the technology and hardware that are really being used in the “real world.” With the exception of some high profile model schools and grant-funded initiatives, schools in my administrative experience are as much as 10-15 years behind in vocational facilities and materials. “At best,” laments Thomas Toch,

the majority of vocational courses today train students rather than educate them. They teach them skills, but not the sort of intellectual skills that can be transferred from one subject to another; they don’t attempt to lead students beyond information to understanding. The members of an automotive class are taught how to repair the power steering on a car, but they aren’t taught the principles of hydraulics that make power steering possible; the students in a drafting class are taught how to draw the blueprints of a passive-solar-heated house, but they aren’t taught why such houses are designed with double walls and other unique features (Toch, 1991, page 125).

During my first principalship I had the opportunity to work with a program called “High Schools That Work” that has sites throughout the Southeast. My school had signed on to the initiative prior to my arrival and by the end of my tenure at the school I was invited to serve on teams that went around and evaluated the effectiveness of the programs. The program’s sister initiative, “Middle Schools That Work,” was also gaining in popularity and I had a chance to work some with it as well. The visiting teams operated in much the same way as an accreditation team. The school that was to be observed had to produce in advance a “document” (i.e. book) that contained demographic data, school

improvement plans, curriculum guides, and state and local assessment data. Once the visitation team was on-site, we would, over the course of two days, observe classes, conduct interviews with students, faculty, staff and administration, and then put together a report of “Outstanding Practices, Current Actions and Plans, Challenges and Suggested Action Steps.” Though the intent of the program, to better integrate academic and vocational studies, was a noble one, my experience was that the bottom line remained the same – test scores. The second half of the question of “How can we work together as a whole faculty to improve reading, writing, and math performance *so that test scores improve?*” was assumed but not stated. I believe that the feedback that the teams offered was helpful in that it provided a somewhat objective snapshot of a school’s management, curriculum, and teaching practices. The characteristics of schools that the “High Schools That Work” program emphasized (“high expectations”, “actively engaged students”, “collaborative planning”, “parent involvement”, “support systems”, etc.) were the same ones generally recognized in the larger educational arena as “best practices.” In the end, though, we simply rated a school’s allegiance to a prescribed group of standards as a subset of the state’s annual accountability program. The subjective, the *why* rather than the *how* of instruction, was not addressed and I suspect that the notebooks that the school prepared are still sitting on a shelf somewhere – unopened since our departure.

The “High Schools That Work” program was predicated on the existence of separate vocational and academic “tracks” in secondary schools and justifiable concerns that the two were not equal. Many states now require students to commit as early as the middle school years to one of several tracks for graduation. For example, North Carolina

students have had to select from one of four “courses of study” (tracks) for graduation: “career prep”, “college tech prep”, “college/university prep”, and “occupation”, a track generously offered for students with “certain disabilities.” Courses of study are demarcated by the number and rigor of academic courses required as well as the amount of vocational courses that must be taken. Though students are told that they can “switch” tracks at any time, the practical truth is that this becomes nearly impossible after the sophomore year if a student wants to complete graduation requirements on time without going beyond the normal school day and offerings. “As a result of the poor quality of instruction and the shallowness of content in the bottom tracks of many schools,” Toch argues,

the longer students are enrolled in bottom-track courses, the further they fall behind their peers in the upper tracks, and thus the less likely it is that they will be able to get out of the bottom tracks. They are caught in an educational catch-22: they can’t escape the bottom tracks without a curriculum with more content or without better teaching, but they can’t get the teaching or the content they need *unless* they escape the bottom tracks (Toch, 1991, page 122).

However, the North Carolina system is an example of what Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom rightly consider to be a kind of self-segregation since over 80 percent of today’s schools allows students to choose the level of each course they take as long as necessary prerequisites are met (Thernstrom, A. and S. Thernstrom, 2003, page 184) They also point to a 1998 National Center for Education Statistics Study which showed that “students with comparable academic records and tested skills, regardless of race, take the same level courses” (Thernstrom, A. and S. Thernstrom, 2003, page 183-184). If schools are not tracking students, then why is it common knowledge that minority and/or

lower socio-economic students are underrepresented in upper-level classes?

Jonathan Kozol and others point to a socially conditioned lack of self-esteem among minority and low-income students that is perpetuated by inadequate funding at all levels of education. According to the Education Trust, as cited by Kozol in *The Shame of a Nation*, “the top 25 percent of school districts in terms of child poverty ... receive less funding than the bottom 25 percent,” and further, after adjustments for the extra costs of educating children of low income, “thirty-five out of 48 states spend less on students in school districts with the highest numbers of minority children than on students in the districts with the fewest children of minorities” (Kozol, 2005, page 245). A long-time critic of the segregation of students, Kozol contends that it is low-income children who are disproportionately found in vocational and other programs representing minimal, market-driven expectations. “The problem is not only that low-income children are devalued by these mercantile criteria” he writes in Ordinary Resurrections;

childhood itself is also redefined. It ceases to hold value for its own sake but is valued only as a ‘necessary prologue’ to utilitarian adulthood. The first ten, twelve, or fifteen years of life are excavated of inherent moral worth in order to accommodate a regimen of basic training for the adult years that many of the poorest may not even live to know. There is no reference to investing in the present – in the childhood of children – only in a later incarnation of the child as a ‘product’ or ‘producer’ (Kozol, 2000, page 139).

### **In Search of Accountability**

“Beyond what most of the public sees of the new era of school accountability,” writes Peter Sacks in Standardized Minds, “we find that learning and teaching have been so narrowly constricted as to be reduced entirely to the collective success of schools,



districts, and states on standardized tests, so that officials can trot out comparative test scores showing that all the kids are the statistically impossible 'above average' (Sacks, 1999, p. 118). State and local governments then use these educational statistics to lure businesses and potential homebuilders to an area. "If the goal of education is to ensure your competitive advantage in the marketplace," Michael Lerner points out, "you will educate in the way that we currently educate. The consequences: huge amounts of unhappiness, a population that has few of the skills that would make it possible for them to access the richness of a spiritual life, and a society that thinks being rational means being selfish, materialistic, and cynical" (Lerner, 2000, p. 234).

In addition to state educational accountability laws enacted in the last decade, schools now must also fulfill the edicts of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Act, which President Bush signed in January of 2002. "No Child Left Behind," (NCLB) as the President affectionately calls it, or "No Child Left Untested," as it is sometimes referred to by educators, promises to ensure that all children can meet "challenging standards" in math and reading while narrowing the academic achievement gap between races and classes (Neill, 2003, pg. 225). Unfortunately, according to David Marshak and many others, NCLB represents, rather than a leap forward, a return to past practices that have already been invalidated. Marshak points out that "the public school system we have today was constructed during the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century" and "shaped to fit industrial models of efficient production" (Marshak, 2003, page 229). "One key function for schools," says Marshak, " was sorting children according to their perceived abilities and encouraging many to drop out and go to work as unskilled

laborers. And let's be clear about this function: public schools built on this industrial model were designed to leave *many* children behind, so they would drop out and go to work in what we now call low-skill jobs" (Marshak, 2003, page 229). NCLB not only continues such sorting, but actually adds a *third* layer of sorting on top of state and local pigeon-holing. Marshak sees NCLB as reinforcing the emphasis in these "industrial schools" on competition at the expense of deep relationships, promotion and grading based on age rather than stages of growth and development, and standardized testing as a substitute for meaningful, multifaceted assessment. "(NCLB) sets in stone the already strong but silly notion that standardized test scores are all that matter in schooling. . . . It guarantees pain and suffering for millions of children and teens whose cognitive and learning styles don't readily fit the narrow structures of standardized testing" (Marshak, 2003, page 230). Despite what lawmakers and business leaders want to believe, the only winners in this "testing game" will be those looking for easily manipulated numbers to feed to constituents and market-driven traders in educational, and therefore human, capital. Though supporters of NCLB argue that the *goals* of the law are in harmony with "the other purposes of schooling," Anne Lewis sees a blind spot in their thinking. "They ignore the reality," warns Lewis, "that test-based accountability, as interpreted by educators today, can't help but encourage competition rather than collaboration, can't help but narrow learning experiences for students rather than deepen them, and can't help but foster superficial learning that could ultimately alienate students further from their schools" (Lewis, 2004, page 484).

The affect of state mandated testing, even before NCLB, was being felt by those

on the front lines of education – the teachers. A nationwide study of public school teachers in grades 2-12 conducted in 2001 by the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy indicated that “many teachers believe that tests have a narrowing effect on what they teach” (Pedulla, 2003, page 43). Roughly 75 percent of teachers surveyed agreed with the assertion that “the state-mandated testing program leads some teachers in my school to teach in ways that contradict their own ideas of good educational practice (Pedulla, 2003, page 43). Joseph Pedulla believes this to be a particularly troubling finding because “it indicates that statewide testing programs, especially high-stakes ones, are leading to an outcome that policymakers do not intend – namely, that teachers teach in ways that contradict their own views of good instructional practice” (Pedulla, 2003, page 44).

Ironically, and disturbingly, teachers have less time to plan for this contradictory instruction. Federal and state accountability includes “improvement plans,” “strategic plans,” “curriculum alignment plans,” and other voluminous tomes that entail countless teacher and administrator hours. “These plans,” groans Jonathan Kozol, “create a massive paper-clutter that takes on a kind of parallel reality with only an indistinct connection to the actual experience of teaching. The amount of time that this consumes is all the more frustrating when one realizes that most of this is being done under the business-driven banner of ‘efficient management of time.’ Nothing could be less efficient than this misappropriation of a teacher’s energy and hours” (Kozol, 2005, page 272). To think that the morale of professional, educated, and passionate people trapped in such a sham would not suffer is pure idiocy.

### **“Site-Based Management”**

In the late 1980's, during the Reagan years of state and local, rather than federal, control of schools, some attempt was made to give teachers more of a voice in school governance. The highly touted “site-base decision making” initiative sought to move decision-making closer to the source by giving schools and local school boards more “control” of their own destiny. Lawmakers opined that the local school community knew what was best for their students while remaining at least privately cognizant of the financial rewards of reducing the state and federal educational bureaucracy during a time of tight budgets. Phillip Schlechty regards site-base management as a “good idea gone awry” (Schlechty, 1997, page 114). Schlechty sees site-base teams too often becoming bogged down in “who has the right to make a given decision” rather than focusing on “which decisions are the right ones to make” (Schlechty, 1997, page 115). Schlechty does not see any reason to believe that site-based decision-making groups selected through political processes are more likely to produce the intended results than other politically elected bodies (Schlechty, 1997, page 114). “Indeed,” he warns, “site-based decision making as it is currently being carried out in too many school districts may only aggravate further some of the problems that already exist in America’s schools (Schlechty, 1997, page 116). One of those problems is the disconnect between elementary, middle, and high schools. “Unless it is carefully designed,” Schlechty contends,

site-based decision making will further weaken the ability of systems to coordinate efforts among elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. When each school site is governed by an autonomous group that may be under no

real obligation to take into account the decisions made by other groups, the long-term interests of children are likely to give way to the momentary passions of particular groups of activist parents at a particular time (Schlechty, 1997, page 116).

As accountability programs began to take hold in the 1990's, site-based management, in my experience and that of other principals, quickly faded as raising test scores replaced fall festivals and toilet paper allocation as the primary topic of discussion. Federal and state officials began to reel in control of education that they had once so willingly relinquished. True to the market economy approach to education, "centralized network management" has meant "a steady increase in centralized purchasing and a decline in the number of schools with site-based management" (Hayes, 2005). "Between the '00-'01 and '02-'03 school years," reports Jeanne Hayes, "the number of schools using site-based management dropped 19 percent, according to reports by Quality Education Data" (Hayes, 2005).

### **Principals At-Risk**

As site-based management teams have declined in influence in recent years, so has the influence of site-based administrators. Until the annual test scores come out and a scapegoat is needed, the role of the principal has been marginalized and increasingly accompanied by fear. "Perhaps this culture of educational accountability, created by well-intended policy makers aiming to improve schools, has instead become a culture of fear, driven by unanticipated consequences of the system," write Marla W. McGhee and Sara W. Nelson, after surveying administrators in Texas, a state with the "longest standing" and "most sophisticated" accountability model in the nation. "For example, school

leaders, whose performance was once assessed using a variety of indicators that reflected the complexity of the job, are now finding their effectiveness determined in much narrower terms” (McGhee and Nelson, 2005, page 368). Ironically, and sadly, their study showed that the principals who are the most vulnerable are the very ones who choose to lead the most difficult schools with the most diverse student populations. “Principals who serve as leaders of schools with diverse student populations may be especially vulnerable to removal,” McGhee and Nelson report.

Each of the participants served as the leader of a school with high percentages of students of color, poor students, and English-language learners. Such students have traditionally had lower test scores than their white, middle-class peers. This is not to say that students of color, poor students, and English-language learners are not capable of earning higher test scores. Rather it is to say that school systems have historically failed to ensure that students with the greatest educational needs receive sufficient resources and time to achieve at the same level as their more privileged peers (McGhee and Nelson, 2005, pages 370 – 371).

Terrence Quinn uses the analogy of a prize fighter when describing the current state of the principalship. “Today’s principals are like prizefighters,” he contends. “Every day, the opening bell sounds and they enter the ring, ready to fight for their kids and their school. Often, they must fight with only one hand, handicapped by their increasing day-to-day responsibilities and an ever-expanding job description” (Quinn, 2003, page 17). The “bob and weave” that is required of the fighter/principal takes on special significance when one considers that the next punch could be career ending.

### **The Decline of the Arts**

Another victim of high-stakes testing has been arts programs in the public schools. Since those subjects that are tested occupy an increasing amount of a school day,

there is less time for non-tested pursuits such as art and music. In addition, with school budgets stretched to the breaking point, funds for hiring art and music teachers are often redirected. “As school administrators turn greater attention to the subjects that states are required to test under the federal No Child Left Behind Act,” Tim Grant wrote in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, “mathematics and reading are the main entree, while art and music are the delicious but fattening dessert they can do without” (Grant, 2005). Federal appetite for the arts has also waned as evidenced by the elimination of \$35.6 million dollars from the 2006 proposed federal budget for “activities to encourage the integration of the arts into the school curriculum” (United States Department of Education, Fiscal Year 2006 Budget Summary, February 7, 2005). In March, 2004 the Council for Basic Education published the results of a study funded by the Carnegie Foundation of New York. The Council interviewed public school principals in the states of Maryland, Illinois, New Mexico, and New York and found “ample evidence of waning commitment to the arts, foreign language, and elementary social studies (Council for Basic Education, 2004). “What’s more,” the study claimed, “we found that the greatest erosion of the curriculum is occurring in schools with high minority populations – the very populations whose access to such a curriculum has been historically most limited” (Council for Public Education, 2004).

Sacrificing the arts on the alter of higher test scores in the core subjects is predicated on a fragmented view of education. While the humanities and the sciences form the opposite poles of C.P. Snow’s “two cultures,” Howard Gardner, who first made aptitude in the arts one of his “multiple intelligences,” sees an essential correlation:

As future citizens grow, it is equally important that they gain access to the most remarkable works fashioned by artists. These masterworks convey the ideas and feelings of different times and places, express a range of emotions, and embody a sense of beauty and harmony that enriches the experiences of all who can appreciate them. Indeed, our sense of beauty and taste comes chiefly from those works of art that we (as a culture over the centuries) have made our own. And the vocabularies and concepts created by students of the arts allow students and teachers to make explicit their understandings – and their sometimes idiosyncratic preferences. In this respect, languages of art play a role roughly analogous to that of mathematics in the sciences (Gardner, 2000, page 151).

### **Holistic Education**

The marginalization of the arts in the school curriculum runs counter to the holistic approach to education proposed by many educational theorists. The notion that education should be reduced to memorization of a static, though objectively testable, body of knowledge is far from the kind of learning envisioned by John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and many others. In such a model of education, that which is taught is considered to be “a finished product, with little regard either to the ways in which it was originally built up or to changes that will surely occur in the future” (Dewey, 1938, page 19). “It is to a large extent the cultural product of societies that assumed the future would be very much like the past,” Dewey believed, “and yet it is used as educational food in a society where change is the rule, not the exception” (Dewey, 1938, page 19). Paulo Freire fiercely opposed education that represented students as urns to be filled with lifeless, static content. To him true education developed what he termed a “critical consciousness”:

The argument that the teaching of content, deposited in the learner, will sooner or later bring about a critical perception of reality does not convince me. In the progressive perspective, the process of teaching – where the teaching challenges



learners to apprehend the object, to then learn it in relation with the world – implies the exercise of critical perception, perception of the object’s reason for being (Freire, 1997, page 75).

The value of social institutions, according to Dewey, rests in their ability to train individuals to look beyond themselves and contribute to the advancement of the whole. “Government, business, art, religion, all social institutions have a meaning, a purpose,” Dewey wrote. “That purpose is to set free and to develop the capacities of human individuals without respect to race, sex, class or economic status. And this is all one with saying that the test of their value is the extent to which they educate every individual into the full stature of his possibility” (Ratner, 1939, page 629). In Dewey’s mind, education defines the kind of democracy we are allowed to participate in. “Democracy has many meanings,” Dewey stated, “but if it has a moral meaning, it is found in resolving that the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society” (Ratner, 1939, pages 629-630).

### **Education and the Spirit**

A major obstacle in the path of realizing education’s possibilities in American society is a distrust, even fear, of anything having to do with the “spirit.” Education comes by such fear honestly, being the product of hundreds of years of Western intellectual development that sees The Enlightenment as the liberation of man from the Dark Ages of irrational, spiritual (i.e. carnal), and unproductive thinking. So heated is the current “religion in the schools” debate that leaders will go to any lengths to avoid any connection between education and spiritual, or even moral, growth. This flawed logic

holds that any discussion of “spirit” must be tied to religion if it is taken seriously at all. The problem is exacerbated by the frequent misuse of what Lerner calls the “language of Spirit”. “People have plenty of good reasons for skepticism, given the many ways that the language of Spirit has been used in harmful ways – for example, as a fig leaf to cover a right-wing political agenda or patriarchal, authoritarian, ultranationalist, homophobic, or racist sentiments,” Lerner writes. “Moreover, spiritual language has been used to assault science, to discredit the very enterprise of rational thinking, and to legitimate hurtful treatment of people who are not part of a given spiritual community” (Lerner, 2000, pgs. 20-21). Tragically, shapers of modern education practice have sought neutrality to the point of sterility. Lerner argues that

The alleged neutrality of contemporary education is a sham that covers up the systematic indoctrination of students into the dominant religion of the contemporary world: the slavish subordination of everyone to the idols of the marketplace and its ‘common sense’ that all people should seek to maximize their own advantage without regard to the consequences for others, that all that is real is what can be validated through sense observation, that it’s only human nature for people to compete with each other and seek ‘individual excellence,’ and that schooling should aim to promote economic success, which is available to anyone who has accumulated the requisite skills and who has the requisite intelligence (Lerner, 2000, page 235).

Skeptics assume that discussions of “spirit” and “truth” must be doctrinal when, in fact, both are merely possible paths of perception that lead to an infinite variety of political and religious destinations. They are the life force of learning and, depleted of it, education becomes hollow and pedantic. “There are elements of spirituality that could and should be developed in school,” Lerner suggests in *The Politics of Meaning*. “They would provide a useful counterbalance to the allure of a mechanistic worldview that

promises material abundance as its primary outcome” (Lerner, 1996, page 261).

The vision set forth by Purpel, Palmer, and other educational philosophers in educational literature is anything but hollow and pedantic. It is a vision of education that integrates intellectual, moral, and spiritual development for self-discovery and fulfillment as well as the survival of the very human community that allows and supports such ends. It is not education for strictly utilitarian or political purposes, though we must accept that individuals can choose to use education to such ends.

### **The Role of Play in Education**

In my personal experience the best teaching and learning is quite messy because it involves exploration of many destinations as opposed to running kids like rats through a conceptual maze with only one destination (the one that is on “the test”). Like Palmer, Purpel, and others, I have seen how essential moral and spiritual growth necessarily precedes intellectual advancement. As Palmer remembers, “at its deepest reaches, education gave me an identity as a knower. It answered the question ‘Who am I?’ by saying ‘You are one who knows.’ . . . Education portrays the self as *knower*, the world as *known*, and mediates the *relation* of the two, giving the knowing self supremacy over the known world” (Palmer, 1993, pages. 20-21). It is this mediatory role that so eludes, perplexes, and frustrates those with specific political and competitive agendas. To mediate, or facilitate, learning requires a level of student empowerment that runs contrary to the control instincts of an assembly line society. In nature and in learning, order is preceded by chaos. In the high-stakes testing world there is not enough time for imagination and play – education’s version of chaos. The Newtonian principles of

regularity, precision, order, and predictability still form the prevailing educational paradigm. The notion that play – a kind of intellectual scattering of the building blocks of ideas on the floor followed by experiential construction – is the fulcrum of learning runs counter to a controlled, assembly-line view of education. Yet, advances over the last decade in mapping the human brain and how it “learns,” have resulted in a renewed appreciation of the need for intellectual play in education. They have also further validated the groundbreaking work of the Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotsky and the extensive clinical research of child psychologist D.W. Winnicott in the 1960’s.

“The influence of play on a child’s development is enormous,” wrote L.S. Vygotsky in *Mind in Society*. “In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development” (Vygotsky, 1978, pages 96 & 102). For Vygotsky, play was the grinding wheel on which the lenses through which we view the world are formed. It was the precursor to, and conduit for, all subsequent development of the intellect and social awareness.

Some 30 years later, an ocean away, D.W. Winnicott came to similar conclusions through extensive clinical evaluations. “On the basis of playing,” D.W. Winnicott writes in *Playing and Reality*, “is built the whole of man’s experiential existence. No longer are we either introvert or extrovert. We experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world

that is external to individuals” (Winnicott 1971, p. 64). Much has been written about the instinctual tendency to play particularly, but not exclusively, in mammals. Scientists in various fields have established that play serves many functions in animal development. With the exception of the work of Winnicott, however, the literary coffers are mostly bare with respect to the place of “play” in the human learning process and, especially, the implications for school leadership.

From the definition of “play” in the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Second College Edition) as “to amuse *oneself* (emphasis mine) in amusement, sport, or other recreation” we have the genesis of a particularly human spin on its function. Humans, after all, are the only creatures on Earth who can understand the concept of “oneself” and its implications for personal actualization. It is one of the primary defining aspects of the species. Parents have always instinctively recognized the value of play – if for nothing else than to provide a few cherished moments of peace and quiet. The call “to go outside and play in the fresh air” has always had more to do with adult needs than a concern for the health and development of the child’s respiratory system. “Playtime,” or “recess,” has long been a fixture of the elementary school schedule. Recently published studies have bemoaned the tendency of American youth toward obesity and tagged a lack of regular, sustained physical activity as the culprit. American schools have responded, as they always do, with mandates and directives to return recess to its proper place of importance.

The play of which I speak, however, has less to do with physical than intellectual vitality, though I believe that the two are inexorably intertwined. It is the mental monkey

bars that should concern educators. Mental inertia has tended to take hold much sooner than physical inertia, and it will take far more than bats and balls and seasons in the sun to reverse the damage.

For Winnicott's purposes and mine, "play" can be defined as "joyful interaction with ideas and their implications." There are several key components to this definition. Activity that entails physical exertion but is not joyful is not what I consider to be play – it is called "golf." True play, according to Winnicott, is "inherently exciting and precarious" and belongs to "the interplay . . . of that which is subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (Winnicott, 1971, page 52). "Interaction" refers to the reciprocal aspect of intellectual and/or physical activity with a real or imagined object. It is the foundation of Newton's third law of motion and the notion that "you cannot touch without being touched." If Winnicott is right and play is crucial for finding one's place – emotionally, intellectually, and physically – then any mariner can tell you that location is unattainable without a fixed point of reference. In an intellectual context, those fixed points of reference are ideas and their implications in both their physical and abstract forms.

Winnicott sees play as the only bridge to true creativity. "In playing, and perhaps only in playing," he writes, "the child or adult is free to be creative" (Winnicott, 1971, page 53). This has powerful implications for an educational system that purports to put a high value on "creative thinking." According to Jane Healy,

Some observers, concerned about declines in creative thinking, as well as imagination, have advocated teaching methods and classroom experiences to stimulate the right hemisphere. Although some of these so-called 'right brain

activities' are fun, their specific neurological merit is viewed by scientists with considerable skepticism. Moreover, it is increasingly clear that genuine creative imagination springs from much deeper developmental roots – which can easily get short-changed both in homes and in schools (Healy, 1990, page 316).

How is creative imagination “short-changed in the home? According to Healy, it occurs when parents do not actively participate in their child’s play. Drawing on the work of Dr. Reuven Feuerstein, Healy writes:

In the absence of this sort of experience, which he terms ‘mediated learning,’ Feuerstein believes children do not develop adequate thinking skills. As an example of nonmediated learning, he describes a parent putting toys around a room and expecting a child to play. In mediated learning, the parent would place a building toy in front of a child and then sit down and demonstrate several ways to use it, talking about each alternative and allowing the child to experiment while still feeling the support of the adult (Healy, 1990, page 314).

Adults in general, and parents in particular, have much to do with a child’s degree of inclination to play with ideas. “If they see about them adults who ask questions, read, write, pose and solve problems, work together, and struggle with important learning,” contends Roland S. Barth, “*they* want to ask questions, read, write, pose and solve problems, and engage in and struggle with important learning (Barth, 2001, page 24).

### **Restoring Play in the Classroom**

In December, 2005, the Alliance for Children, a partnership comprised of educators, health care professionals, researchers, and childhood advocates released a national “call to action” that included among its proposals the reinstatement of play in the classroom. “Creative play that children can control is central to their physical, emotional, and cognitive growth,” the group contended. “It contributes greatly to their language

development, social skills, and problem-solving capacities, and lays an essential foundation for later academic learning. Yet many children do not have the opportunity to develop their capacity for socio-dramatic play” (Alliance for Children, 2005).

How is playful, creative thinking being “short-changed” in the classroom? According to Alfie Kohn, the answer can be found in an overemphasis on standardized testing. Kohn writes:

Even in classes less noticeably ravaged by the imperatives of test preparation, there are hidden costs – opportunities missed, intellectual roads not taken. For one thing, teachers are less likely to work in teams. For another, within each classroom ‘the most engaging questions kids bring up spontaneously – ‘teachable moments’ – become annoyances. Excitement about learning pulls in one direction; covering the material that will be on the test pulls in the other. Thoughtful discussions about current events are especially likely to be discarded because what’s in today’s paper won’t be on the exam. Furthermore, it is far more difficult for teachers to attend to children’s social and moral development – holding class meetings, building a sense of community, allowing time for creative play, developing conflict-resolution skills, and so on – when the only thing that matters is scores of tests that, of course, measure none of these things (Kohn, 2000, page 30).

Unfortunately, because it makes the problem harder to solve, the obstacle to deep learning is not just a reactionary response to “accountability” programs such as “No Child Left Behind,” but rather a fundamental ignorance of, at best, or disregard for, at worst, what has been known for a very long time about the way children learn.

In their summary essay “A Perspective on Cognitive Research and Its Implications for Instruction” for the 1989 yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, John D. Bransford and Nancy J. Vye waded through a plethora of recognized studies of human cognition. A common theme in the research was



the notion that learning involves the manipulation of objects and ideas, often enhanced by cooperative interaction with classmates and adults. “We noted that typical approaches to instruction often result in inert knowledge,” Bransford and Vye report. “Our arguments focused on the need to take seriously the goal of helping students transform declarative, factual knowledge into procedural, conditionalized knowledge. . . . this is best accomplished by focusing on ‘learning by doing’” (ASCD Yearbook, 1989, page 199). For evidence that play is a prime example of “learning by doing,” one need look no farther than a toddler playing with blocks. It is sadly ironic that Bransford and Vye were writing on the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Alfred North Whitehead’s passionate cries in the wilderness against the evil of “inert knowledge.” Never one for subtlety, Whitehead blasted education of the time as being “overladen with inert ideas” (Whitehead, 1929, page 1) He went on to add that “education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is, above all things, harmful” (Whitehead, 1929, pages 1-2). What we knew in 1929 and in 1989, and what we are even more certain of in 2006, after ten years of staggering advances in our knowledge of how the human brain operates, is that humans in general, and children in particular, are “wired” for physical and intellectual play that opens up the realms of man’s “experiential existence.” We are all, poets and scientists, at our very core, explorers. “We re-make nature by the act of discovery, in the poem or in the theorem,” writes Jacob Bronowski. “And the great poem and the deep theorem are new to every reader, and yet are his own experiences, because he himself re-creates them. They are the marks of unity in variety; and in the instant when the mind seizes this for the first time, in art or in science, the heart misses a beat” (Bronowski, 1956, pg. 20).

## **Leaving Children Behind**

School drop-out figures in America do the best job of chronicling the absence of the experiences Bronowski describes as students progress through the elementary and middle grades. The job of educational alienation is usually complete by the sophomore year of high school and students exit American education by the bus loads.

Particularly instructive is a walk down the halls of a K-12 school. Lower elementary classrooms are colorful, open, and filled with manipulatives. The clear message to all who enter is that learning is fun and nonjudgmental. Typically, neat rows of desks have been spelled by tables for cooperative learning or no student furniture at all. Lower elementary classrooms are loud and sometimes chaotic with swarms of students hungrily feeding on information and ideas in all of their forms. Often the classrooms are empty as learning is taken to the source via activities such as nature walks and field trips. As one moves down the halls, and up the grades, color, openness, excitement, constructive noise and other indicators of excited learning fade away in regular increments. Upper middle and high school classes feature neat rows of uncomfortable desks, very little color, very little excitement, and the requisite site manager (teacher), also known as a “sage on a stage”, who dispenses knowledge from behind a wooden shield (podium). The toys have been put away, intellectual playtime is over, and education is about the serious business of number two pencils, packaged curriculums, and school report cards. I hasten to say that there are still enlightened and passionate middle and high school teachers and administrators who, despite overwhelming odds and at the risk of losing their jobs, struggle daily to turn their

students on to the joy of learning. Sadly, very sadly, however, by the time the children reach them a deep pessimism about school has taken hold.

With respect to *play*, it is almost redundant to speak of it, in connection with the expression of feelings and fantasies, since playfulness is inherent in these. It is important to speak of it, however, because our educational practices have unfortunately developed intrinsic postures of dourness with respect to what really matters to children – what excites, bemuses, and impassions them. That is why school is typically so boring. What is worse, however, is that children have come to *expect* it to be so. Thus, the teacher cannot assume that her pupils will immediately respond to her honest and stimulating lessons, even if she is herself confident she can provide conditions which would make them safe, enjoyable, and useful (Jones, 1968, page 245).

Having been an administrator in schools public and private from kindergarten through the twelfth grade, I come at this problem from a unique perspective. As with most complex societal dilemmas, the causes and the cures are not as simple as we would like. I am a soldier myself in the battle against intrusive and suffocating, high stakes testing or any other effort, public or private, that in any way stifles creativity in students or teachers. The truth is, however, that our schools' ability to turnoff students was well developed long before the accountability movement. Classrooms, particularly in the middle and upper grades, have long specialized in a one-dimensional, knowledge transfer, delivery-based form of instruction that was offered on a "take it or leave it" basis. Play has always been somewhat broadly frowned upon since America's early days when "productivity" shielded the mind from demonic attack ("idle hands are the devil's workshop"). Play and creativity also tend, in the common view, to distract from the indoctrination necessary to "ensure the domination of a Protestant Anglo-American

culture in the United States,” (Spring, 2005, page 3) or what Joel Spring calls “ideological management:”

What people know, what they believe in, and how they interpret the world have an important effect on their choices and, consequently, their actions. . . . Therefore, the history of education is nestled in this broader concept of the formation of culture and the dissemination of ideas. In other words, the history of education can be considered as part of the study of the political and economic forces shaping both the process and the content of ideas disseminated to the public, and the construction of culture (Spring, 1997, page 406).

Sputnik and other late 20<sup>th</sup> century historical events only served to further entrench the idea that students were not intellectual explorers but a kind of public commodity to be ideologically managed. By the eighth grade, or even earlier, intellectual raw material is sorted onto different “tracks,” as in a railroad yard, and sent to be finished in the factories that produce “useful citizens” – a term I despise. The intrinsic worth of children is sacrificed, and far too early children are yanked from their childhood, their intellectual sandboxes, to begin their processing.

Jonathan Kozol said it best:

(Children) are not ‘preparatory people.’ They are complete and good in what they are already; and their small but mystical and interesting beings ought to count for something in our estimation without any calculation as to how they may, or may not, serve the economic interests of somebody else when they are 25 or 30. (A child) is not simply 37 pounds of raw material that wants a certain ‘processing’ before she can be shipped to market and considered to have value. She is of value now, and if she dies of a disease or accident when she is twelve years old, the sixth year of her life will not as a result be robbed of meaning. But *we* can rob it of its meaning now if we deny her the essential dignity of being seen and celebrated for the person that she actually is (Kozol, 2000, pages. 139-140).

### **The Debate Continues**

In these and other areas, educational literature continues the pendulum swing between competing and extreme paradigms of education. As education has mixed more thoroughly with political and economic concerns, the debate has become more public and localized with educational bond initiatives being hotly contested across the nation. In educational literature, especially in recent years, the polarization between liberal and conservative ideologies is readily apparent. The range of educational literature examined in this Act confirms that there is fundamental disagreement among educational theorists and practitioners concerning basic assumptions about the nature and uses of public education. The voices cited here also cry out for a more comprehensive view of learning that embraces cultural, spiritual, and moral considerations that have largely been excluded from the conversation. Conversations recorded on paper, like a Shakespearean play, become more three-dimensional when reanimated with their auditory and visual components restored. In Act Three I will humbly attempt to dramatize some of these voices in a one-act play that, if not destined for the stage, will hopefully be performed in the thoughts of those who are passionate about saving and transforming education.

### ACT THREE

“We come to know a scene by virtue of what the writer has made,” Elliot Eisner writes in The Enlightened Eye. “Thus, the writer starts with qualities and ends with words. The reader starts with words and ends with qualities” (Eisner, 1991, page 22). Such is my reasoning from departing from the usual dissertation form and including this original, one-act play as a means of bringing qualities to life. I do this at the urging of the chairman of my dissertation committee, Dr. Svi Shapiro, but I must quickly confess that I did not put up much resistance. Like many former English teachers and admirers of Shakespeare, I have a bit of closet thespian in my soul though I am now more suited, by age, temperament, and girth, to play Falstaff than Hamlet or Henry V.

The drama is uniquely positioned for exploration of the human condition. In this one-act play, as in Shakespeare’s Henry V, the playwright calls for a “muse” which, since the earliest days of human theater, has been a guiding spirit and source of inspiration. What we see as humans has always had a profound impact on what we think and believe. In Ways of Seeing John Berger writes that “seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (Berger, 1972, page 7). Further, Berger points out,

. . . there is another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled (Berger, 1972, page 7).

Powerful theater is summoned from the soul, not lifted from a page. It is, as Kama Ginkas, the acclaimed Russian Theater director described, “provoked” rather than manufactured. So compelling and dynamic are the ideas represented on stage that they must escape the confines of the written word or unspoken thought. If they did not break forth on the stage, the aching loneliness of Lear, the defiance of Oedipus, and the self-indulgent hubris of Ranevskaya would, and do, animate themselves in social and political reality. These are ideas and feelings that cannot be ignored and are best grappled with up close – the safe distance of the printed page left behind.

The theater has always been a kind of grand laboratory in which we formulate and test human equations. Characters serve as physical representations of ideas, prejudices, and raw emotion that can be intentionally mixed together and studied in a way that is not otherwise possible. In the best drama writers, actors, and audience conspire to create something that is very much alive, and unique. Though the ideas may be familiar, when we leave the theater, we know and understand them in a different and hopefully deeper way.

The kind of unsettling relationship between what we see and what we know that Berger speaks of is nowhere more apparent than in educational leadership. The ideas and emotions presented in this play have been analyzed and explored through many mediums over many years of educational research and scholarship. However, the kind of educational paradigm shift that Purpel, Palmer, Shapiro and others envision must be provoked – not merely formulated as intellectual exercise and relegated to the cloth prison of a book. Only when we *see*, only when we *hear* the voices of educational leaders

whose very personal and professional tapestry is being ripped can we really begin to understand and confront.

Maxine Greene and others have argued convincingly that art is a legitimate medium for achieving a different and deeper level of knowing. In fact one of the most tragic by-products of the marginalization of arts in our schools is that it deprives students of an exciting and enlightening way of knowing. Just as Shakespeare's plays were intended to be acted rather than read as text, the differing viewpoints in this dissertation are more compelling when presented in the type of drama that plays out in the lives of educational leaders. While traditional scholarly writing has its legitimate place, it was in my case an inadequate vehicle for reaching the "different and deeper level of knowing" that Greene describes. Even prose, poetry, and other expressive mediums seemed too constricting for the spectres that the characters in this play are battling. If we are committed to alternate ways of knowing in the classroom, it seems reasonable that we should be open to them in our own scholarly writing. The written word, though powerful in its own right, is transformed by dramatic pathos and the ethereal bow of the playwright.

In this play, admittedly, the arguments and angst that these characters represent take precedent over stagecraft. My goal is not to entertain but rather to animate some of the voices that haunt the modern principalship. Even if the play never actually reaches the stage, but is instead acted out in the minds of educational leaders with the result of provoking change or even renewed confidence in the path education is presently on, then my purpose will have been served.



**The Fires of Agincourt**  
*(A play in one act)*

[Dramatis Personae

CHORUS

HARRY        *a mid-fifties, balding, heavysset man. He wears a white shirt that looks as though he slept in it, open at the collar, and a loosened tie. Half-glass bifocals rest on his nose and he presents a rather tired demeanor despite his cheerful, merry eyes.*

LEWIS        *in many ways the antithesis of Harry. Lewis, though around the same age, is tall, slender and quite handsome. He wears an expensive suit with monogrammed shirt and shiny black dress shoes. His hair is full and expertly styled. His complexion is dark and his every movement is practiced and exact.*

THOMAS      *mid-fifties, tall, thin, African-American man with graying, stubby beard and short, graying afro. His face is somewhat weathered, with large, sad eyes countering an irrepressible toothy grin. He is dressed in a dark turtleneck shirt, gray sports jacket, and matching slacks.*

CHARLES      *also mid-fifties, average size and build, with thick wire-rim glasses. He sports a dark, bushy beard and eyebrows with brown curly hair. He is dressed in a white shirt and tie loosened at the collar. He wears khaki slacks and sandals.*

KATHARINE *Harry's wife. She is short and heavysset with curly, sand colored hair and glasses. She is wearing a plain blouse and skirt with an apron tied around her waist.*

SCENE: *It is 4:30 in the afternoon in the living room of a middle-class rural ranch-style house. Stage left is an unlit fireplace topped by a mantle with various family pictures and a large framed print of Carl Spitzweg's "The Bookworm" hanging from the wall. Between the mantle and the back wall is a side door through which Alice enters and exits carrying food and drinks. The back wall features two outside windows through which can be seen a rural setting in late spring. Between the windows is a table with a tray, glass decanter, a couple of wine bottles, and wine glasses spread across the top. Above the table, centered on the wall, is a homemade banner that reads: "Fab Four Reunion" in large green letters. Against the wall stage right is a large bookcase that is stuffed to capacity with books. Another exit door is between the bookcase and the back wall. Stage center is a large, overstuffed couch that is flanked on each side by plain, wingback chairs. A small coffee table is in front of the couch. As the play begins the stage is dark with Lewis on the stage right end of the couch, Thomas to his right in a chair, and Charles at the other end of the couch sitting in a chair. These characters are totally blacked out. A spotlight is on Harry, who is standing stage front and center with his back to the*

*audience. Each character is holding a wine glass. The characters are all absolutely still until the Chorus finishes speaking and the stage lights are brought up.*

CHORUS

*(off-stage)*

Oh for a muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention! Consider here Henry the Fifth, the child-king, and the hellish hounds of duty and conscience that hunt his soul. On the eve of the bloody Battle of Agincourt, King Henry seeks the comfort of comrades as he weighs the responsibilities of the crown against the validity of the cause for which he fights. Cloaked in darkness and apprehension, he searches the night for answers to questions that puzzle the will: When does doubt become hypocrisy? Does the end truly justify the means? At what cost does one bear the hollow crown of leadership? Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts; into many parts divide one man, and kindly admit these players to your thoughts, who prologue-like, your humble patience pray, gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play!

*(stage lights up)*

HARRY

*Raising his glass*

Gentlemen, a toast, to the “Fab Four”, a merry band of soldiers, fresh from the education wars, and together again at last!

*They all drink and Harry then walks over to the couch and sits on the vacant end.*

LEWIS

I wouldn't be here if I didn't have that On-Star thing in my car. I thought I would never find this place!

CHARLES

Yeah, I passed a tree with "White Man Go Home" carved in the side of it!!!

HARRY

Well, I'm glad you all could make it. I've been wanting us to get together for a long time.

What has it been - nine years since we graduated from the MSA program?

*Katharine enters stage left and stands behind the couch, facing the audience*

KATHARINE

I'm glad to see that you've all made yourselves comfortable. Well, there's wine and brandy on the table and I'll have some fresh hors d'oeuvres in a little while.

THOMAS

That was a feast fit for kings Katharine! I see how you snagged Harry! He always loved a good meal, though he was always too cheap to pay for it! Come sit down and join us.

KATHARINE

*Smiling*

Oh no! You all are just going to talk shop and I hear enough about schools from Harry!

CHARLES

We need a referee.

KATHARINE

Nope, too dangerous for me! I remember your little “debates”. If you start throwing things at each other you can clean up the mess yourselves!

THOMAS

You still teaching French, Katharine?

KATHARINE

Oh no. I work for a bank now.

THOMAS

You finally decided to make some money, huh?!

KATHARINE

*Smiling*

Yeah, right! *(sighs)* I do miss the kids and the subject, but I just couldn’t deal with the packed classes and students who didn’t care. You know how it is with those elective classes like French. It’s not one of the “tested” classes so it becomes a dumping ground for students who expect an easy credit. Well, I’ll be in and out. Let me know if you need anything! *(exits stage left. Until her next spoken part, Katharine comes in and out several times to straighten the table, refill the decanter, and bring a small flower vase. Though she doesn’t stop, it is apparent that she is listening as she turns her ear toward the conversation)*

LEWIS

So, how you been, “captain of this ruined band”?

HARRY

*(Sitting back on the couch)*

*Melodramatically*

I have of late, but wherefore I know not, lost all my mirth.

LEWIS

Macbeth?

HARRY

Zounds, man, the political wars have dulled your sword! Hamlet!

LEWIS

I never could compete with you. Remember when we used to stand in the hall between classes and try to stump each other? Other guys talk about sports or girls and we're yapping about Shakespeare! Two English teachers with no life!!

HARRY

I don't know. You had some pretty good stories. You certainly had more fun than I did!

LEWIS

That's because you always had your nose stuck in some philosophy book. Never could figure out how you even moved in that apartment with all those books and papers stacked everywhere.

HARRY

Better companions a man could not find.

LEWIS

*Chuckling*

I found a few! Married three of them! But I've learned my lesson. Being single suits me just fine.

HARRY

Never figured you as a guy who settles down anyway.

LEWIS

Nah, it's hard to keep this dog on the porch!

THOMAS

That's a pretty nice porch you're on now! Big city superintendent, nice car, nice clothes. You've done well for yourself Lewis.

LEWIS

Just spoils of war, Tommy. I'm still the same guy.

CHARLES

*Jokingly*

I'm sorry to hear that!

*(Everyone chuckles)*

THOMAS

Yeah, Lewis, you're a real newsmaker. Every time I open the newspaper I see your name! You've hit the big time!

LEWIS

Big time headaches! But it is nice to be the boss and not have to deal with all that crap you put up with as a principal. *(Laughs)* Things go wrong, you blame them! Like I always told you guys, play the game and then go play golf. It's not worth killin' yourself over. You play the game. Get to a position where someone else deals with the petty stuff.

HARRY

But what about your school board? They have to be tough to live with. They get more newspaper and television time than the president. Parents yellin' at board members and being thrown out of the meetings by police. They've had some pretty nasty things to say about you as I recall.

LEWIS

Yeah, dealing with that board is like dealin' with children. And those parents just hate me because my skin is a different color. No offense Thomas.

THOMAS

None taken.

HARRY

I read that they spent thousands of dollars to hire a firm just to come in and teach board members how to get along!



LEWIS

*Smiling*

Yep, that's true! I can wait for those sessions to start. I ought to take you all with me. Charlie would love all that touchy-feely stuff – sittin' around, holdin' hands, and singin' "Kum Ba Yah". But it's no big deal to me. I just come to the board meetings every month, give my report, and then sit back and let them eat each other. Look, as long as the test scores are good, they can't touch me. It's all in knowing whose butt to kiss. Humor them. Pull a Ross Perot on 'em and show 'em a bunch of slick graphs and charts. Play the game boys. Play the game.

THOMAS

Don't you care about what's happening in the classroom? In the schools?

LEWIS

*Slightly offended*

Sure I do! Hey look, I go around to all the schools at least once a year. I press the flesh, kiss the babies, and all that stuff. It's a big system. But nobody can say that our kids aren't doing well. We got back to the basics and I cut out a bunch of stuff that was unnecessary. That's why our test scores went up.

HARRY

Like the arts? History and science? After school programs?

LEWIS

Look, don't give me grief because the budget was cut. That's not my fault. Besides, what good is being the next Beethoven or Einstein if you can't read, write and do math.

LEWIS

*Rises from the couch and begins walking around the room. As he speaks, he looks at pictures on the mantle, other things in the room, and out the windows*

What about you Harry? What happened? How did you end up (*hesitates, spreads his arms*) here in Hooterville? Last I heard you were principal at Rogers High.

HARRY

You've been keeping track of me! I'm honored Lewis.

LEWIS

A good executive always keeps track of potential free agents!

HARRY

I was at Rogers for seven years. But I resigned at the end of last year.

LEWIS

What happened? Did your test scores hit the dumper?

HARRY

*Smiling*

No, quite the contrary. Scores went up. We were a “School of Distinction” when I left. A lot of good people at that school. Kids were great. I really miss them.

CHARLES

Then why in the world did you leave?

HARRY

I got tired Charlie. All the meetings, ball games, concerts, paperwork – no time for Katharine and the kids. I missed a lot during those years. Education has changed so much since those days when all of us would meet after school and go to graduate classes together. The “Fab Four”! Masters of School Administration! Out to change the course of education! Inseparable until the graduation ceremony - when Charlie didn’t show up.

CHARLES

I was a conscientious objector!

LEWIS

*(Laughs)* You were drunk! *(Looks around at the others)* Remember that little diner we always stopped at on the way home? We had some great arguments there!

CHARLES

It's a wonder we didn't get thrown out!

LEWIS

*Chuckling*

Yeah, you with that ideological, philosophical crap; Tommy, the grim reaper of accountability; Charlie, our "free love, free education" hippie; and me – the lone voice for reason and common sense!

THOMAS

Oh no! Hide the wife and kids! Lewis said a dirty word! ACCOUNTABILITY!!! Does your mamma know you talk like that? She oughta' wash your mouth out with soap!

LEWIS

You know Tommy, I never understood why you went into education. But you've got it made now – Director of Accountability! You get to bake up those pie charts and crunch numbers all day long! You should have been an accountant. They like those nice neat columns.

THOMAS

They like results. Verifiable, tangible, data. The kind of stuff that makes you boys downtown look good! Keeps you ridin' in that fancy car!

LEWIS

Common sense keeps me in that car. Keeping the balance between the robots and the flower children.

CHARLES

*Leaning forward*

I guess that's where I come in, huh Lewis?

LEWIS

*Smiling*

Ah, no offense Charlie. People like you are the reason they started making the Volkswagen bug again. Just fill the kids with Mozart and Monet and they'll turn out just fine! You must be in heaven now that you're a professor and you can teach that stuff.

*(Lewis refills his glass and returns to his place on the couch)*

CHARLES

Give them a balanced education and they'll turn out fine. Yeah, I enjoy showing our student teachers that there really is more to learning than rote memorization and number two pencils. The arts do have a place; it's not fluff, despite what the test mongers say.

THOMAS

You know, I just can't figure out why you people are so afraid of accountability. What's wrong with a standard curriculum and measuring student performance to make sure that the kids are getting what we're teaching them. I taught for 12 years and I never minded my kids being tested.

CHARLES

You taught math. The kids had to pass your class. What about subjects like social studies, science, physical education and yes, art and music, that aren't tested? What happens to them? I'll tell you what happens to them. They get pushed aside to make more time to drill the kids on the subjects that are tested.

THOMAS

That's a load of crap and you know it. The schools haven't eliminated social studies, science, and the arts. They're still taught. Why is it so bad to concentrate on reading, writing, and math? Those are the key skills that everything else hinges on!

LEWIS

Tommy's right. The basics come first, then everything else.

HARRY

I didn't realize that you couldn't have both.

LEWIS

That's because you have your nose in too many philosophy books. Basics Harry. Take care of those and the rest don't matter. Being an administrator is like running a business. Now I know that bleeding hearts like you and Charlie don't see that, but it's true. Do you think the businesses in my city care about whether kids can "construct knowledge"? They better be able to construct houses and run computers and machines and crunch numbers. The bottom line is what matters. What comes out at the end of the line. Stamp'm and send'm on.

CHARLES

A human assembly line.

LEWIS

Oh no, you're not going to get me to say that! I'm talkin' about producing people who can contribute to the economy – be successful, and not stand in the welfare line or sit in a jail cell on my tax dollars.

HARRY

Don't you really mean producing people who can pass a test?

LEWIS

What's wrong with that? Why is "testing" such a dirty word? How do you have any kind of accountability without a standard curriculum and standardized testing? If we did things your way there wouldn't be any rules. Every teacher would decide individually what would be taught. Or worse yet, the kids would decide! "Now Johnny, would you like to put down your paint brushes and play with some algebraic equations?" Give me a break. You might as well hand them the keys to the school. Kids have had too many choices. A lot of that junk we read in grad school sounds real good until you hit the real world. Listen Harry, the standard course of study is proven. The system works. It's been validated over and over again. Schools have to have a purpose and a structure.

CHARLES

Why? What's wrong with just learning for the sake of learning? Why does learning have to be validated by society? Why treat kids like they're raw material that has to be



processed in order to be consumed by society? They are valuable just as they are. And what about their moral and spiritual development? Doesn't that count for something? How do we quantify that on a standardized test?

LEWIS

You want moral development, go read a book on ethics. If you want spiritual development, go see a priest. That's not what schools are for.

HARRY

What are schools for?

LEWIS

To make productive, thinking citizens.

HARRY

Why do they have to be "productive"? And how do you "make" a human being?

LEWIS

You got a point there. Heck there are plenty of park benches for them to lay on and read Plato.

CHARLES

You're missing his point Lewis. Why is learning only worthwhile if it "produces" something? Why am I only valuable as a person if I contribute to the gross national product?

LEWIS

Because if you don't contribute then you are a burden – somebody else has to pull your weight.

HARRY

What if you contribute ideas and insight? What if you contribute to making the human condition better?

LEWIS

And what if you don't? What if you're like the majority of working joes who just want a way to make ends meet. Pay the bills. You just need the skills to hold down a job and feed your family.

THOMAS

Yeah, but my problem is that the majority of those lower and middle class "working joes", as you call them, are minorities. We know what happens in this country if equal access to a good education is left to those in power. The rich white kids – no offense

Lewis - get the quality education while the minorities get the scraps and end up pumping out their septic tanks and emptying their trash! That's why you have to have accountability. Do you remember what happens without a set curriculum and testing? A nation at risk. That's what happens.

HARRY

And that quality learning and teaching can only be accomplished by a monochrome curriculum and high stakes testing?

THOMAS

*Rising from his seat and walking stage right*

I don't know Harry, but I do know that this country has not reached a point where it can be left to good intentions. Even with the accountability movement there are huge disparities in the amount of funding for students in poor, urban schools – black and white. That's with testing and other accountability measures that you and Charlie rail against. Where would we be without it?

CHARLES

I'm more concerned about where we are with it. Lewis talks about his "thinking citizens." There's a difference between thinking and regurgitation. Do you honestly think that the colorless, skill and drill teaching that we are doing now – devoid of the arts, devoid of any means for building a child's moral and spiritual foundation – is going to

produce thinking citizens? No, I tell you what it is going to produce – selfish, materialistic, narrow-minded citizens who don't have any desire or ability to pursue the kind of intellectual, enlightened life that improves the human condition.

THOMAS

Hah! Do you think that a barrio or ghetto kid gives a crap about an “intellectual life”? Morality and spirituality are fine pursuits if your belly is full.

*(Katharine enters stage left with a tray and makes room for it on the table on the back wall. She then turns to face the audience)*

Here are some fresh hors d'oeuvres. You all help yourselves.

*(As the characters get up and move toward the back table, Lewis stops Harry)*

I need a smoke. Come on and keep me company.

*(As Harry and Lewis walk to the front of the stage, the lights dim at the back of the stage. The other characters can only be seen in shadow – eating, drinking and talking. Katharine sees that Harry and Lewis have separated from the group. Though she remains in shadow, she walks toward the middle of*

*the stage and stops. She is obviously overhearing  
the conversation)*

LEWIS

You know, Harry, that university ruined you. Filled your head with a bunch of liberal garbage about “stakeholders” and a “moral and spiritual crisis in education.”

HARRY

I seem to remember you were pretty good at shoveling that so-called “garbage” in those seminar classes.

LEWIS

I gave them what they wanted. That’s something you never understood. You play the game Harry – get the piece of paper and then do things the way you want to. End up making twice as much money as they do. You were always too hung up on philosophy. I learned early on that you can’t change the system. You just do what you have to do to get to the next level.

HARRY

The central office.

LEWIS

Absolutely. Listen, I pulled my three years in the principal's chair and when the first chance came to go downtown, I jumped on it. That's what you should have done – before you got “tired.” You can't tell me that in seven years you didn't have a chance for an assistant superintendent position.

HARRY

Yeah, there were openings, and I thought about it. But I didn't want to leave the kids, and I liked working with teachers. At least at first.

LEWIS

Come on Harry. You're no quitter. Level with me, why did you really leave? And don't give me that crap about you being tired. We may not have seen each other in a while, but I know you better than that. You were so full of energy back in the old days that you would get on everybody's nerves – talking our ears off about Sergiovanni, Freire, Palmer and all those other people you were reading all the time. I've never seen anybody more excited about getting to that principal's chair than you were. Remember all those plans you had for building your “learning communities”? No, you didn't get tired. It had to be something else.

HARRY

*Walking away from Lewis to the corner of the stage  
and looking out with a distant stare*

You know me too well, Lewis. *(Pauses)* You know, when I was a kid I spent a lot of time with my grandfather. We used to spend hours in the backyard throwing a baseball back and forth and talking. You know what we talked about?

LEWIS

*Sarcastically*

Philosophy?

HARRY

*Ignoring Lewis' sarcasm*

Robinson Crusoe , and baseball, and whatever else I wanted to talk about while we played catch in his back yard for hours. You know, he started reading to me before I could hardly walk. We would talk about everything. The man loved books. He didn't even make it past the eighth grade, but he was so smart. He was my first and best teacher. If anyone "ruined" me, it was him. He showed me that learning new things could be fun. He loved to study the Civil War. I remember him describing a great battle like he was there – the cool air, the canon smoke, the crackling of fire arms. And there I was – this little boy, sitting at his feet, only half understanding but amazed. He taught me a lot about

being honest with people – being true to your word. “Do the right thing,” he would always tell me, “Keep your glove up.”

LEWIS

He passed away just before we finished grad school, didn't he? I remember. You were pretty shook up.

HARRY

Yeah. I have always felt kind of empty since he died. Whatever in me is good and noble, I think a lot of it came from him. I was lucky Lewis. My grandparents and my mother and father were “old school.” You always did right by people even if they didn't do right by you.

LEWIS

Well, I was always taught that you take care of yourself first. Maybe that came from having a single mom and moving all the time. I don't know. But it has served me well.

HARRY

*Turning toward Lewis*

It would seem so. I do miss being your foil Lewis.



LEWIS

Yeah, I miss the intelligent conversation. Don't get much of that as a superintendent. You know, for the last few minutes it was like we were all back at that diner! The pragmatists and the philosophers. Battlin' it out for the souls of America's youth!

*(Harry walks back to Lewis)*

LEWIS

I have to admit something, Harry. I didn't come here tonight just to see the old gang. I had a selfish reason. I came here to make you an offer – help you escape from Hooterville. *(walking to the other corner of the stage)*. I have this school in my district that is in a real mess. Lot of minorities, discipline problems, and the worst test scores in the free world. Every school in the district is scoring pretty well except this one. Can't keep a principal in there. The last one totally alienated the public. Burnt a lot of bridges. I need someone to go in there for a couple of years – rally the troops, establish some order, kick some butt, and get those scores up like you did at Rogers. This school is even smaller than that, so I know you can do it.

HARRY

You mean you would actually entrust one of your schools to a philosopher?

LEWIS

Sure, people like you. You're real good at talkin' and getting people to believe you. I know from experience! I mainly need you to go in and make a big p.r. splash. We'll come up with some catchy slogans – "Excellence is in the air!" or "Excellence is back!" or something like that. We'll have some banners and brochures printed. My assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction is retiring in a couple of years. When the old bat leaves, I promise I'll move you right into that spot. It will be great. You can play with the curriculum all you want. Until then you can go into that school and lay a Joe Clark on'm, and you don't have to worry about what anyone thinks because you'll only be there for a short time. With our supplement, you'll make a lot more money than you ever did in your last principalship. (*Walks back to Harry and places his hand on Harry's shoulder and smiles*). It's time to get your command back Harry, before you disappear into one of those shelves of books back there. Ordinary. Forgotten.

HARRY

*Walking back to the corner of the stage*

You know, when you asked me why I left Rogers, I lied. It wasn't really because of being tired.

LEWIS

I know.

## HARRY

No, I don't think you do. I came to realize that I was leading people in a cause I no longer believed in – if I ever did at all. I realized that I was a hypocrite. The very thing my grandfather taught me not to be. Oh, I did play the game Lewis. I played it so well. You would have been proud. I was the cheerleader – standing up there in faculty meetings urging my teachers to stick to the test. “Pre-test, test, and re-test,” I would preach. “Make sure all those objectives are covered.” I did the pep rallies before testing time, hung banners – heck, I even sat in a dunking booth and let the kids take their shots at me – all in the name of “the test.” But when I walked those classrooms, there was no enthusiasm - no joy. We were filling containers - and containers are passive by definition. Lewis, I believe that learning is anything but passive – that it lives and it breathes and it explores and it asks questions. It helps us to define who we are – morally, spiritually, intellectually. I realized that I could no longer settle for less – or allow my kids to settle for less. So I decided to go back to the only thing I ever loved. I've always been a teacher at heart, Lewis. When I discovered that I couldn't be a leader and a teacher at the same time – I had to make a choice.

## LEWIS

So your choice was to give up everything you worked so hard for and come here to Mayberry? Your scores were good. Your school was doing well. How could you walk away and go to a hillbilly private school – to teach!! (*Walks to where Harry is standing.*) Are you really ready to just die here? Do you think you're going to change things by

spending the rest of your career teaching a bunch of farmers to conjugate a verb? Do you think anybody will care? Listen, when you're all used up they'll give you a cheap watch and maybe a plaque, and they'll send you on your way. In less than a week no one will ever know you were here. When you are in that principal's chair you can make a difference. You have power.

HARRY

Sure, I have a title, but what does that get me? The honor of having people smile to my face and then stab me in the back? The joy of constantly trying to figure out from which side the next political offensive will be launched? The pleasure of sitting at my desk late at night trying to catch up on paperwork and worrying about test scores while everyone else is warm and asleep in their beds? Hmmm? "Once more into the breach!" Is that what you're saying Lewis? Mount my horse and ride into battle again while the enemy circles behind the lines and takes the children's souls?

LEWIS

*(Angrily turning his back to Harry and walking back to stage center)*

Damn it Harry! Is life just one big Shakespearean play to you? You are not King Henry and this isn't Agincourt. Why won't you wake up? I am offering you a chance to get back on top before it's too late. What are you gonna' do? Float on your high and mighty principles here in this redneck lagoon until you rot? Don't you get it Harry? Nobody

gives a crap. Nobody's listening. How old are you? 55? 56? Do you think any other superintendent is going to give you a high school principalship at your age? (*Regains his composure and again turns to Harry*). Harry, listen to me, you're a successful high school principal. Not one person in ten can sit in that principal's chair like we did and survive.

HARRY

*(Harry walks to Lewis and puts his hand on Lewis' shoulder. Harry smiles)*

That's the problem, my old friend. Nine out of ten can. I'm going back in with the others.

*(Harry walks to the back of the stage and joins the others. He is now in shadow along with the others. Lewis remains in place and lights another cigarette. Katharine comes down the side of the stage to the front in order to avoid being seen by Harry. Once he is gone, she walks angrily to Lewis)*

KATHARINE

What are you trying to do?

LEWIS

*(startled)*

What? Katharine? What do you mean?

KATHARINE

You know good and well what I mean. I heard you trying to bait him back into a principalship.

LEWIS

*(Walking stage right)*

I am trying to help an old friend.

KATHARINE

Help him? Help him do what? Die of an ulcer? Have a nervous breakdown? Listen, you haven't been with him for the last seven years. You don't know what that principal's chair did to him – and to me and the kids! We never saw him, when he did come home, exhausted and stressed, he hardly spoke. Do you have any idea how many of his own kids' ball games, concerts, and birthday parties he missed because he was locked in some damn meeting or the burglar alarm at school went off? When his own kids had problems in school, do you know what we had to do? Hire a tutor! A tutor for the kids of a guy who was once Teacher of the Year! Why? Because he was too tired or too stressed to be there for his own children. Do you know the medications he was on for blood pressure and stress? Always worried about those test scores and whether he would have a job the next year. Always catchin' hell every time he suspended somebody's "little angel." It's easy

for you to stand here in your fancy suit and talk about power and money. But the kids and I don't care about that.

LEWIS

It would only be for just a couple of years, Katharine. Think of the difference he could make at this school.

KATHARINE

He is making a difference. He's teaching – the one thing that has always given him joy. And I have my husband back. And the kids have their father back. *(Calming down a bit)* Listen Lewis. You and Harry were best friends. I know you want the best for him. But please don't do this. He'll take the job just to help you if he thinks you need him. You know how he is.

*(Katharine places her hand on Lewis' shoulder, smiles faintly, and then returns to the others at the back of the stage who are still in shadow)*

LEWIS

*Taking one last puff and looking directly at the audience*

'Tis good for men to love their present pains. Upon example; so the spirit is eased. Conscience doth make cowards of us all. And the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er

with the pale cast of thought, and enterprises of great pitch and moment, with this regard their currents turn awry, and lose the name of action.

HARRY

*Calling from the back of the stage*

My lord, your nobles, jealous of your absence, seek through your camp to find you!

*(The others laugh loudly at Harry's remark)*

*(Lewis chuckles to himself, throws his cigarette down, and extinguishes it with his heel. He then returns to the couch area. The others meet him in the couch area, bringing the wine and brandy with them, and return to their original seats. They continue to drink in between their lines.)*

LEWIS

Give me your favor: my dull brain was wrought with things remembered. Kind gentlemen, your pains are registered where every day I turn the leaf to read them.

HARRY

*(Mock surprise)*

Why Lewis, I am impressed, you haven't forgotten your Shakespeare after all!



LEWIS

It's funny how I still remember stuff like that. It's been so long since I sat down and read a good book, listened to music.

THOMAS

*(smiles sadly)*

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, creeps at this petty pace, 'til the last syllable of recorded time. And all our yesterdays light fools the way to dusty death. *(pauses)* Not bad for a math teacher, eh?

CHARLES

Most impressive. Bravo!

HARRY

Y'know, I sometimes wonder how we got so far away from the joys that led us to education in the first place. I didn't go into education to be a principal. I just wanted to teach, share my passion for books and writing with someone else. See their faces light up. Ha! Look at me, 55 years old and I'm right back where I started.

CHARLES

*(smiling)*

Lesser than Lewis, but greater!

THOMAS

Now don't pick on Lewis. We have all sold out in our own ways.

HARRY

You make little concessions, take small detours, and then, before you know it, you're far from home. Except for Charlie over there. You never left teaching.

CHARLES

Well, let's be honest, teaching in a university is not like teaching in that old, hot, packed high school classroom. I don't deal with kids. Of course, they all want the same thing – get that piece of paper and go on with their lives.

LEWIS

They have their eyes on the prize. Nothing wrong with that.

CHARLES

Some prize. Rush, rush, rush. This dead line to that. Constant pressure to get to the next rung on the ladder.

THOMAS

Results. That's all that matters now. You're only as good as your last accomplishment.

LEWIS

That only bothers people who can't make the grade, people who plateau, or start moving backwards.

HARRY

And who determines "the grade" Lewis? Who decides what qualifies as "moving forward"? Is education just about "getting ahead"?

LEWIS

Try getting ahead without it.

HARRY

You know, Lewis, there is a janitor at our school. They call him “Ernie G.” Old guy. Maybe three teeth in his whole head. Never read Shakespeare, plotted graphs, learned the parts of a plant, or any of those other things we educators think is so holy. He just pushes that mop, empties the trash. But you know, The kids love him. They’ll come to him when they have a problem or just want someone to talk to. And he sits there on that mop bucket. Teaching. Happiest man I ever met.

THOMAS

Is he black?

HARRY

Yes, but why does that matter? The point is that he loves what he does and he is doing what we worked so hard, jumped through so many hoops, to be “certified” to do – teach. And you know something? Years from now when those kids look back, they won’t remember their teachers, they’ll remember Ernie G. – janitor.

CHARLES

Thinking about your legacy, Harry?

HARRY

Aren’t you? Aren’t you starting to look back and see what you’ve accomplished? Starting to wonder what difference you’ve made?

LEWIS

I don't look back. All it does is give you neck cramps. You can't change what's in the past. What matters is what you do today.

THOMAS

*(Distant, staring at his glass)*

I do. I look back. You know, my wife and I never had kids. We were too busy with our careers. Didn't used to bother me. But now it's just us at the end of the day. Awards and degrees on the wall. But no one to share with. You spend your whole life giving everything to "enrich the lives of students", and then they go on and leave you behind. Most of them don't even appreciate or remember what you did.

LEWIS

*(Smiling)*

Numbers aren't adding up anymore Tommy?

THOMAS

Screw you. Like you've changed the world.

LEWIS

Never set out to. I just figured out how to survive in the world. Make it work for me. You think I sit around having little pity parties because my former students aren't bringing me cookies? No way. I don't have time for that crap. I do what I gotta' do and let those who can't cut it worry about their legacy!

CHARLES

But that's the difference Lewis. It's all about YOU. Some of us want to leave the world better than we found it. It's not all about grabbing everything for ourselves or seeing everyone and everything as something to be beaten. You know, I turn on the t.v. everyday and I see the results of an "everybody for himself" mentality. No moral or spiritual awareness. Just screw the other guy before he screws you. What's right depends on the situation. And you know something, you know what really sticks in my craw? I haven't done anything in my 50+ years to change it!

HARRY

Sure you have Charlie. You're a teacher. You've always been a teacher. You and me and Tommy, heck, even Lewis, we're all teachers. It's not about changing the world, it's about inspiring others to. We don't know how we've changed parts of the future. I have to believe that some of the seeds I've planted in those kids will grow, long after I'm here to see it. I have to believe it. I can't bear the alternative.

THOMAS

That your life was meaningless?

*(There are a few moments of silence. The ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner is now audible)*

*(Katharine enters, not speaking at first. She looks around at the others who are staring straight ahead)*

KATHARINE

My goodness, what has this turned in to, a wake?

*(The other characters, as if suddenly awakened,  
chuckle)*

KATHARINE

Come on, let's go in the kitchen. I'll put on a pot of coffee.

LEWIS

Thanks, but I'm afraid not. I really have to be going. It's a long drive back and I have to get ready for the board meeting tomorrow night.

THOMAS

Yeah, I'm sorry Harry, but I really need to hit the road too.

CHARLES

And since I rode with Tommy, I guess that means I'm oughtta' here too!

HARRY

I understand. Sure has been good to see you all. We must do this again soon.

CHARLES

Absolutely, I want another shot at these two! Please give our thanks to Katharine.

*(The characters put their glasses on the coffee table, shake hands with each other, gather their coats, and exit stage left, all except for Lewis, who steps back on stage)*

LEWIS

*Smiling*

You have my card. The job is yours if you want it. The throne awaits! Think upon what I have said, and, at more time, the interim having weigh'd it, let us speak our free hearts to each other.

HARRY

Very gladly

LEWIS

Till then, enough.

*(Lewis exits)*

LEWIS

*(Heard off-stage)*

Come friends.

*(Harry and Katharine gather the glasses, and circle behind the couch stage right. Katharine and stops momentarily to look up at the banner on the back wall.)*

KATHARINE

*(Putting her hand on Harry's shoulder)*

Are you okay?

HARRY

I am, fair Katharine, worry not.

*(Katharine smiles and exits stage left. Harry takes one last look at the banner, and then also exits stage left. Stage lights dim)*



## ACT FOUR

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
and by opposing end them.*

- *Hamlet, Act III, Scene I*

Were the choice as simple as Shakespeare's young, solitary Dane proposes, there would not be as much propensity for angst in the modern principalship. The truth is that educational leaders are seldom solitary figures who have only themselves to answer to. They are often husbands and fathers, mothers and wives, with bills to pay, children to send to college, and other financial obligations that form the ties that bind in today's market economy. They are also seldom young, having reached the administrative level after at least several years in the classroom and completion of a master's degree. They do not easily switch careers after investing so much of their professional and spiritual lives in the cause of education. Educational leaders are also quite mindful that, despite education's proud proclamations that it is training people to "fully participate in a democratic society," the administrative levels of that society are quite closed and intolerant. A principal who openly calls into question, for example, the implications of high-stakes testing will be, if not summarily fired, at least fatally ostracized by the central office and school board. Confide during an interview for a principalship or central office position that you have doubts about the direction schools are taking, and you assure yourself of not making it to the next round.

Those principals wanting to throw their sabots into the machine usually elect to do so from the safe distance of a university classroom after seven years or more of evening and weekend doctoral studies – a span of time which serves to further discourage career changes. Others leave the principalship all together, or, more sadly, they leave emotionally while remaining physically behind in the role of manager rather than leader.

### **The Need for “Prophetic Education”**

There is an aching need in our schools for the prophetic voice, or more specifically, what Walter Brueggemann calls “the prophetic imagination,” and what David Purpel, applying Brueggemann’s concept, terms “prophetic education.” The savage incongruities of our educational system are the result of socio-economic forces that have co-opted our classrooms for their own purposes. As in Solomonic times, it is “unmistakably the policy of the [ruling] regime to mobilize and claim the energies of the people for the sake of the court and its extravagant needs” (Brueggemann, 2001, page 27). “As we know from our own recent past,” Brueggemann writes, “such an exploitative appetite can develop insatiable momentum so that, no matter how much in the way of goods or power or security is obtained, it is never enough” (Brueggemann, 2001, page 27). In today’s market paradigm no amount of financial, material, intellectual, or positional capital is enough, and the impulse to view worth as a finite, socio-economically defined commodity to be obtained, if need be, at the expense of others is deeply imbedded in our collective psyche from an early age. It gains “momentum” over the key developmental years until socio-economically defined reality becomes

inseparable from the moral and spiritual fabric of our souls. “Whereas the South American societies suffer torture and physical abuse,” Brueggemann points out,

the cultural situation in the United States, satiated by consumer goods and propelled by electronic technology, is one of narcotized insensibility to human reality. It may be, however, that torture and consumer satiation perform the same negative function: to deny a lively, communal imagination that resists a mindless humanity of despairing conformity. . . . Numbness does not hurt like torture, but in a quite parallel way, numbness robs us of our capability for humanity (Brueggemann, 2001, page xx).

In a public education context numbness is evident in inertia that undermines legitimate reform efforts and condemns educators and their students to ideas that lack sound foundations and eventually, predictably, fall under their own weight. To Purpel, the “prophetic ministry” that Brueggemann describes, the “alternative to the dominant culture,” is an education that embraces “sharp criticism, dazzling imagination, a sacred perspective, commitment to justice and compassion, hope, energy, and involvement.” “Freedom,” Purpel writes, “does not come, according to the prophets, from adaptation and acceptance, nor does freedom emerge out of numbness and callousness to injustice. Freedom for the prophets emerges from caring, and lies in hope, possibility, and commitment” (Purpel, 1989, page 85).

In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann calls for a new, socially transformative application of prophetic texts. For “what is now required,” he contends,

is that a relatively powerless prophetic voice must find imaginative ways that are rooted in the text but that freely and daringly move from the text toward concrete circumstance. Seen in that contextual way, ‘prophetic imagination’ requires more than the old liberal confrontation if the point is not posturing but effecting change in social perspective and social policy (Brueggemann, 2001, page xii).

Though educational leaders do not deal with the religious writings that Brueggemann refers to, there is, in a sense, a canon of education literature that serves as primary source material in the training of principals, superintendents, and other leaders. The canon runs the gamut between liberal and conservative, pedagogical and theoretical, and sublime to ridiculous. In the last ten years especially, the canon has seen the inclusion of scientific excursions into the life of the adolescent brain and application of those findings, or guesses, to classroom learning. Qualitative research, once the bastard child of educational inquiry, has gained increasing acceptance through pure qualitative studies and the mass market popularity of pseudo-qualitative writings by writers such as Jonathan Kozol.

The content of the canon, as a healthy and illuminating intellectual debate, is less important than the “transformative application” of those ideas in the sense that Brueggemann ascribes to religious texts. Only through such application do we have the faintest hope of achieving the kind of educational reform that will allow us to effect the kind of change in social perspective and social policy that Brueggemann is talking about. “Prophecy,” according to Brueggemann, “is born precisely in that moment when the emergence of social political reality is so radical and inexplicable that it has nothing less than a theological cause” (Brueggemann, 2001, page 6).

This is not to suggest that school leaders should don robes and sandals, though that would be more dignified than sitting on top of the school in a lawn chair or being the bulls eye of student pie throwing – all in the name of higher test scores. Brueggemann’s call to action transcends the superficial showmanship that has so infiltrated education. The prophetic imagination is a call to *action* - not theoretical contemplation or political

posturing - and, in its truest sense, it is felt so deeply as to be beyond the realm of choice. The prophets of the Bible were not driven by the need for an audience, a love of civic debate, or a desire for notoriety. They were, as one friend of mine so eloquently put it, “pissed off”! So enraged were they by the social, political, spiritual, and moral decay they saw around them, that they were compelled to action. As Abraham J. Heschel explained in his seminal work, *The Prophets*, these leaders did not advocate detachment from society, separation from the world, rejection of civilization, nor complete avoidance of the self (Heschel, 1962, page 359). They were very much engaged with society at their own personal peril. In the modern, educational context, those of us who are “pissed off” by the intellectual, moral, and spiritual poverty in our schools feel compelled to undertake an activism that is, borrowing Brueggemann’s framework, *critical* and *energizing* – critical in the sense that it serves to dismantle the dominant consciousness and energizing in the sense that it provides a compelling framework toward which education can move (Brueggemann, 2001, pages 3 and 4).

### **A Call to Action**

There are three possible, tangible courses of action for the educational leader who must resolve the conflict between duty and the better angels of his nature. The first is to “damn the torpedoes” and charge “into the breach.” The strength and number of the enemy virtually assures that this will be a suicide mission. “I suggest that the dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it,” Brueggemann warns.

Conversely, the dominant culture is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energized. . . . We know, of course, that none of us relishes criticism, but we may also recognize that none of us much relishes energizing either, for that would demand something of us (Brueggemann, 2001, page 4).

What, more specifically, is demanded of those exercising this option is a willingness to compromise our principalships, superintendencies, and even our reputations for a vision of education that does not compromise. Principals and superintendents are, by necessity if not by nature, masters of compromise. According to more recent, site-base management approaches to school leadership, the principal operates behind the scenes, keeps the peace, and empowers others. Aspects of each of those approaches have their merits, but what Brueggemann calls for here is much more ambitious.

My grandfather often repeated his narrative of a particular event in the Civil War that is somewhat analogous. General Lee, my grandfather's hero, had a penchant for leading the charge in battle. This unnerved his army to no end since they all realized that, without the genius of Lee's leadership, the cause was lost. They were also cognizant of the fact that the enemy had also figured this out and that Lee, astride his large, trusty, and almost white mount, "Traveler", made an easily recognizable target. Thus, with chants of "Lee to the rear!" the general was forced to the back of the charge. Under the flag of emancipating education from the clutches of political, social, and economic expediency, principals can lead the charge and resist the temptation to surrender to personal and vocational expediency. Principals are uniquely positioned for this role, not because they are holy or have more inherent worth than teachers or others in the schoolhouse, but

because, by training and experience, principals have the most comprehensive knowledge of the entire school community and the havoc that high stakes testing and other policies are exacting.

Principals should also keep in mind that leading the charge will run them afoul of a very powerful force – graduate programs of study in school leadership that serve not only as the academic training ground for principals, but the gatekeepers of principal licensure. Like principals, graduate schools do not operate in isolation and they are also constrained by financial and institutional pressures. In North Carolina, as in other states, prospective principals must pass a state-mandated “test” in order to be licensed and graduate school leadership programs, like their public school classroom counterparts, are very much aware of the implications of low test scores. Such pressure seems to diminish somewhat in Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs, however, my experience has been that the relatively low number of school leaders in such programs are headed for college classrooms and central offices rather than the battlefield. Educational leaders who choose to die on this hill will not have the benefit of support from school administration programs as they are currently configured. They will, in a sense, be abandoned by their left flank.

A second less palatable option is to do nothing to change the current state of education and simply survive until retirement or change careers. It is tempting, especially for young, idealistic educational leadership neophytes, to lambaste those who go in this direction. However, as has been argued and acted previously, personal as well as familial loyalties and obligations are not so easily discarded. This is the path of least resistance for

leaders and educational leadership programs. In this scenario masters of school administration programs can continue along in much the same fashion as they do now with the goal of preparing students to pass licensing exams and function in the educational world as it currently exists.

The current nationwide principal shortage is evidence of the number of people who are choosing to leave the principalship or never enter it at all. With the financial incentives that come with National Board teacher certification, experienced teachers can earn a salary that rivals that of assistant principals and even principals. Those salaries can be earned without the stress, responsibility, and long hours that attend the principalship. Leaders who have made it to the principal's chair are also finding that their skills and experience are very marketable in the business community where they can make twice the money with half the hassle.

### **When Vision and Reality Collide**

A final, angst-ridden option for principals who decide that they do not care to mount the kind of frontal assault that I have proposed, or give up entirely, is to work within the system to salvage as much true learning as we can for those students we serve. For now, this is the path that I have chosen to take. If we play the game, as Lewis suggests, we can resolve to do so with a certain slight of hand beneath the table. This approach holds to the notion that principals who are agents of change are more valuable within the system than outside of it. It is also an approach, admittedly, that falls into what Purpel describes as "co-optation," a "technique for having your cake and eating it" that he contends is "dangerous" and "deceptive" in its "propensity to give people the illusion



and appearance of significant change,” especially “those who very much want to change but are reluctant or unwilling to deal with the consequences of real change” (Purpel, 1989, page 142).

However, as a principal I have had the experience of implementing curriculum and teaching reforms in my own school that at least approach the paradigm shift toward active inquiry and research that Purpel and others advocate.

One principalship took me to a small, rural high school in which only a little over 40% of students were meeting state standards on the end of course testing. There were three high schools in the district with mine being on the “wrong side of the tracks” and the opposite end of academic prestige. Fortified with curriculum theory and models of teamwork implanted during my graduate studies, I began my quest to bring the fragmented curriculum, and faculty, together. High schools are particularly prone to an island mentality in which there is little cross-pollination between subjects. Math teachers, for example, see little practical value in knowing what is being covered in English classes. I found that the segregation continued outside of class with teachers clumping together by subject area in faculty meetings and other gatherings. To encourage dialogue I scheduled classes in such a way that teachers from different subject areas had common planning periods. I then required them to meet periodically and plan cross-curricular teaching. I followed this up with faculty meetings in which everyone participated in building a profile of what a student graduating from our school should be like.

The year before I arrived as principal, school became part of the “High Schools That Work” program. The program, sponsored by the Southern Region Educational

Board, a non-binding advisory entity, had the noble purpose of helping schools integrate instruction so that students in vocational classes received the same quality instruction that those in higher level academic courses were privy to. Review teams would periodically come in and spend a couple of days evaluating the school's program, in much the same way as accreditation teams from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. While such a goal matched up well with my curriculum reform efforts, the faculty felt that it had not been included in the planning or decision making that led to our school's admission into this voluntary program. As a result, "High Schools That Work" became a dirty phrase that people avoided, and attempts to follow through on the directives of the program were met with resentment if not subversive resistance.

When a new principal takes the helm, faculty and staff expect that changes will be made if for no other reason than to clearly define who is boss. Unfortunately for students, a bunker mentality quickly takes hold as faculty members resolve themselves to "outlasting" the new initiatives. Given the fact that I was the fourth principal in seven years, the probability that I would leave soon was high. Still, over the four years I was there, I was able to foster enough enthusiasm and support to achieve some momentum, and when I departed for a larger school in South Carolina, the school's performance on the state testing (performance composite) had improved by nearly 20 percentage points.

After making the difficult decision to leave an excellent school and an innovative superintendent just one year later to return to North Carolina and help with my ailing father, I had another chance to implement curriculum reform - this time in a private, Christian pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade setting. Like my first school, this

organization had recognized the need for academic restructuring. While the elementary school was highly regarded, the middle and high school grades were losing students at an alarming rate due to the perception, which was accurate, that the secondary program was not adequately preparing students for college and beyond. The previous principal, who had retired, had strengths but student discipline and curriculum reform were not among them. She and the assistant principal, who had both been there for nearly ten years, had grown quite comfortable in a kind of “co-principalship” that stressed areas other than quality instruction and student accountability. The board of directors brought me in specifically to revamp secondary instruction and improve discipline. Though I knew that the dynamics of a private, religious school would be different than those of a public school, I still went in feeling that I would be unencumbered by the state testing mania and other restrictions that had plagued me in the public school principalship.

Unfortunately, I found that other restrictions took the place of the ones I had shed. Those who had been empowered under the previous principal were not easily persuaded to surrender that power for the sake of improvement. Though the curriculum was rewritten, greatly enhanced, and aligned with state standards by teams of teachers working effectively, and enthusiastically, across subject areas; and despite the fact that discipline problems dropped dramatically and enrollment increased, the cancer of old loyalties spread and I was given a lesson in politics that I will forever remember. At the end of the year I knew that it was not a hill I was willing to die on, and I resigned with a peculiar mix of pride in the new curriculum I had help to build and regret for a job unfinished.

## **The Culture Shift**

In these two, very different principalships vision and reality collided to produce a view of educational leadership that did not look much like the one I left graduate school with. I learned that neither theory nor pragmatism can carry the day completely by itself. The degree to which I was successful, or unsuccessful, in effecting positive change in these two settings is the degree to which I was able to shape culture. “Beneath the conscious awareness of everyday life in schools there is a stream of thought and activity,” Terrence Deal and Kent Peterson report in *Shaping School Culture*. “This underground flow of feelings and folkways wends its way within schools, dragging people, programs, and ideas toward often-unstated purposes” (Deal and Peterson, 1999, page 3).

Though I had read a great deal about curriculum and culture in my graduate studies, it was the lathe of actual experience that melded the two together. If the overt curriculum was not hard enough to formulate and manage, the “hidden curriculum” that Purpel describes seemed almost insurmountable for me as a young principal. Reshaping curriculum and instruction meant identifying and harnessing elements of the school culture – tapping into deeply held assumptions and beliefs in a way more tangible than stale and quickly forgotten belief and mission statements. I had to establish credibility as a leader with knowledge, relevant experience, and an unshakable commitment to the comprehensive mindset change that I proposed. In my first principalship I vividly remember one veteran faculty member, who was too comfortably close to retirement, asking me directly if what I was asking the faculty to do was a project for my masters

thesis. That person obviously saw change as something formulated for personal gain and achieved on the backs of others.

Just as difficult as forwarding a view of education in which learning is valuable in and of itself is convincing faculty and staff that the fulcrum of school improvement is not personal or professional gain. As a principal I found this even harder to accomplish with professional adults who were even more ingrained with the values of socioeconomics than the children were. The competitiveness of the high-stakes testing environment further complicates the matter. With the wide publication of testing data and subsequent “rankings”, schools and even individual teachers find the “win-lose” mentality even harder to avoid. I discovered this to be especially true in the small public high school that I served. In many cases only one teacher taught a certain tested subject. Therefore, when the data was made public, it had very personal implications – and very specific winners and losers.

Efforts to effect change in such an environment had to be centered on a culture shift in which the school concentrated on meaning and method in learning (the subjective) with the expectation that the data (the objective) would follow. Such a juxtaposition of the cart and the horse required a leap of faith that, thankfully, many teachers and staff were convinced to take. Those who chose not to join us tended to be teachers who were close to retirement and were not about to leap for anything as well as marginal faculty and staff who viewed their work not as a profession but as a factory job. I certainly could not ignore this group because they had considerable literal and symbolic power. However, through hiring new teachers who reflected the cultural and instructional

philosophy I was trying to establish, and generating excitement as teachers were exposed to the rich rewards of collaboration and cross-curricular connections, I was able over time to marginalize the non-believers to the extent that they lost influence or, in some cases, left altogether. Most gratifying to me was the rejuvenation, rather than departure, of several capable “non-believers” who went on to be key agents of cultural and instructional change.

### **The Great Escape**

I found very early on that my ability to effect comprehensive change in the school had a great deal to do with my ability to “escape” the main office. Building a meaningful curriculum and implementing that curriculum through excellent instruction requires that the principal, whom Deal and Patterson call “the symbolic leader” (Deal and Peterson, 1999, page 85), be in the classrooms modeling and monitoring face-to-face instruction. Superintendents with whom I worked and others in professional literature implore principals to make instructional leadership a priority. Competing with that priority is the managerial aspect of the principal’s day that entails investigating and deciding disciplinary issues (with subsequent self-defense against angry parents); making and returning phone calls; filling out mounds of local and state-mandated paperwork; supervising buildings and grounds; attending meetings; planning and implementing staff development; etc. The practical result of my “open door policy,” which seemed like such a noble concept in graduate school, was continual “drop-in” visits by faculty, staff, parents, and students. Soon I realized that my office, rather than being a place of refuge, was actually a trap. I began to walk more and over time I learned that the office could

function quite well in my absence, but that the culture of the school was not going to change without my presence. In fact, a trusted friend pointed out to me that my constant presence in the main office sent a very unintended message – that I did not have faith in my staff to handle situations. By empowering faculty and staff I was more able to free myself of the managerial chains and concentrate on improving instruction.

Avoiding the main office had a tangible effect on my relationship with students. Rather than the students seeing me only when they were in trouble, they saw me in instructional and casual settings. In order to promote a culture of mutual respect and caring instead of distrust and disconnect, I tried to model the kind of interaction I wanted between teachers and students. Teachers began standing at their doors during class changes to greet students and faculty presence at sports and cultural arts events became more prevalent. The instructional curriculum improved through attention to the hidden curriculum.

### **Into the Breach**

If, as Harry contends, we aspire to a higher purpose for learning in our schools, we must recognize and use to our advantage the human, cultural, and political bonds that attempt to hold us back. Only by pushing mightily against such bonds can we hope to achieve a slingshot effect that will propel us unstoppably in the opposite, true direction. If, as Lewis contends, we must “play the game,” we must do so for an unselfish purpose greater than ourselves and our own personal, professional, and egotistical gratification.

As modest as the gains made at these two schools may have been in the larger context of time and possibility, they were gains none the less, and they made a difference,

I believe, in the lives of those students who achieved them. Surely I would not have effected such change, in those situations and in those lives, from the outside. Purpel aptly points out that “in order to dwell in a profession which has universal and eternal dimensions, we must not be trapped by the narrow boundaries of the short or even the medium run” (Purpel, 1989, page 164). This is a marathon that I have committed to, not a sprint, and I must accept that the baton will be passed many times before the race is won years after I am gone.

For schools of education the ramifications of this third, middle, option are many. In order to change the system it is essential that administrators understand how that system works in its present machination. One universal constant is that the victor usually knows the opponent better than he knows himself. Criticism and calls for change are less credible when they come from those who have not understood and worked within the current educational system. Thus schools of education must provide the applied knowledge necessary for educational leaders to infiltrate and survive in the very educational system they are committed to changing. Otherwise potential gladiators of change will not even gain entry into the very arena they must compete in. At the same time potential school leaders need the theoretical foundation to envision, articulate, and implement an educational process that is sensitive to the need for cultural change and embraces a vision of democracy, compassion, justice equality, freedom, and joy (Purpel, 1989, page 137). Providing such a balance will be a challenge in graduate school educational leadership departments that experience a tension between those who favor application and those who favor theory. It is no secret that graduate faculties struggle



with the same inter-departmental politics that their public school counterparts contend with.

The dramatic increase in alternative settings in education such as private and charter schools has further taxed those charged with training educational leaders. As I have personally experienced, theoretical and practical challenges that confront private school administrators, especially those in religious based schools, differ greatly from what public school principals face. Charter schools, in North Carolina and other states, have been in place for less than a decade, and though they still participate in state accountability testing, they vary greatly in their orientation (Montessori, Comer, Sizer, etc.). Principal training programs must have faculty with experience in these areas; otherwise the complexities of the first principalship are made even more unnecessarily daunting.

Whatever type of schools their students eventually serve, schools of education must engage future leaders in what Brueggemann calls “futuring fantasy” (Brueggemann, 2001, page 40). “The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented,” Brueggemann says, “for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the system can be imagined. The *imagination* must come before the *implementation*” (Brueggemann, 2001, page 40). Imagination can be in short supply even among graduate students who are products of k-12 and undergraduate classrooms that “stress knowledge, retention, homework, and mastery of material rather than a serious effort at developing intellectual curiosity and gaining insight into significant ideas (Purpel, 1989, page 19). Schools are very complex systems, and while applicable training in the areas of school

organization, school law, school finance, etc. is vital, schools of education, if they see themselves as agents of change and growth, must engage potential leaders in a much deeper conversation about the assumptions that govern all aspects of teaching and learning.

### **The Little Red-Headed Girl**

This dissertation, a kind of midnight walk through the different campfires of thought that burn in my soul, has confirmed what I suspected to be true from the beginning. Leaving educational leadership is not an option for me because I care too passionately about young people and the fate of the society they will lead. I can imagine so much more and, as William T. Cavanaugh writes, “we have to believe in the power of imagination because it is all we have, and ours is stronger than theirs” (Brueggemann, 2001, page xix). Defiantly charging the oncoming truck is not a choice for me either because I will not effect change as an anonymous martyr or as road kill. For now I must remain a principal, or in the company of present and future principals, and use my knowledge, experience, scholarship, and creativity, as a writer and thinker, to construct an alternative reality that is too vivid to be ignored. “What can sustain us on this trip,” David Purpel reminds educational leaders, “is hope and faith in the direction of our path.

I am not talking of starting but continuing; not of returning to a land that never was, or of creating a world that can never be, but of insisting that we nourish and enrich that which is best in us. Our responsibility as educators is to remind us of this commitment, to help us become what is our best, by providing our students and ourselves with the knowledge, skills, imagination, energy, and hope that are required” (Purpel, 1989, page 165).

A defining moment for me, personally and professionally, came one afternoon, during my first principalship, while I was navigating the sea of mail that seemed to flood my office daily, I happened upon an advertisement for one of the major computer makers. On the front cover was a picture of a little girl, bespectacled and speckled with freckles that match the color of her red hair. She was sitting in front of a laptop computer with her tiny arm raised as high as she could push it – propelled by the special kind of ecstasy that comes with the possession of a right answer and the urgent, desperate need to share that answer with the one who inspired its discovery. Her eyes were open wide and so was her mind. At the summit of her arm was a hand that, rather than carving dark circles with a number two pencil, was strangely spread, much like someone carefully carrying a large tray of expensive delicacies in a fine restaurant. For just a moment, this small, frail little girl was Atlas, and her fingertips touched the stars.

I don't know this child's name, but I do know that she is more and more absent from today's classrooms. True teaching and learning is truly magical, and it cannot be contained and measured on Form A any more than lightning can be captured in a bottle. Somewhere along the way in the rush for accountability education and to meet the selfish demands of a market economy, true education has lost something of its soul. We are consumed with facts and figures, data and dates. To be sure, these have their place in a well-rounded education and are necessary for learning. But it is the subjective, the light in that little girl's eyes, that is why we teach and lead others. I am reminded of the panel in the Sistine Chapel ceiling entitled "Creation of Adam." In the painting Michelangelo depicts the empty, lifeless figure of Adam limply extending his arm and pointed finger

toward the oncoming figure of God, who is being restrained by a host of angels in an attempt to spare Him from the pain that they know will accompany the animation of man. God, too, has his hand and finger extended and from the floor of the Chapel it seems that the two fingers touch. However, a close examination reveals that the two fingers do not meet. Michelangelo was once asked why he painted the panel in such a manner. He replied that he did not have the skill as a painter to depict that magical, mystical, and sacred moment when Father and flesh met. The same should be said by anyone who contemplates capturing that mysterious moment when an open mind touches a powerful idea.

I am amused and saddened by education's critics who equate any objections to the trivialization of education, especially from actual, practicing educators, as an attempt to avoid being held "responsible." Over time we will become practiced at training our children to regurgitate the required roughage of state testing. That will not be difficult. Such critics are missing the chance to hold us accountable for a much higher and more difficult standard to reach – true learning, in which students grapple with ideas, both ancient and new, come to know themselves and their world, and whet their critical intellect to the point that it slices through prejudice, pride, and propaganda like a hot knife through butter.

The picture of that freckle face, redheaded little girl, her hand held high, her face illuminated with the joy of true learning, will continue to haunt and challenge me, as a leader and as a person, along the road to Agincourt.

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